



by Todd Terrell

There is a stereotype concerning agriculture. And like most stereotypes it is uninformed and unfair. People not a part of the ag community view it as a slower paced, old-fashioned lifestyle. I think the community at large imagines farmers perched atop antique tractors wearing bib overalls and owning a few dozen dogs one of which bears the name "Skeeter." Likewise, ranchers all wear faded Wrangler jeans, a straw hat that looks like the wearer sleeps in it and each night the cowboy beds down after a meal of beans cooked over a campfire. Some of you laugh at these descriptions for two reasons. They are at the same time wildly inaccurate of most of the agriculture community and yet, you probably know someone that fits that description exactly. For example, I left a job teaching computer classes before I began writing for this magazine. Friends laughed when they imagined me going from high tech to high cotton. They were believing the stereotype. I met someone this month that will shatter their perceptions about agriculture for good.

Russell Harwell is not the stereotypical manager of a world-class cattle operation. Russell is soft-spoken, retiring, and almost apologetic when I first met him. His employer, Caney Valley Farms in Lakeland isn't the typical cattle operation either. It was begun in the late 1990s by

the owners of Doll-McGinnis Publications, Duane Doll and Joe McGinnis. Doll-McGinnis publish several magazine titles devoted to show dogs. Caney Valley Farms got its start as a hobby to produce show quality Shorthorn cattle. Shorthorn cattle have a small following in Florida; their popularity is largest in the Midwest where cooler temperatures seem to favor the breed. But that is just one more thing that sets Caney Valley Farms apart. Most ranches pride themselves on their bulls. Bloodlines are carefully cultivated and champion bulls are prized for the prestige their genetic qualities can bring to the owner. Caney Valley had one bull on the premises and Russell told me he was being shipped off next week. The rest of the herd was made up of less than 30 cows grazing in a nearby pasture. That was the whole works. I scratched my head a bit and wondered why I had been sent out here to write a story. I have to admit, I had gotten caught by the stereotype a bit myself. Even though I thought I knew better, I was expecting to meet someone in a Stetson walking out of a huge barn with hay stacked in the loft and horses stabled nearby. The owners would be fifth or sixth generation Crackers and would just be coming in from branding steers on the back forty. Instead I was talking to a nice young guy next to a small barn with one bull, a few cows and maybe 15-20 acres

all owned by two guys that published magazines about show dogs. And that's when I got to see Caney Valley's secret weapon. They are a new kind of cattle operation. They are quite possibly a model of the future of ranching in Florida. It was all inside that small barn.

I had heard of embryo transfer in livestock. I knew it was being done and felt that I understood the basic concepts involved. Russell walked me through the process. And then I got it. I understood why this farm seemed to be turned on its head. I had been looking at it the wrong way, the old way. One of the cows in the nearby pasture was a National Champion Shorthorn. Typically she would be able to produce one calf a year. But by harvesting the embryos, the yield of her potential genetics being handed down to new calves goes up astronomically. Consider the numbers: a possible 6-8 embryos harvested in each "flush," becomes a possible 32 embryos a year. Now each embryo doesn't guarantee a viable calf, but conservatively, that one cow can produce 10 calves a year. Caney Valley owns eight donor cows they harvest embryos from and about 20 recipient cows that receive the embryos and actually birth the calves. The embryos typically don't go to the donors at Caney Valley, though. They are sold to eager

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buyers all over the Midwest hoping to produce a calf with the same winning genetics as Caney Valley's National Champ. In a manner of speaking, the farms herd is kept in three liquid nitrogen filled containers in the barn. I noticed the three coolers in the corner looking very much like old-fashioned milk cans. Russell was nice enough to open one up and show me the contents. A fog of steam escaped from the canister making the barn look like the set of a sci-fi movie where the monster is getting ready to escape from its cryogenic sleep. Nestled in the cooler are

six rods about a foot or so long. Each rod could hold as many as 100 embryos. So, in potential, 600 tiny calves are living inside that milk can. There were three cans in the barn that I saw. Not a bad sized herd on 15 acres. As more of Florida's lands are developed to provide homes, is this the future of Florida's cattle industry? It certainly has possibilities.

For all the cutting edge science, the manager of Caney Valley, Russell Harwell still enjoys things the "old-fashioned" way. His father and grandfather had both owned cattle in Lakeland, but it was

raising a steer for FFA at Kathleen High School that really sparked Russell's interest in cattle. He started working some with Caney Valley while in school and eventually became manager of the operation in 2002. In his spare time Russell enjoys maintaining his own herd of show club cattle and helping area students raise their own steers for FFA and 4H events. It must be working. Just prior to my meeting with Russell he was attending the Citrus Festival with his niece helping her show her steer. Of course she won. *She had a great coach!*

## PC CATTLEWOMEN ELECT NEW OFFICERS AND LEADERS FOR 2008

The Polk County Cattlewomen, Inc. elected their officers and committee chairs for 2008.

The following members have been elected:

President: Mary Helen Costine, Lakeland, FL  
Vice President: Brandy Howell, Lakeland, FL  
Secretary: Beth Hunt, Bartow, FL  
Treasurer and State Director: Marcia Lightsey, Lake Wales, FL  
Historian and Scrapbook: Kathryn Bibby, Lakeland, FL  
Chaplain: Bernice Buchanan, Lakeland, FL  
Committee Chairs  
Membership/Fundraising: Marjorie Wood, Lakeland, FL

Scholarship and Public Relations: Laura Lee Taylor, Lakeland, FL  
Sunshine/Hospitality: Donna Smith, Lakeland, FL  
Website: Brittney Evans, Lakeland, FL  
Volunteer Hours Coordinator: Cori Waters, Lakeland, FL

The Polk County Cattlewomen, Inc. is committed to the education and promotion of the beef and cattle industries throughout Polk County, the state of Florida, United States and world. For more information regarding the association, please contact Laura Lee Taylor at [L2Brangus@aol.com](mailto:L2Brangus@aol.com).

## INTERESTING AG FACTS

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND CONSUMER SERVICES

- Cattle were first introduced to North America in Florida in 1521 by Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de Leon.
- One Florida ranch owns the largest brood cow herd in the United States.
- Florida is home to four of the United States' 10 largest cow-calf operations.
- Florida ranks 12th in the nation in number of beef cows.
- Nearly one-half of all Florida Agricultural land is involved in cattle production. Florida has 4 million acres of pastureland and 1 million acres of grazed woodland.
- Much of "Natural Florida" remains in the working landscape of Florida cattle industry.
- Wildlife and plant systems are well balanced and thriving on Florida's ranchlands.