

Surgical lifestyles:

***Surgeon at home in the
OR and on the ranch***

by Karen Sandrick, Chicago, IL

R Phillip Burns, MD, FACS, grew up in the cattle business. At the age of nine, in 1951, he mortgaged a horse he had bought with a World War II war bond he received from his uncle, and with the \$500, he purchased two steers. After tending to the steers and showing them at a state fair, he sold the cattle at auction, paid off the bank loan, borrowed another \$1,500, and bought five more steers.

The son and grandson of ranchers, Dr. Burns wanted to spend his working life with livestock, but his father discouraged him from majoring in agribusiness in college and then working the family's cattle ranch in the lower, southeastern section of Tennessee. "We had not inherited land; we had bought it on borrowed money, and the margin of profit was so narrow, my father felt it would be difficult for me to make a living in the cattle industry," he said.

So, Dr. Burns decided to enroll in a preveterinary program to at least keep in contact with animals and livestock. However, in his sophomore year, he realized he didn't want to end up treating dogs and cats and suspected a veterinary practice devoted to large animals would be questionable financially. "There wasn't that much profit in the cattle side of veterinary medicine because most cattlemen weren't using vets for routine work," he said.

After working with a general surgeon in his hometown, Dr. Burns found that surgery not only was fascinating but allowed him to work with his hands. So he switched to medicine and then specialized in surgery. Since then, he's been both a surgeon *and* a cattleman.

Two careers

Today Dr. Burns is chair of the department of surgery at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine, Chattanooga. He is a former member of the American College of Surgeons' Advisory Council for Surgery and a current member of the general surgery residency review committee.

Dr. Burns also runs a 1,500-acre ranch with his brother that at any one time has 400 breeding cows for calving and a total of 700 to 900 head. "But it's not a white-fence place; it's a working ranch. We keep fences up, but they're not painted or for show.

They're just to keep the cows in," he stressed. And Dr. Burns is not a gentleman rancher. "I don't drive around in a truck and ask somebody else to do things. If something needs renovating in the barns or wherever, I get to do that," he said.

Dr. Burns and his brother raise Herefords, which were first bred in Hereford, England, about two and one-half centuries ago. The breed, which is a cross between red Yorkshire livestock and white-faced animals from Holland or a mix of Welsh and Herefordshire stock, is an ideal source of beef because it fattens at an early age, and it produces large amounts of milk.

Herefords are one of the oldest breeds of cattle in this country and many years ago replaced both the longhorn and the western shorthorn cattle as the dominant breed in Texas.

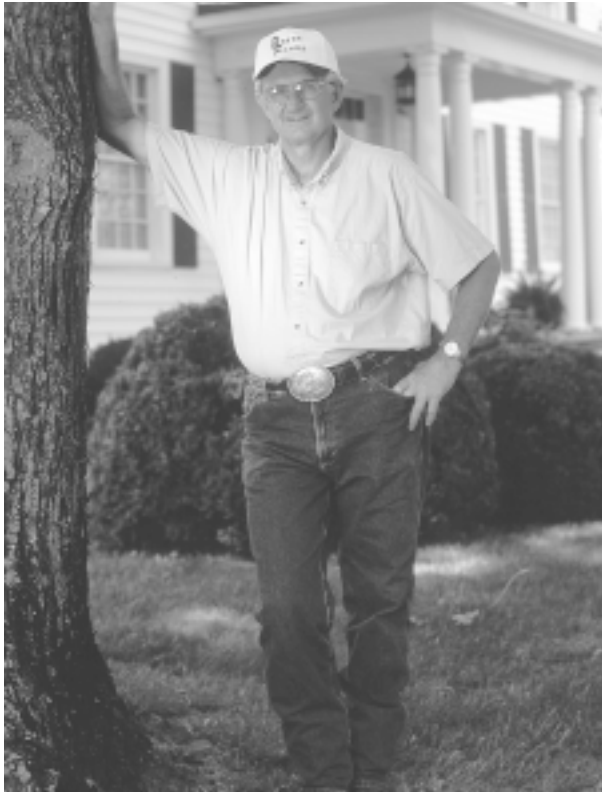
Characteristic Hereford cattle, which range in color from dark red to reddish yellow with a white face, crest, dewlap, and underline, now can be found throughout the country from California, Colorado, Montana, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska to Illinois, Kentucky, and Dr. Burns' home state of Tennessee.

Cattle industry promoter

Dr. Burns is so dedicated to the breed that he is the only physician to serve on the board of directors and as president of the American Hereford Association. While active in the leadership of that organization, Dr. Burns helped establish its business direction and management, overseeing the passage of chief executive officer reins and overall organizational reengineering, as well as the promotion of a branded Hereford beef program. Begun in 1994, the certified Hereford beef program labels beef products that have been genetically proven to provide better tasting beef. Over the last few years, the program has mushroomed. In 2002, the Certified Hereford Beef program grew faster than any other year, accounting for nearly 28 million pounds in beef sales, an increase of 106 percent in sales over the previous year, and causing the American Hereford Association to create the not-for-profit Certified Hereford Beef, LLC, to license and protect the use of the Certified Hereford Beef trademark and market the brand.

Clearly, Dr. Burns' involvement in the cattle industry is not a hobby; it's serious business. "Every day is a work day for me," he said. Whenever

Opposite page: Dr. Burns with his herd bulls in Pikeville.



Dr. Burns

he is not performing surgery or teaching, he is working with cattle—on his family’s ranch or in cattlemen’s association meetings. And he doesn’t spend much time in the morning drinking coffee deciding what to do.

Dr. Burns and his wife live in Signal Mountain, TN, which is west and slightly north of Chattanooga overlooking the Tennessee Gorge. The cattle ranch is 45 to 50 minutes west. Because the division between Eastern and Central time zones runs right down Signal Mountain, Dr. Burns can rise at 6:00 am, leave his home at 6:15 am, and get to the ranch at 6:00 am. Of course, he loses an hour on the return trip, but he doesn’t mind since he’s just going to go to bed.

He not only sells cattle but shows them as well, participating in all of the clipping, feeding,



Dr. Burns (right) with bull Bf808 Domino 092.

breaking, and leading. Last year, he had a particularly good string of show cattle, especially a bull that captured the top prize at all state and regional fairs in Tennessee. But that achievement is only the latest example of Dr. Burns’ eye for first-quality cattle. In 1994, Dr. Burns, his brother, and another couple from Tennessee selected a bull calf that won the Kentucky Derby of cattle shows, the National Western Hereford Show, in Denver, CO, the next year.

Roping it together

Balancing the demands of academic surgery and those of the cattle business is not always easy. “If you want to keep more than one ball in the air, you have to be willing to take on the stress that brings,” Dr. Burns said. But he has been able to keep both in focus. “When you’re doing one thing, you’re often thinking about another. You can’t do that all the time, but you can do it part of the time,” he said.

At the same time, he’s kept both professional areas separate. “As someone once told me, ‘You’re a doctor among doctors and a cattleman among cattlemen.’”



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