

# All In the Pleasant Open Air:

## Animal Welfare Approved Farmers Spearhead Return to Raising Cattle on Grass



Mike Suarez

IN THE MID-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY, the United States underwent an agricultural revolution that went largely unnoticed by the general public when the ability of science to industrialize farming overtook the knowledge and expertise of working farmers. Led by a few industry “visionaries,” farm animals were moved out of the pastures and into the warehouse, creating the unnatural and callous system that is now known as factory farming. For cattle, a species deeply entwined with human survival, this meant the rise of the feedlot and grain-finishing system.

Feedlots are the antithesis of cattle’s natural environment. In addition to being confined to a barren pen, feedlot cattle—uniquely evolved to eat grass—are fed a diet of carbohydrates and growth stimulants designed to promote an unnaturally quick and harmful weight gain, artificially cutting the amount of time needed for a calf to reach slaughter weight. Feedlot cattle must be administered antibiotics or ionophores (chemical compounds used as antibiotics or growth promoters) to fight a number of diseases that fester in a feedlot environment including bovine respiratory disease, feedlot bloat, and subacute acidosis. From the moment calves arrive at the feedlot, they are thrust into a system that strips them of their natural behaviors and instincts in the never-ending quest to stock the neighborhood supermarket with the cheapest beef possible.

However, not all farmers are willing to cede control of the care and raising of their cattle to an industrial system that leaves them open to disease and distress. Animal Welfare Approved farmers are quiet revolutionaries in the growing movement to ensure that farm animals live out their lives on pasture. For these farmers, the return to traditional grassfed practices represents far more than a savvy marketing move, it brings them back to a more holistic and thoughtful relationship with the animals they raise.

AWI interviewed four Animal Welfare Approved cattle farmers and asked them to talk about the

rewards of farming with the animals in mind, the challenges of turning away from a conventional system and what the future holds for pasture-based farming. Will Harris credits pasture-based farming with strengthening his relationship with his animals. Dr. Patricia Whisnant’s veterinary training gives her a sound scientific basis for her appreciation of the health benefits for the animals. Don Davis is committed to raising cattle who are best suited for his land, benefiting both the cattle and wildlife. Bill Stuart resisted the pull to transition his farm to an industrial system and is now seeing a resurgence of interest in the farming traditions his family has followed for generations.

### What were your original farming practices and how do they differ from your current practices?

**BILL:** We’ve always been a pasture-based operation and our cattle have always grazed in season and been fed hay in the winter. The one major change we made in our operation was to finish our beef cattle strictly on grass and hay rather than finishing them on corn and other grains. We’ve saved a lot of money by grass-finishing our cattle. Eliminating grain lowered our cost inputs. Another reason we changed is because we wanted our cattle to have the best conditions possible and by eliminating corn, the cattle now eat what they were created to eat.

**WILL:** In the history of our farm, we’ve done the gamut of production, making the transition to a conventional operation in the late 1960s, when we stopped raising cattle for beef and began raising calves for the feedlot system. About fifteen years ago, we began the transition back to a grassfed operation, raising and finishing the cattle ourselves, on the farm.

**PATRICIA:** We farmed conventionally for years—mostly a basic cow-calf operation (keeping only a breeding herd of cows and weaning calves for the feedlot system), but we always kept a few cattle and finished them ourselves on pasture. Today, we grass finish all the cattle we sell.

### What made you change to a pasture-based system?

**DON:** We did a lot of research before starting our herd. DWD Longhorns started just as the movement away from confined feeding of animals was gaining recognition. “Humane” was starting to venture beyond just dogs and cats into third-party farm certification. Consumers were starting to demand products from farms that paid attention to the needs and natural behaviors of farm animals. We attended a conference on Holistic Resource Management and came away with many great ideas about range management. We were able to begin our new ranch in Tarpley, [TX] which had previously been overgrazed and under-managed, in a holistic way, managing and nurturing the health of the soil to benefit the Longhorns. A pasture-based system using high animal welfare was the right thing to do and one of the reasons we decided against a conventional system.

**WILL:** I learned all about running an industrial beef operation while I was in college and I kept on with the practice when I started farming. But over time, I found myself liking it less and less and I grew disenchanted with the system. I was pouring chemicals onto my fields, damaging land that has been in my family for 140 years. I was shipping a 500-lb. calf on a truck to a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO)

*Bill Stuart and his family on Stuart Family Farm.*

*Don and Debbie Davis of DWD Longhorns.*



Courtesy Stuart Family Farm



Courtesy Debbie Davis



*Animal Welfare Approved calves are raised with their herds and are never sent to feedlots.*

Mike Suarez

hundreds of miles away from where he was raised. On the truck, you had animals jammed together, the ones on the top tier defecating and urinating on the ones below. Often they had inadequate water for the trip. It became harder and harder to watch my animals leave, knowing that everything they would experience from that point on was completely counter to what was best for them.

**PATRICIA:** Raising grassfed cattle is good land stewardship. We practice a solar-driven pasture rotation that works with the seasons and land to produce forages that we use cattle to harvest. Living on the land you farm heightens your attention to the practices that are environmentally sound and are enhancing to the soil. We do all that we can to take care of the land, grow natural grasses and give our cattle, our wildlife and our family an environment in which we all thrive together.

**Has the change to pasture-based production impacted you and the animals?**

**PATRICIA:** Our family has really rallied around the farm. We work harder but we find it wonderful to have the opportunity for our joint endeavor to pivot around the center of something we feel a deep passion about—our family farm. Personally, the impact has been exciting, risk taking, challenging, overwhelming, rewarding, difficult and never dull. Our animals are allowed to live and grow in pursuit of their natural behavioral instincts; they have a higher level of welfare, better health, and are treated with care and respect. I believe this to be far different from their feedlot counterparts who suffer from innumerable health issues and need synthetic inputs to maintain them in an aberrant environment.

**WILL:** I really like what I do now. I enjoy raising my cattle. My herd is better off, my land is better off, and the people who purchase my products are better off. I'm leaving my farm in better condition for my daughters and that's important. When you have a family business, you want to create opportunities—but not an obligation—for your children to come back. My cattle are in better shape since I've returned them to pasture. I simply don't have sick cattle and don't need to give them antibiotics. I spend a lot more time with them now and I've become reacquainted with my herd.

**DON:** We are witnessing the success of our system. Our cattle are thriving in dry, dusty Texas. Wildlife is thriving on our ranch. Many people don't realize the positive relationship between a pasture-based operation and a suitable habitat for wildlife. Our land is healthier, the animals are healthier and that ultimately results in wholesome, uncompromised food for the community. We are finding a lot of spiritual fulfillment in what we are doing.

**BILL:** Pasture-based farming allows the animals to achieve harmony with nature by utilizing the sun's energy, which is transferred into green plants the cattle eat. When an animal is in harmony with nature it is living its best possible life and everybody wins.

**Why is pasture-based farming important for the animals?**

**WILL:** Cattle are ruminants, designed and evolved to walk over open pastures and eat grass and forage. When the switch to feedlots came about after World War II, it had nothing to do with the welfare of the animals. It was about

money and economics. Feedlot cattle gain a tremendous amount of weight in a short period of time, their movements are restricted and they are fed corn, which to a cow is like candy, and it makes them sick.

**PATRICIA:** Grazing on pasture fulfills the natural behavioral instincts of cattle. They enjoy better health with an appropriate diet and live in a low-stress environment.

**DON:** Ruminants evolved in a pasture environment. Their systems are designed to function best in a pasture environment. On pasture, they are healthier and use fewer resources. Pasture-based farming is an animal centered production model that incorporates the well being of the animals, the land and wildlife. It honors the integrity of natural systems.

**If you could look into a crystal ball, what do you see in the future for high-welfare, pasture-based farming?**

**PATRICIA:** In a market where consumer confidence has been rocked by recalls, we are seeing a new consumer. This consumer is a partner in the process and is ultimately the one whose support for high-welfare, pasture-based farming matters most.

**DON:** We believe high-welfare is the future of food production. We need to concentrate on building a strong, healthy, sustainable food system for our communities.

**BILL:** Demand for products from pasture-based farms will continue to grow as consumers continue to become more aware of the conditions and practices of many conventional and corporate farms. They'll flock to farmers' markets and farm stores—the movement is in full-swing

and more farmers will want to give consumers what they are looking for, creating a better environment for their animals, their neighbors, and themselves. 🐾

**About the farmers:**

**DON DAVIS, DWD LONGHORNS, TARPLEY, TEXAS:** Although both were city kids, Don and his wife Debbie were only a generation or two removed from farming, spending weekends at the ranches of family members. Don and Debbie are proud to carry on the tradition of Don's great-grandfather and uncles, who participated in the old Texas cattle drives, raising genetically pure Texas Longhorns, a species exceptionally adapted to the Texas landscape.

**WILL HARRIS, WHITE OAK PASTURES, BLUFFTON, GEORGIA:** The Harris family has been farming in Bluffton since 1866 and despite being located in the heart of peanut and cotton country, they've always been cattle people. Five generations of the Harris family have made their living farming White Oak Pastures and Will now works with his daughters (the sixth generation), expanding the operation to include a slaughterhouse to increase viability and spare the animals the stress associated with transport.

**BILL STUART, STUART FAMILY FARM, BRIDGEWATER, CONNECTICUT:** Bill grew up on the farm his grandfather purchased in 1929. He studied meat and food science in college and worked for 10 years before returning to carry on the family tradition of raising beef cattle. Bill, his wife Deb, and their sons, raise their cattle in a way that is consistent with their natural habitat and behaviors to ensure their health and welfare.

**DR. PATRICIA WHISNANT, AMERICAN GRASS FED BEEF, DONIPHAN, MISSOURI:** A veterinarian, Patricia was drawn to farming through her mentor who ran a large animal veterinary practice. Her experience working with family farms and farmers and her husband Mark's experience growing up on a farm inspired them to begin a farm of their own. The Whisnants also run Fruitland American Meat, LLC, a small slaughter and processing plant specializing in grassfed production.

*Dr. Patricia Whisnant of American Grass Fed Beef, with her husband Mark and children.*

*Will Harris of White Oak Pastures.*



Courtesy of the Whisnant Family



Courtesy White Oak Pastures