

# “Tomorrow is Another Day”

BY CORINNE PATTERSON



## A whole new world comes within reach of a very focused young cattleman

**A**rrows may point in the right direction, but for those in agriculture it's a common reality that their courses may change for expected and unexpected reasons. For Doug Tenhouse, growing up in the livestock and farming business in west central Illinois gave him a clear desire to continue his family's legacy. But an expiring contract and small margins pointed to a different direction.

A decade later, managing a 400-cow herd in northeast Missouri is a dream job for this young family. The path took determination for Doug, his wife Blair, and their two young children; Liam and Emeran. But to them, it's just expected in their chosen agriculture profession.

"My family had row crops, and when I was old enough to remember, we had cow-calf pairs and we fed cattle," Tenhouse recalls. "In 1990 we started a dairy, milking about 250 cows. We still finished cattle out and had the beef herd. We sold the dairy in 1997. At that point we got a contract with Farmland Industries to develop dairy heifers for some large-scale dairies located in Illinois and Texas. We were also custom feeding cattle for customers and had about 1,500 dairy heifers we were developing."

Tenhouse found he enjoyed working with the cattle, and a quick stint at junior college solidified his desire to return to the farm. Running the dairy and then developing dairy heifers gave him plenty of experience with arti-



TENHOUSE PHOTO

The rolling hills near Unionville, Missouri became the new grass heaven for Joe Mayer's droughted-out Oklahoma heifers.



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**Mayer Ranch's Missouri division ranch manager Doug Tenhouse, his wife Blair, and their two young children Liam and Emeran.**

ficial insemination (AI), and this became an arrow providing direction for Tenhouse.

"We were typically breeding around 100 heifers a month because they wanted a year-round supply of bred females," Tenhouse recalls. "That's where I started to develop my AI skills. It gave me a leg up compared to most folks who may only breed their cowherd once a year. AI is like anything else. It just takes practice to get better."

After the Farmland contract came to an end, Tenhouse decided to expand his horizons and returned to school where he completed a Bachelor's Degree in Animal Science from Western Illinois University. Upon graduation, an advanced degree was in the cards.

"I applied to several different colleges for grad school," he says. "I wound up going to Kansas State University and studied under Dr. Jeff Stevenson. I worked for him for two years during my masters program and earned a Masters Degree in Reproductive Physiology."

During his time at Kansas State, Tenhouse also had an internship at Heartland Cattle Co. in McCook, Nebraska. Heartland specializes in the custom development and AI of large groups of heifers for commercial producers. Tenhouse's experiences at Kansas State and Heartland solidified once and for all the path he wanted to follow in the cattle industry.

"I had invested in my education, and I wanted to focus on the reproductive side of things," Tenhouse recalls. He went to work for the Kansas Artificial Breeding Service Unit (KABSU) in Manhattan, Kansas. While a two-year stint at KABSU gave him experience and additional skills, it wasn't all gold and glory. Making about \$10 an hour with a masters degree was simply paying his dues and something Tenhouse says young people in agriculture need to be prepared to accept.

Others in the industry took notice of Tenhouse's skill in successfully managing large AI projects and it wasn't long

before a major bull stud offered him a position managing a territory for them.

"I was offered a job with Select Sires and worked with producers in the western third of Kansas. That was where I started to build up the number of heifers and cows I was breeding each year."

During his time working the territory, Tenhouse capitalized on the opportunity he had to expand his list of contacts.

"Working for Select Sires gave me the opportunity to develop some relationships with some really great people," Tenhouse says. "One of them was Dr. Randall Spare at the Ashland Veterinary Center in Ashland, Kansas. He introduced me to a lot of producers in the area."

As with any other skilled service provider in rural America, a job well done is noticed and garners demand. With each successful AI project he managed, Tenhouse's reputation as a trustworthy and organized custom breeder began to gain him more and more work.

"The AI work was snowballing each year, and I decided to go out on my own and start my own custom breeding business," he remembers. It was also during this time of transition for Tenhouse that the brutal drought grasping much of the lower Midwest began to really take hold in his major service area. Many of his customers were being forced to drastically downsize their cowherds, and in some cases liquidate their cattle holdings completely until rain and grass returned again.

### **ARROW POINTS THIS WAY**

One of Tenhouse's clients at the time was the Mayer Ranch located in the Oklahoma panhandle. Tenhouse had provided some custom breeding for ranch owner Joe Mayer and his family during the last few years. Mayer had meticulously stacked carcass and per-



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**Those building Missouri rainclouds look mighty good to the Mayer Ranch crew and cows.**

formance genetics in his cowherd the last decade and a half, and now he was faced with the difficult decision of how to move forward in the face of adversity.

“That dry spell continued to get worse and worse,” Tenhouse remembers. “In 2011, Joe was forced to sell about 1,400 cows, which was a majority of what he owned.”

Mayer reached out to Tenhouse after a conversation Mayer had with Dr. Spare regarding the future of the Mayer Ranch cowherd.

“The reason why he called me was because he had kept all his heifers, his first calf 2-year olds and some older cows,” Tenhouse says. “He had decided that if he was going to make it through and retain any of the elite genetics that he’d built up over such a long period of time, he thought the herd would need to go somewhere that got some moisture where the cattle could have good access to growing forage instead of dry lotting them.”

That phone call in the late fall of 2011 changed a lot of things for both Tenhouse and Mayer. Tenhouse recalls the short version of the conversation with a laugh, sharing, “Joe called and he said, ‘I’ve got a wild idea. If you can find a ranch, you can manage it for me.’ That was a dream come true for me.”

Tenhouse’s appetite for the most up to date technology and trends in



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**“The 2013 cattle were about 22 percent to 23 percent Prime, and in 2014 we were pretty close to 30 percent Prime,” says ranch manager Doug Tenhouse.**

cowherd and breeding management focused his attention on north-central Missouri as a potential forage lifeboat for the Mayer herd.

“It’s funny how these things fall in place,” Tenhouse recalls about the decision on where to re-locate the cattle. “About that same time Joe contacted me, I had been studying many of the management practices put forth by the University of Missouri’s Extension service in regards to both artificial insemination and also intensive grazing practices. I knew with the cost of land in

Missouri and the stocking rates that this area can maintain, I believe it’s one of the most economical places to run a cow-calf pair. That was a lot of the motivation in regards to the location we started to look into, and it was also great to possibly get a little closer to my family and the part of the country that I was really familiar with. I loved working out on the plains, but really wanted to get closer to home.”

With a target geography identified, Mayer and Tenhouse began searching for a suitable piece of ground to purchase. It wasn’t long before Tenhouse found an online listing for 1,640 acres of rolling hills near Unionville, Missouri.

After the purchase was finalized and Mayer took possession of the place, work began in earnest. The outfit was pretty bare bones, with a modest set of outbuildings, a home, some usable corrals and a perimeter fence. Tenhouse travelled to the Mayer Ranch headquarters in Guymon to gather some essential equipment and then headed 700-plus miles northeast.

“I went down to Joe’s and he set me up with a pickup with a bale bed and Trip Hopper cake feeder, and a 24-foot aluminum trailer, some tools, and I set sail for Missouri.”

The pressure was on. With cattle completely out of available forage back in Oklahoma, it was now up to Tenhouse to get the Missouri ranch ready so that the cattle could be moved as quickly as possible.

“We needed to get around some



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**Liam Tenhouse supervises the loading of the cube feeder while his dad, Doug, keeps on task.**

fence, and I wanted to set up a rotational grazing system as soon as possible," Tenhouse explains. "I spent a lot of time going over aerial maps of the ranch to evaluate available water sources and how best to set up our grazing cells. We put up hotwire cross fences. I figured out where I wanted permanent fences. When the cattle got here we had a place to put them, and then we could build fence ahead of them. The first two months on this place all we did was build fence. The last part of May we finally got done."

Literally as the last strands of hotwire were being strung, and the new working facility was being installed, the cattle pots started to roll in from Guymon. The first several loads were replacement heifers that were immediately set up on a 14-day controlled internal drug release (CIDR) protocol for a timed AI service. Looking back at this whirlwind of activity in the spring of 2012 Tenhouse says it's all still a blur.

"It seemed so daunting but it was such an opportunity for me that I just never let myself get scared," Tenhouse admits.

## STOPPED CHECKING HEAT

Fast-forward to 2015 and all arrows are pointing in a common direction. Rotational grazing paddocks have been established. Tenhouse is now able to focus his time on managing the cows and heifers with a goal of pregnancy achieved on the first AI service.

"We AI every animal one time with fixed-time AI. We use a 7-day CIDR protocol on cows and a 14-day CIDR protocol with heifers," Tenhouse says. "We run everything through and AI them once. Twenty-four hours later we turn the bulls out."

Tenhouse is quick to add, "Then the question usually comes, 'How do you know if your calves are AI sired?'"

Blood samples are pulled on every calf and parentage is verified through the Genemax program.

"I used to do a lot of heat detecting," Tenhouse remembers. "During my time in western Kansas on those big breeding runs, I stopped heat checking because with the CIDR protocols we could achieve the same conception rates without heat checking."

As more research has become available in regards to timed breeding programs, Tenhouse has been willing to switch things up in order to maximize the number of first service pregnancies.

"Before I moved to Missouri, my standard protocol was a 7-day CIDR protocol on both heifers and cows," he says. "The first cattle we bred out here we used the 14-day CIDR protocol. I've seen some of the projects we've worked on where we'd be in the low 60 percent conception rate on fixed time AI with a 7-day CIDR protocol. When we switched to a 14-day protocol, it's not too hard to consistently hit a mid-60 percent conception rate still using fixed time AI."

Many variables are at work to achieve a good conception rate. Nutrition, body condition score (BCS) and overall health of the heifers and cows are all key.

"I learned a whole new appreciation for AI when we moved up here because I was the one getting cows gathered up, getting the crew lined up to help, and making sure everything was sorted up right," he admits. "In my previous career, I just dropped in and bred the cows and collected my check and left. I have a whole new respect for guys who AI large groups of cattle. It can be daunting. You have to have a plan."

## GOT TO CONSERVE THIS LAND

Managing available forage resources is a major component of the overall program.

"Centering everything around the forage supply we have here is key," Tenhouse adds. "We do management intensive grazing. We don't put up any hay. We buy all the hay we feed."

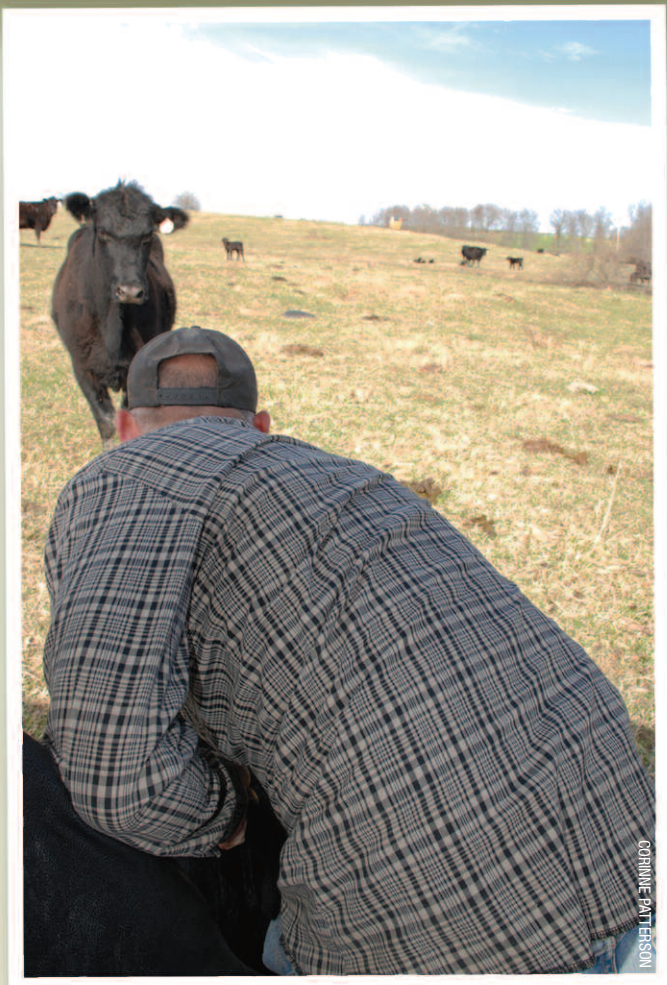
Wintertime is determined the first day where it doesn't get above freezing. From that time until about mid-April each pasture is allocated equal time for the cows to be on, and hay is fed unrolled on those pastures.

"We feel it works for two reasons," Tenhouse says. "It adds some fertilizer to the grass via manure from the hay feeding, and it helps to re-seed the pastures. In a perfect world I'd like to get to a point where we didn't have to feed hay."

**Doug Tenhouse knew there was a big world just waiting out there, so he went out and made the most of it. Today, his experience is paying off; the Mayer Ranch's genetic program is well suited for producing high-quality, consumer-pleasing beef.**



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**Ah, the challenges of calving.**

"I'm debating if we should stockpile and intensify our management in the wintertime. My fear is that with our type of genetics, we'll always have to feed some hay," he continues. "I'd like to do a little better job in leaving more residual cover on this ranch. These hills are highly erodible, and we've got to do a good job conserving this land. In order to do that the rotational grazing is really good. Where we're at it's more important to leave some cover on the ground than it is to not feed some hay."

Cows are ideally kept in a BCS score of 5.5 to 6. Calves are started on a creep feed ration consisting of one-third soy hulls, one-third dry corn gluten and one-third rolled corn with Rumensin. Mayer's breeding program has always focused on carcass quality and growth performance. Terminal calves are retained through the feedlot phase and sold on a grid-based marketing system.

"The cattle are highly efficient in the feedyard and quality grade is something we've kept an eye on," Tenhouse says. "When I started here the percent of Choice carcasses we

were producing was very close to 100 percent. Our percent Certified Angus Beef (CAB) was running right about 50 percent. It was about 15 percent Prime at that time as well.

"The 2013 cattle were about 22 percent to 23 percent Prime, and in 2014 we were pretty close to 30 percent Prime," he continues. "The goal Joe now has is that in 2 years we can have everything going about 50 percent Prime. In a nutshell that's what our breeding program is geared towards."

Tenhouse is appreciative of the support role his wife, Blair, plays in the operation as well. She keeps track of the books for the Missouri division, working closely with Joe's daughter Margie, who manages the herd records, and Joe's wife, Mary Ann, who is in charge of the overall financials. Blair also provides labor when needed, in addition to being a busy mom.

"We keep every bit of data on this cowherd that we can," Tenhouse shares. "It's all under Joe's management, even though it's 700 miles away. We try to manage it alongside his

cowherd as tightly as we can. This place takes such different management practices compared to the herd in Oklahoma, but as far as records and financial we try to keep that tightly integrated with the home operation."

Tenhouse attributes patience and the willingness to take some risks as two of the things that have helped him navigate to this point in his career.

"When I moved to Kansas I didn't know a soul. That was a huge leap for me. I had never envisioned leaving my hometown or our farm, and I really didn't want to. I had no ambition to leave, but at the same time I knew there was a whole other world out there that offered a lot of opportunities," Tenhouse says. "The set of circumstances during that time in my life forced me out there. To a young person who may not have that spot in a family operation waiting for them when they get out of school, you have to work as hard as you can and the rest will take care of itself. It really is all about keeping your head down, and working through the tough times. Tomorrow is another day." **WR**