

Little Way Farm

My friends from half way across the globe (incredible that the Devon community is global when you think about it!) reached out and asked me if I could share some thoughts about our experience with Devon for the benefit of our Australian brethren. I feared I may not have much to add given we are relative newbies when it comes to the art and science of raising purebred seedstock, not to mention Devon - but nevertheless, I was happy to oblige. Perhaps some new Devon breeders will learn something.



Enrique Garcia Sr (Dad) & Delfino Garcia.



Enrique son on future sire.



By way of introduction, my name is Enrique Garcia and I live in East Texas with my heavenly wife of 20 years, Veronica, with our 10 children. Technically our two oldest boys have flown the coop and are off studying and starting their lives, but Veronica and I remain in a bit of denial for the time being. Anyhow, we are incredibly grateful for the blessings the good Lord has showered upon us, including the privilege of raising our children around Devon for the past 15 years. As I think back to how I ended up raising Devon, I realize how fortunate I was to have had the help of many selfless cattlemen along the way. I am incredibly grateful.

Let me take a step back and describe how we ended up raising a small herd of Devon in east Texas. I am the son of immigrant parents from the state of Tamaulipas in northern Mexico. My father's lineage ties back to Portuguese communities that emigrated into Spain and eventually braved to cross the Atlantic, explore the Americas, and settle the hot, dry, thorny, dessert country of northern Mexico. The town they settled was once a beautiful quaint dessert village on a bluff looking over the Rio Salado ("Salty River") in the middle of the Mexican dessert, that to this day goes by the name of San Rafael de las Tortillas. The families that resided there were livestock ranchers that owned ranches all along the river but lived together for protection from the natives and to support one another. Today, all that remains of that village are about 160 homes with 12" thick adobe walls with partly caved in roofs, the old school house, the center pen where families kept their family milk cows near town, the town cemetery, and the cobble streets. Although the families that owned the surrounding ranch lands eventually moved to bigger modern towns nearby, but the land was passed down along generations and the descendants continue to this day raising livestock, primarily cattle, on the same dry lands. As I think about the early settlers, I am amazed that they chose to stop and settle in this tough, hot country, and even more amazed that they were successful. The land is dry and thorns abound. Rain is scarce. Every year seems like a drought, yet somehow, some way, ranches survive and make it through to face another year.

My immediate family, too, raised livestock on our 10,000 acre ranch near

San Rafael de las Tortillas. At that time, nearly 40 years ago, we operated a cow-calf operation of anywhere between 300-500 Brahma-cross cows. These cows were heavily influenced by the Brahma breed, thought then to be one of the only breeds that could survive the harsh climate and defend their calves from coyotes and other predators. The heavy Brahma genetics were resistant to drought, yet anything but docile. Working Brahma-cross bulls through pens required keeping your head on a swivel!. We were always looking for ways to improve our livestock practices and performance. We started crossing our cows with large framed Simmental and other Continental large-frame bulls to maximize weaning weight. We found pregnancy rates to be higher when we crossed to English breeds like Herefords, so we looked for larger Hereford bulls. We also hopped on the rotational grazing wagon and saw significant benefits from doing so. We also, at one point, attempted to try Angus bulls. We quickly realized the obvious mistake... their black offspring spent all day submerged in whatever shady marsh or water hole they could find due to the heat. We also learned to avoid any bulls with a sheath on their belly to avoid dessert brush with thorns that infested the country - long sheathes resulted in infections that compromised bull fertility. I also recall getting the great Bud Williams, may he rest in peace, to come down to

Mexico and teach us the secrets to his stockmanship. His ability to work cattle without slapping, hollering, prodding, etc. was remarkable and changed our behaviors overnight.

Fast forward to the mid 1990's, around the time I went off to college, we were forced to sell the ranch due to high inflation that led to ~50% interest rates. Needless to say, I was heartbroken after having been raised around commercial cattle herds in wide open country. But, the good Lord's ways are not our ways, and so we trusted and moved on, albeit with a heavy heart. A few years flew by, and before long I had a young family and a small plot of land in eastern Texas. We committed to raising the boys around livestock, so as soon as my oldest son was around 7 years of age, we started rotating some commercial cattle on our "little way farm". I was super excited to raise our children exposed to livestock and I started looking at various "newly" developed breeds attempting to leverage the approaches that led to Beefmaster, Santa Gertrudis, or more recently Santa Cruz (a ½ Santa Gertrudis, ¼ Gelbvieh, ¼ Red Angus composite) breeds. However, given the small size of the herd, my father encouraged me to consider raising purebred cattle. I recoiled at the idea. We were simple good old-fashioned commercial cattlemen. We looked at purebred cattle raisers as... well... out of our league. But with significant



Enrique's Family.



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encouragement, my father reminded me of the importance of hybrid vigor and why we need good purebred breeders... so I started looking at different breeds.

I spoke with a few purebred breeders that lived in my region and quickly realized every breed claimed many of the same traits - fertility, docility, weaning weights, tenderness, carcass quality. That was indeed off-putting. I realized every purebred breeder had a bit of a conflict of interest. I didn't blame the breeders. On the contrary, I understood they were invested financially, physically and emotionally.... and committed to continually improving the breed. But their counsel was not working. Now what? I recall deciding to try some Limousin purebreds and found a reputable breeder that had the same positive view of his herd. When I went to pick them up, the owner asked me to keep the 2 heifers I chose in the back of a wide chute while he let the others out. As soon as he let them out, they two heifers came at me and I jumped out of the way. The owner was not amused and asked me to try again, hold my position and not let them out. The scene repeated itself in the exact same way. I've been around cattle and I was fairly confident I am no match of two 600 lb heifers committed to go through me. Needless to say, the owner was emphatic and we switched places. Well, when I let the herd out of the pen and the owner set his feet, the 2 heifers rolled him over. I was respectful enough to not say a word.

Sometime after that I ran across the late Gerald Fry. I was intrigued by what he shared with me. Here was a cattleman that did not favor any one particular breed. He spoke about the qualities you look for in any breed that result in production efficiency, particularly on 100% grass. This was my guy. The trick was not to get hung up on a specific breed... and instead focus on the physical, physiological traits that correspond to paternal and maternal efficiency, as well as the advantages of prepotent genetics that are not diluted by continually introducing sires with traits that correspond to the latest fad. Gerald shared a lot of literature with me and I am forever grateful to his generosity. As a result of my investigations I settled on selecting between British Whites, Murray Grey, or "Ruby Red" Devons. All



Enrique's son with bulls.

of those breeds had fallen out of favor over the decades and had relatively few breeders, particularly in the southern US. However I fell in love with the docility of the Devon and that was all it took to get me started. I started with just a few cows and realized a few years in that some Devon lineages are much better suited for cold climates. I decided to start over - such are the lessons that shape our herds for our specific locations. The table was now set with different lineages from US, Australia, and Brazil, but not without some more limited influence from colder climates.

Along the way, I was fortunate to meet Jeremy Engh of Lakota Ranch and start learning from his experience. That has been and continues to be a remarkable wealth of knowledge, and Jeremy's selflessness and willingness to share what he has learned over many years has been invaluable. I combined what I was learning from Jeremy with, you'll never guess, Toyota's Lean Production System. That is subject perhaps for a different article, but suffice to say that the "lean dashboard" allows our family operations to clearly identify the top performance goals and measure progress toward them in a transparent manner. Our goals were aligned along 5 key principles: health, quality, delivery, cost, and people. The "lean dashboard" enables us to have clear line of sight of how to measure these realtime, how we are trending over time, and more importantly: what are the countermeasures that we are prioritizing to close the gap and achieve our goals. We are still on our journey and continuously learning. We have learned to be patient with ourselves. We have learned to be quick(er) to cull, which can be incredibly hard. We have learned to be incredibly selective on our

sires. We have learned to better identify defects earlier and maintain diverse set of genetics in our foundation cows. We have learned to not over select for any one trait, as there are often unintended consequences. We have learned to maintain our herd size below our carrying capacity to give us flexibility. We have learned to pay closer attention and invest in our soil health

The Little Way Devon herd is maintained around 30 cows that are run under strictly organic farming principles. The bull Little Way K69 (pictured) contains Australian breeding from Tirranna and Belmur Clay B13 through his Lakota bred sire. I also purchased semen from Jenny Kahrl, Montana Devons and inseminated cows to Gowan Ross Gentleman and Vix Jurassic in 2023 and using Gentleman again this year.

In 2010 we exported the first purebred registered Devon cattle to three of our extended families' ranches in Mexico. This includes my uncle Delfino Garcia's La Avispa Ranch where Devon bulls have been used for several years now. He runs his Devon cross commercial cow-calf operation in hot, arid, rocky terrain that is tough on animals and sells his heavily Devon influenced steers to feedlots in Mexico. Bulls he chooses for the desert environment are sleeker coated ones with snug sheaths to avoid cactus spines. At my cousins El Estribo Ranch the Red Devons have performed extremely well, his cattle are now predominantly 15/16 Devon. My cousins are seriously considering starting a Mexican Devon Register.

It has now been 15 years since we started on our Devon journey... and we look forward to continuing to learn over the next 15!

