

Women in Farming Profile- Judy Decker**Finding a Place in Raising High Quality Grassfed Beef**

by Jean Stramel

Back in the mid 1990's, Judy Decker was raising kids with her husband on a small tract of land near Emporia. Then she attended the K-State Sustainable Agriculture Conference and heard Joel Salatin speak about grass-fed beef and pastured poultry and she thought "I can get into that". She knew the feed lot and confinement thing just wasn't in her. Now 20 years later she is running a successful business on their Renaissance Farms Ltd., incorporated as a Sub-S entity in 1998. She is raising grass-fed Galloway beef and selling all she can produce using the farm website and Facebook as her marketing tool.



She and her husband had already been raising a bucket calves, and keeping a few cows and calves on their twelve acres, but this new concept made her start looking for more land. In 1999 they bought 100 acres north of Emporia and now run two herds on that land, plus another 135 leased acres across the road. It was a perfect fit for Judy who has a degree in wildlife biology from KSU, and worked on the Kanza Prairie research land near Manhattan during the final year of her undergraduate studies and for a year as a graduate student.

"I just have a real love and passion for grassland ecosystems, so this whole cattle thing was very fascinating to me – it gave me an excuse to be out there with the grassland system – managing it". She and her husband attended the Jim Gerrish grazing school in Missouri (he is now in Idaho), and discovered the book "Grass Productivity", by Andre Voisin, which she recommends to anyone wanting to gain an understanding of the grassland ecosystem as it pertains to livestock production. She was on her way.

Finding a breed was the next quest. She believed in the idea that not all cattle are capable of producing quality beef from grass in a timely and economical manner and so went looking for the genetics that can do that. Through list serves, reading and word of mouth, she ended up with some Solid Galloway cows from Wisconsin and has been very pleased with the breed and its performance on grass. This breed is recognized in Europe as an environmentally friendly ruminant.

As it turned out, marketing was not difficult. At the time, they were already selling pastured poultry. So when they had some beef ready to sell, she wrote it on a chalk board so her poultry customers could see what was available and people bought it, were very pleased and kept buying it. Her customer base is now expanded far beyond these poultry buyers through word of mouth and her on-line presence. She recently gave some to her son in Kansas City; and his roommate's father, who raises Angus beef, wanted to buy a side of her beef, claiming they were the best steaks he had ever eaten, even claiming they were at least as good as Omaha Steak Company. "I felt bad because I wrote back and said they were from a six-year old cow!"



Decker chose the Solid Galloway breed for its performance on grass and low maintenance. Half of their farm income comes from selling breeding stock. They also market sides of beef from their website and on Facebook. Many customers come from the Kansas City area to pick up their beef. Judy also does periodic surveys of her customers, as quality control is serious for her.

Now she uses her website and Facebook to market her product to people looking for grass-fed beef. Much of it goes to Kansas City customers, who order a side of beef and then drive to Olpe, Kansas to pick it up from the processor. She sends an email that includes tips for selecting cutting options. Judy is on site when her beef are being processed because “I want to feel and look at the steaks. I know who the genetics are – what bull and cow – and I just like to keep an eye on things and make sure it really looks and feels like it should.” The owner of the plant was OK with this. “People are paying a lot of money for this beef” I told him. She periodically does follow-up with customers, providing a review sheet they can send to her with anonymous suggestions, which she feels allows them to be more forthcoming in their comments. Judy takes quality control very seriously.

Judy runs two groups of animals on the land “up north”. On the pasture acres they own, she rotationally grazes the herd, giving a 3-5 day paddock of grass. They see huge benefits to giving the grass some rest, but they have not set up the leased land into a paddock system because they are never sure from year-to-year whether the land will be available to them, or the owners will sell it.

When looking for land in the 90’s their criteria was “cheap”. The 100 –acre tract bought in 1999 was in very poor shape nutrient-wise, having previously been “farmed out” and overgrazed. Once they bought it, they set about building soil fertility with rotational grazing, inter-seeding new species, and planting 28 acres of “go-back” land into two different mixtures of native species. The soil has a high clay content so if it rains it does well, but also makes it a challenge during drought since clay likes to hold onto the moisture.

After they bought the land, seven main pasture units were set up using 1-strand, 12-gauge high-tensile wire to create the primary paddocks. She will sometimes sub-divide these further, depending on the season and grazing pressure available. All exterior perimeter fences are barbed-wire. Watering points were developed including two pit ponds, one using USDA cost-share. Water is pumped from the pond into a 3200-gallon tank, then gravity fed to the paddocks through an above-ground pipeline. They also have two tire tanks installed by Judy’s husband, accessible from multiple paddocks.



Due to recent drought years, they installed an energy free waterer that is hooked up to rural water; solar charged electric fence divides paddocks on one pasture for rotational grazing management.

The drought of recent years led them to hook up to Rural water to put in a Cobett energy free waterer, which works very well and which Judy loves. These improvements allow them to keep the cattle on this land all winter long. She will use range cubes to lure them to the truck when she checks on them. She finds her animals are very winter hardy using her system. She and her husband will drive up on weekends and put out 4-5 hay bales in rings, which lasts the week. They try to move the feeding areas around to build fertility but it often depends on weather and ground conditions and maintaining access to the area.

The forage base is a mixture of 50% cool season and 50% warm season grasses, with a variety of forbs. They have had a problem with Western ragweed, which the cattle will eat, but not enough to control it. They will periodically frost seed Korean lespedeza, which gives a huge “pop” in summer productivity on the cool season paddocks, and provides a green forage. They have also tried drilling oats, turnips and rape on an area they call “the tillable” patch, which once had a good stand of crabgrass but it has not persisted, so the inter-seeding gives it more production. Regardless of what they graze or plant, it is a huge improvement from when they bought the land, when “you could see a mouse run across the ground”.

They only spot spray pastures when necessary and are up front with customers about this if they ask. Some choose to move on, but that is OK with her. She wants them to get the beef they want and she uses the production system she needs to get her product on the table.

Judy pays attention to cost of production, paying themselves rent for the land and paying her husband to make the hay. He likes to put up hay and owns the equipment. Renaissance Farms owns only a cattle trailer and old truck for pulling it, and another older truck for hauling hay bales. She would like to see more research available on the costs and benefits of using cover crops for livestock forage and “how it pencils out”. Judy feels there is a need for more farmer workshops on keeping track of cost of production because “we need more quality local foods, but it shouldn’t be on the backs of the farmers”. She feels that without knowing true production costs, profitable product pricing is a guess.

Judy is passionate about helping the Galloway breed thrive and grow in the US. That’s why she goes to the time and expense of hauling animals to the Denver Stock Show. “I guess my heart is in helping this breed excel and get back into the mainstream of the cattle industry, and I have found I love doing that”. She brings individuals to the corral at her home and loves the process of weaning and gentling them. She gets them used to being washing and cleaned for show.

Judy is now selling breeding stock, putting photos of sale animals on Facebook. This enterprise now accounts for half of the farm income. The Renaissance Farms website sells the beef and directs people to the breeding stock page. She is amazed at how many followers they get and enjoys the contact with the buyers she attracts. She has seen the Galloway breed take off in the last 7-8 years and is glad to be helping in that regard.

By 2005, Judy was so involved in the Grassfed beef industry that she organized a big conference in Kearney, NE called "Grass Genetics, Plus". "The thing I did different from other conferences is that I wanted to display live cattle. Potential producers could talk to the owners about what environment they were being raised in." The conference attracted attendees from 19 states and over a dozen breeders from all over brought cattle for the display pens. This conference was the precursor to the very successful Grassfed Exchange Conference.

Judy has found her place raising high quality grass-fed beef. The low maintenance animals she breeds and raises help her promote a sustainable food product important for building the resilience we need for the increasing challenges of droughts, floods and helping build local and regional food production systems. Her website is renfarms.com and she can be reached at galloway@renfarms.com.

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