

**AUSTRALIA'S FINEST**  
*By Heather Smith-Thomas*

After a very successful career in breeding Herefords and Polled Herefords in New South Wales, Australia, Barbara Roberts-Thomson changed to Wagyu. Her interest in cattle began in Tasmania where she grew up on Table Cape where her father raised Polled Dorset sheep, Polled Herefords and vegetable crops.

Barbara was the eldest of seven children. Her mother sadly died when she was 14 so she left school to help her father with the children and worked on the farm with the animals. She loved to ride; Pony Club and hunting were her main off-farm activities.

At age 19 she started a nursing career finishing up as a triple-certificate trained nurse, with obstetrics being the most useful--when calving the Hereford cattle. She had a stint working as a veterinary nurse, then travelled extensively in her 20's with the International Agricultural Exchange Association (IAEA), a Danish organisation, first as a student and then as a tour leader in 1979. That year she was employed by IAEA to do promotional work across Canada looking for students to travel the world.

"I spoke at all the Agricultural Colleges across Canada and worked at the big shows. At the same time, I watched the judging and met breeders of Polled Herefords. Their cattle were very different than the small, fat cattle we were breeding in Australia at that time and I realised that I knew very little about cattle. I attended two conferences, a Polled Hereford one in Canada and an Angus one in USA and those two occasions opened my eyes enormously," she recalls.

"I was so impressed with the practical ideas of the North American cattlemen and their goal of breeding very functional cattle that calved young, grew fast, milked well and had excellent muscle-to-fat ratios," says Barbara.

She also noticed the tremendous improvement in the maturity and ideas of the young people she travelled with. "Working on farms in foreign countries was an eye-opening experience. I am sure many of them have gone on to do really well because of the exposure they had to different farming practices."

Don Jarrett, from Ponderosa Ranch in Saskatchewan, then president of the IAEA Host Families Association and a leading Polled Hereford breeder, noticed that Barbara did a great job attracting young farmers to travel. He thought she might be successful in encouraging Australian farmers to try North American genetics. The ban on all imports of bovine genetics for 15 years had just been lifted so he prepared two bulls for semen export to Australia. It took 18 months quarantine in those days, so while waiting for the semen Barbara decided to get an education in practical cattle management. In 1991 she spent her last dollar on an air ticket to the U.S. and asked Bill and Beth Gray (Graystone Farms, in Pennsylvania) if they would take her on as an employee for 1 year.

"You do not have to pay me," she told them. "Just provide me with a bed and work and teach me what I need to know."

It was a wonderful year. “I learned so much about the purebred cattle industry! I loved the American people and way of life. At that time I thought I could live my life in America,” she said.

“We went to a lot of shows that Bill was judging and he instructed me as I judged from the sideline. At home I cared for the bulls including a sire named Graystone Granite who was a magnificent bull, long, well-muscled, beautifully balanced and with a powerful pedigree. Bill taught me so much about the power of genetics, which has been the cornerstone of my success as a cattle breeder.”

Granite went on to become the US National Champion the following year. At the end of the year it was time to go home, as the semen from the Ponderosa bulls was ready for shipment. “I was sad to leave, as I was so inspired by the educational opportunities and the positive thinking of the cattle breeders. When I said good-bye to Bill, I told him I felt we were starting to think alike. He said, ‘No Barb. You are starting to think like me!’ Another very successful breeder, Glen Klippenstein, said, ‘Go home, Barb and you will become a very successful cattle breeder’ but I had no money, no inheritance, no position on my father’s farm so I did not believe him--but I treasured his words.”

The semen on the Ponderosa bulls arrived when she was working in the operating theatre in a big Geelong Hospital. “The week days I worked as a nurse and on weekends I went out selling semen. One weekend I made more money in two days than in the theatre in five days so I resigned my job and started travelling, visiting Polled Hereford breeders by appointment and selling semen. I was on a commission of 15% and when I had saved \$2,000 I saw a heifer I thought was very good and I purchased her for \$1500. I was in the cattle business,” says Barbara.

“It did not take me long to realise that if you owned the bull and kept all the income, good money could be made. At that time semen was very expensive; the Polled Hereford breed was really on a roll. I plucked up the courage to purchase the Australian marketing rights on Graystone Granite under the conditions that I could sell the semen first and as I took in money I would pay for the semen from America. That was my first real break in the world of business,” she says.

### **Improving Hereford Genetics In Australia**

As a pioneer in introducing North American sires in Hereford and Polled Herefords, Barbara helped the Australian cattle industry ultimately alter the growth and type of Australian cattle. She travelled all through eastern Australia as a sales person and educator on the benefits of Performance Recording and using larger framed, better muscled bulls with known milk figures and to look at females the way Bill Gray had taught her.

The change in type of cattle was spreading to other European breeds over the next two decades. Angus breeders in Australia were great importers of American genetics. “Young cattlemen wishing to see the world came here and worked on our purebred

farms, clipping and fitting, and changed the look of our show ring cattle. Junior heifer shows began, and had a lasting positive effect on the industry. Just like in America, this change was embraced, until very quickly our cattle became too big, too lean, too late maturing, and in bad seasonal times their fertility was decreased,” she says. Breeders started to notice that their large-framed females were slower to breed, and were the thinnest during hard times.

The pendulum started to swing back to thicker cattle with less frame, just like it has in America. Carcass quality and marbling became the trait chased by the British breeds. “It was then that my marketing ceased because I did not know which of my sires gave the superior carcasses and which did not and I could not honestly advise people on which bulls to use,” recalls Barbara.

She called her Polled Hereford Stud “Academy” because an old dictionary defined that word as “Pertaining to the art of learning”. She felt she was starting out on a lifetime of learning and she carried the Academy name through to her Wagyu Stud.

The first location for her stud farm was in Lockinvar NSW on a shared agreement with a family who owned a small property. After a short time, however, they sold the property and Barbara was left with about 30 head of cattle and nowhere to go. A very kind Polled Hereford breeder from Armidale, Bill Dangar, offered to take her cattle on agistment. This is a type of contract in which the property owner has a lien on the animals and their progeny for payment of the agistment fees and other charges and expenses.

He rented her a small cottage but could not employ her which left her free to work hard on marketing. This went very well for about 2 years. Then a drought struck and Bill told her, “My cattle are going to Victoria and you can do what you will with yours but they will have to go--as we have no feed and it is too expensive to buy hay.”

By this time she had over 100 head and no idea what to do with them. She managed to sell a 50% share in the herd to some Sydney business people. Australia’s head Stud Stock Agent evaluated the cattle. They were all by North American bulls and the agent put such a high price on the herd that Barbara could not believe what she received. The day the herd left for their new home in Oberon--about 300 miles south--Barbara purchased Trevanion. This was a house and 40 acres next door to where she had been living on the edge of the small university city of Armidale where she is still located today. Her role in the new partnership was to do the breeding and advising and market the cattle and semen.

Amongst the cattle that went to Oberon was a young calf born in September 1985, called Academy Challenge E96. He was an outstanding bull, one of the first calves by Graystone Granite. He went on to win numerous championships and eventually sold for \$75,000. “My partners were very pleased,” Barbara said.

Genetics from their cattle were soon sought after. One Sydney show at that time had more Polled Hereford cattle sired by her bulls than from any other stud in Australia.

In 1984 she was invited to judge the first Junior Heifer show in Hereford, England. She continued to import semen from some of the top sires around the world. Along with seeking the best genetics she studied consumer demands at the butcher shop level and at the farm and closely watched world trends in seed stock breeding. “Housewives told me they wanted leaner beef as cheap as possible. The commercial breeders told me they wanted fast growing, hardy, sound bulls whose progeny would be ready for market at a certain weight with the desired amount of fat at the optimal time and with minimum cost of production. The world trend at that time was for larger-framed cattle, fast growing, better muscled bulls and very feminine females,” she says.

“I knew what was needed to satisfy all three customers and what I had to do was produce the product, promote and sell. With farmers it was a matter of giving them what they wanted and what they needed in the same package, and show by example in my own stock that I had the superior genetics.”

The Oberon partnership was very successful but eventually some of their family wanted to leave the industry. “We mutually decided to end the partnership. By this time there were over 350 head in the herd and I finished up with 150+ head and I now owned 60 acres. The decision to take the cattle and not disperse the herd at that time was one of the biggest mistakes of my business life. I brought my half to Armidale on leased properties and struggled with too many numbers and poor facilities, not enough help and bad seasons. I was too busy to market the semen so the cash flow dwindled. Though I was breeding some good cattle it was hard to market them as I could not get them in the condition to present them well and they were spread over a number of small properties.”

Her partners had a dispersal sale of their half and did extremely well. “I managed on a small deposit to buy “Wongalea” (another small property, of 375 acres) only 4 miles away, which gave me some relief, but I finally dispersed the Polled Hereford Stud. It was a good sale but the timing and position of my sale were not as good as that of my partners whose property was close to Sydney,” she says.

In the mean time she had bought a few Hereford cows to prove the two Hereford bulls whose semen she had imported from Don Jarrett in Canada. She also purchased two flushes from an outstanding Australian cow for \$25,000. “I received very few calves from the flushes but the two bulls I bred, one by each bull - Academy Patron and Academy Extra Special both sold at a Sydney Show for \$60,000 and \$30,000 and went on to breed exceptionally well. The Academy Hereford Stud was established, my cattle numbers were much smaller, and I concentrated on showing the Herefords,” she says.

“My best year was in the mid 90’s when I won the three biggest shows in Australia--Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane--with three different bulls in 12 months. The Sydney Champion – Academy Columbus sold for \$30,000 but then there was a sudden slump in the cattle market. I dispersed the Hereford stud in 1997 and purchased my first Wagyu cow in 1998”.

Barbara married a well-known beef industry leader and cattle breeder, David Wright and for 7 happy years her life changed dramatically. Concentrated cattle work diminished. The showing and semen selling virtually stopped. Family time took over and together they worked the farm, and spent time at David's family beach house at the coast. They travelled more, and went to cattle sales in the small aircraft that David owned.

She met friends of his, Peter and Jane Hughes, who were large scale Wagyu breeders from central Queensland, and a lasting relationship was born. Sadly David died suddenly in 2006 from a heart attack and Barbara was back on her own, but with four wonderful step-children, their spouses, and 8 beautiful grandchildren who have given her tremendous joy.

### **Enter The Wagyu**

“In 1997 a leading Polled Hereford breeder told me he had just eaten the best meat he had ever tasted and it was Wagyu. Some months later there was a sale not far away and I went along just to see what these cattle looked like. The majority of the cows for sale had been flushed and were fat and dry and looked sub-fertile to me but the people were paying high dollars. Towards the end of the sale a structurally correct young cow came through who was sired by Haruki 11, and I was told he was one of the top sires in the breed. She was rough in the coat and looked a bit thin and wormy to me but she did look fertile and no one was bidding on her. I tentatively raised my hand and she was quickly knocked down at the opening bid of \$2,000. With some feed and drench she quickly improved and turned out to be one of the greatest females I have ever owned,” says Barbara.

“I was in the Wagyu business. I was doing some flushing with Polled Herefords and as this cow H22 was open I put her in the flush and bred her to Itomichi 1-2 as semen was available; the result was 1 bull and 5 heifers. I then flushed her to Terutani 40/1 as I was told he was good, and the result was 3 bulls and 5 heifers. I decided to breed her and she conceived on the first AI, calved with a small calf and milked well. That bull calf bred one of the Polled Hereford cows when he was 6 months old! I was impressed. All the calves were good and I still have 7 of those first heifers. They are now 16 years old and all have had 15 natural calves each and are pregnant again. Their udders and feet are still very sound and their Breedplan figures are exceptional,” she says.

Breedplan is the Australian performance-testing program. “It is very good and has now spread widely around the world. It is the program used by the American Wagyu Association. In May 2015 the Australian Association released their first Bull Book which published carcass data on about 200 of the most widely used sires in the breed.”

Her Wagyu herd built up from that one cow, H22, who had 20 daughters. “They have multiplied to a herd of over 1000 females and have all been fully performance recorded. Having started 16 years ago, I was one of the first Wagyu herds to measure and compare progress. That's part of the secret of my success. Westholme, then owned

by Chris Walker, was the leading performance tested herd in those early years, Chris was an exceptionally gifted cattleman in his buying, breeding and performance recording, says Barbara.

Westholme Hirashigetayasu Z278 was the first Wagyu bull she purchased, when he was a calf. He was in Westholme's production sale before the entire herd was sold to the AA Company in 2005 for about 6 million dollars. Z278 has proven to be an exceptionally good sire. "He is a trait leader for growth, milk, testicle size and carcass weight, and his marbling is good. His progeny are very quiet—a trait we should all be striving for," she says.

"I have made some good moves and some not so good with the sires I have used. Lack of information on most of the bulls was my biggest problem. Now, with the Bull Book, breeders have some good guidelines on the value of the sires in the breed. Still more carcasses and time are needed to better their predictions," Barbara says.

Over the years the prices for Wagyu cattle have gone up and down with the movements of cattle prices in the general beef industry but they have always been way in front. "We had a short price boom in 2005 when demand for bulls outweighed supply and again this year 2015. We have also had some real lows when Mad Cow broke out and in 2013 when it was nearly impossible to sell breeding cattle due to the drought; you could not even give them away in that year as no one in eastern Australia had feed to run them," she says.

"I started breeding Red Wagyu's in 2006 as a bit of an experiment as I really appreciated their structure. They looked good in the paddock but I was always aware that they did not marble to the level of the best Black Wagyu cattle. However when running them both in the one herd I came to learn of one huge difference; the Red Wagyu's would fatten on grass in a much shorter time than the black Wagyu cattle and I could see a real purpose for these cattle in our grass fed environment," says Barbara.

"In that first year when scanning my Red and Black heifers together, at about 20 months the black Wagyu's scanned with about 5 to 10 mls of fat and the Red Wagyu's 10 to 18 mls of fat. The Reds – Kajakari and Red Emperor heifers-- were heavier. If they had been slaughter cattle, they would have been ready for market," she says.

Her property is 3000 feet above sea level and has about 30 inches of rain each year, mostly in summer. It has a short growing season – at best 6 months--but it is healthy country and cattle do well with a minimum of feed inputs. "The cattle are only grass fed except in a drought when they are given hay or silage, both of which are very expensive. I calve in the winter when the heifers are about 2 years old," she says.

"I can see a real place for Red Wagyu in North America where breeders are paid a quality grade premium. A Red Wagyu bull crossed with any breed female should, on average, produce progeny that marble better than any other sire a commercial man can use, and will be ready for slaughter at much the same age. If using a black Wagyu the cattle could marble even better but may not finish in the required time. In Australia we

are not paid a quality grade so it will take longer for the Red Wagyu to really make their mark, but as we finish a big percentage of our cattle on grass I believe that in the future Red Wagyu will be highly sought after. Australians are exceptionally good breeders of quality Black Wagyu and we have a number of feedlots that really understand the feeding of cattle for maximum marbling,” she explains.

In 2010 she sold her black Wagyu herd to Peter and Jane Hughes, Australia’s largest privately owned Wagyu breeders with a commercial herd of over 20,000 cows. “They use their stud herd as an elite set of performance-tested cattle to supply bulls to their vast northern properties. I still do the semen marketing and the breeding for Hughes Pastoral. Their bulls go out as yearlings into their heifers. The Hughes have been breeding Wagyu for over 20 years in central Queensland and have now taken them to their huge properties in the Northern Territory. Wagyu cattle are unbelievably tough and can handle both the heat and the cold and are wonderful foragers,” Barbara says.

“I have only a very small property, so have to keep my numbers down. In 2013 and 2015 I sold most of my Kumomoto Red cattle to Professor Richard Dawkins who is doing interesting experimental work on that herd in Western Australia, and to Steven Binnie who is crossing Red bulls with both red and black cows for a special niche meat market in Sydney,” she says.

“I had a thrill this year when my first Kumomoto Red bull The Wright Wagyu Master Chef E146 won Wagyu Bull of the Year in the Wagyu Breeder competition run by PJ Budler. Master Chef is marketed by Eldon Clauson in U.S.”

She has two small experimental herds on her property now. “First, about 12 years ago, I could see the need to breed Polled Wagyu. Dehorning is the most destructive job that the breeder has to do. Losses are considerable on the large grazing properties where most of the Wagyu cattle are bred. Also the Animal Liberation group will put a stop to dehorning in the not too distant future, so we need to be ready to comply,” she explains.

She started using high marbling purebred Angus cows for polling the black Wagyu cattle and purebred Senepol cows for the Red cattle. “The Senepol have an excellent poll head, a very fine coat, good size and good milk but they need the Red Wagyu with their high fertility, good meat quality, neat udders and very good feet to complement their breed. The resulting cattle are beautiful. The fine coats are essential in the tick country and the red-coated cattle feel the heat less. Red is the most sought-after colour in South America and South Africa. I can see a real place for these cattle to improve the meat quality and fertility of the Bos Indicus herd,” she says.

“The other small herd I have are high Tajima Red Wagyu cattle. The first of these came along by surprise when I line bred some black cows who went back to the Red bull Rueshaw at about 5 generations. I now have a number of Reds who have only high marbling black Wagyu in their pedigree to 6 generations. When I have bred up a polled Purebred Red Wagyu bull I will cross him with the high Tajima red cows to improve the marbling in the red cattle and have them polled as well,” she says.

She predicts a bright future for Wagyu. “The most important goal at the moment is to be able to identify which cattle will marble to a high level and long-feed only those. The next most important research we’re starting to do is feed efficiency testing. There are animals that convert at a much better rate than others, so when we can identify and multiply those, much of our feed costs will be reduced. Genomics is working toward these goals and will hopefully be of great assistance to breeders in the coming years. I first tested H22 (my foundation cow) for genomic marbling in the year 2000.”

Even though the show ring is great for bringing breeders together, Barbara feels it has never truly identified the “best” cattle in an economic sense. “When I started out, there was a saying that the worse the cattle look, the better they marble. Carcass competitions are excellent for Wagyu cattle and should be encouraged. Only on the rail can we identify the really good genetics,” she says.

“We must be alert for genetic disorders, but with careful breeding these can be skirted. In Australia we have decided that there is no advantage in having F11 free cattle over those who carry this (bleeding disorder) gene, so it’s not generally tested for. The ideal SCD test (for superior fat composition) does have some taste advantage, so we should strive to breed cattle whose fat is soft and melts at lower temperature,” she says.

Polled versus horns is another issue. “I believe there will be large economic benefits with polled, especially to the bigger producers who process cattle less frequently. Polled cattle will be Purebred rather than Fullblood because there are no Fullblood polled cattle. Yet in time the economic benefits of polled cattle will far outweigh the advantage of being called Fullblood,” Barbara says.

She feels that being Fullblood is simply a marketing advantage and not necessarily a quality advantage. The ‘Best Wagyu Steak in the World’ has just been judged in the UK and it was from a ¼ Angus bred by Jacks Creek Wagyu in Australia. There were 70 entries from all over the world. The judges said of the MS8 strip loin: “It had an even fat cover, the marbling was fine, and it was a nice cobweb and pinkish colour. When we ate it, we knew it was a winner.” That animal had been fed for 400 days.

“I believe that is what most of us are aiming for. The health benefits of Wagyu meat are very important, also. As more research becomes available, the more customers will want our healthy, marbled beef. We do have the most valuable cattle in the world. They provide the best eating experience, and they are hardy and more efficient in the paddock,” says Barbara. Wagyu have fewer problems than most other cattle.

Their fertility, calving, udders, feet, sheaths, eyes, disease resistance, etc. is exceptional. “They are freer of genetic disorders, and their longevity is unbelievable. Wagyu are what I have always called the retiring people’s cattle because they are so much less work than other breeds,” Barbara says.

“I have had a quiet life; the majority of the time I have lived and worked alone. This has given me time to think, and to pray for guidance in my decisions. Breeding



quality cattle has been my life's pleasure, and obsession. Sharing my genetics with everyone has been my goal," she says.

"In the 1980's I imported a lot of North American genetics in both Herefords and Polled Herefords that led the change in quality of the cattle. In recent years I have exported Red Wagyu embryos and both Black and Red Wagyu semen around the world. I am hoping that history will prove that the genetics I have supplied have been very beneficial to the breeder of Wagyu cattle."