

Vander Wal Yards - Bruce, SD

Since 1939, the driving forces behind the Vander Wal Yards has been family, faith and the innovativeness to meet the needs of the changing times.

AJ Vander Wal began to farm at age 28 near Bruce, SD and today this continues to be the site for the family's feedlot. "Today the farm is made up of my parents Lawrence & Sally, my son Ethan and his wife Callie, my brother Dean, and my wife Shawn. We have a daughter that works in town at an Ag marketing/consultant agency. Ethan will be the 4th generation on the farm." shares 3rd generation producer Kent Vander Wal.

Kent's grandfather AJ started with a few milk cows, hogs, chickens and beef cattle on 300 acres of land. As time went on, the milk cows and hogs left and the family focused in on farming and cattle. "He (grandpa) was the first farmer to have a tractor with rubber wheels, being the first to try some new was a common theme



Early Hereford cattle were a staple in the operation at Vander Wal Yards.

with grandpa over his farming career. If grandpa saw the need for something he either bought it or made it in the shop. He was a very good blacksmith and welder. Back then most all the farmers shared machinery to help keep the costs down."

Changing Times means Changes in Feeding Techniques

AJ started to feed cattle as a means to improve the cash flow of the farm. With this venture came the need for adjustment in other areas of the farm. 1944 was an exciting year at the yards along with addition of concrete silos, a single row silage chopper and electricity became available to the farm. In the early days,

cattle were fed with shovels, bushel baskets and wheel barrels. Today you will see feed bunks at Vander Wal yards that too are rich in history. "My dad and grandpa poured their own concrete fence line feed bunks and feeding floors. Grandpa made his own forms and they would pour them with a 1952 8N Ford tractor that had a mounted cement mixer on the tractor. Most all the bunks they poured in the sixties we currently use today!", states Vander Wal.



The implementation of feeder wagons and silage choppers helped the Vander Wal farms feed their cattle in a more productive manner.

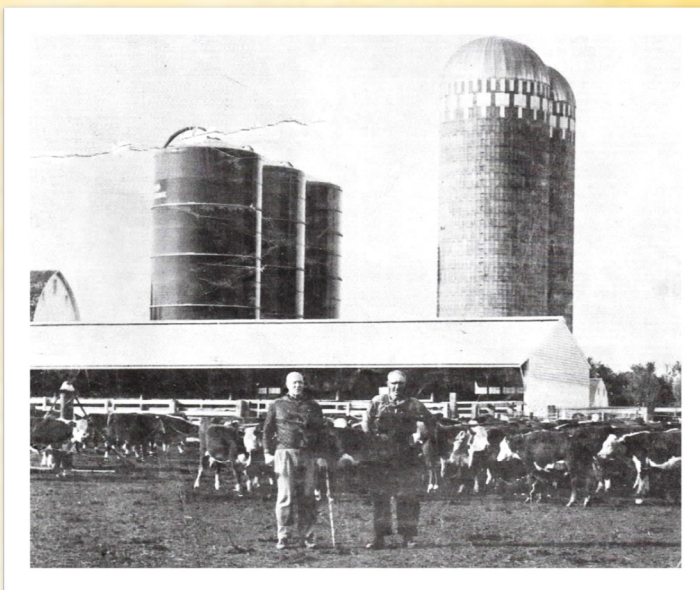
"What changed the cattle feeding the most was when they bought a mixer

wagon with a scale on it, before that they would just guess how much feed to add to the wagon. It was at that time they also started to feed less forage to the cattle and more corn and supplement,” comments Lawrence Vander Wal, “When they started to feed more grain, the ADG of the cattle started to increase. The type and kind of cattle also changed, he said they mostly fed Hereford cattle in the early years. Eventually the continental breeds started to emerge and therefore the quality of the cattle got better. If you had cattle that gained 2# per day, that was considered good, now we have closeouts on cattle that gain 3.25 to 4# per day. Some of that can be attributed to the cattle, but most of it is the way we feed cattle today. Cattle feeding today consists of computer generated rations that may contain up to 6 different ingredients compared to just 2 ingredients back in the 50’s.”

Challenges Lead to Decisions

When thinking about the challenges that the yards have faced, Kent says it is hard to list the ones that actually changed the way they operated, “ One challenge we had was being able to raise enough feed for the cattle. Grandpa seen that challenge in the 60’s with the dry weather and bought an irrigation system to water the corn and alfalfa. Probably the biggest challenge we had was in the 90’s when the farm economy was very poor, especially cattle feeding. We had to decide if we still wanted to feed cattle?? At that time we transitioned from owning all the cattle to custom feeding the cattle for someone else. It took less risk off the table for us and created a better cash flow statement for the bank! Most of the cattle we feed are still custom fed from longtime customers.”

Vander Wal Yards June of 1966



Horace Fishback, Jr. President, First National Bank, Brookings SD and A.J. Vander Wal at Vander Wal Yards 1964.

Valued Relationships

Whether it be a relationship with a banker, a fellow farmer or with the bible, the Vander Wal family recognizes the importance of learning for others. “Back in the 50’s and 60’s we had local cattleman’s tours. Farmers would tour other people’s operations to see how they did things. Dad always said that you went home with something new you wanted to try.” comments Kent, “Grandpa also had a very good relationship with his banker; his banker understood our operation and was always willing to help us succeed.”

