

# THE LASATER PHILOSOPHY OF CATTLE RAISING

*by*

LAURENCE M. LASATER

*Millennium Edition*

*Edited by*

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DAROL DICKINSON

*“South Africa’s Dr. Jan C. Bonsma is said to have labeled the Lasater Beefmaster herd as near perfection in functional efficiency.”<sup>1</sup>*

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MARCOS GIMENEZ ZAPIOLA

Laurence M. Lasater

*“The Breeder of animals directs the spark of life itself.  
The possibilities of his art are almost infinite.”*

National Geographic Magazine  
December 1925

## *The Author's Preface to the Millennium Edition*

2000 marks the 28th anniversary of the publication of this book by Texas Western Press. Very unexpectedly, it has been one of the highlights of my career.

The last 28 years have been difficult ones for the U.S. cattle industry. Sixty years of farm and dairy subsidies have damaged the viability of the grass-based ranching industry. The government's tight-money policy since 1980 has devoured industry equity. After 8 years of drought, three of my close friends in West Texas have lost part or all of their ranches. All are second- or third-generation ranchers and top managers.

Cattle producers have lost 25% of the market share for beef domestically over the past two decades. During these same years we have seen the sheep industry lose its infrastructure and viability due, in part, to government policies. Twenty-plus years ago the use of Compound 1080 to control coyotes was stopped, sounding the death knell of a great industry. The wool and mohair subsidies, in place for over forty years, have been removed. Smart people in the industry have told me that subsidization removed the incentive to develop better predator-management methods as well as the incentive to develop new products and markets.

In 1987, I co-authored *Welcome to the New Cattle Industry*, which correctly predicted changes responding to economic forces, in the type of ownership and management of U.S. ranches. No one, however, could have foreseen the actual magnitude of what has taken place. Nobody prophesied that Ted Turner would found CNN and sell out to Time Warner for \$1.8 billion. He now controls several million acres of ranch land. The scenario of wealthy businessmen buying large ranches has been repeated hundreds of times.

In spite of the dairy subsidy remaining sacrosanct, there is a positive note in that the farm program is phasing down and the agriculture industry is moving toward a world market. Nevertheless, 30 percent of U.S. beef comes from subsidized Holsteins, and this combined with artificially high interest rates, has done great damage to the range cattle industry.

We are moving to a global market and a global view, as exemplified by the book you hold in your hands. The lion's share of the credit for the revised edition of this book goes to my friend and collaborator, Marcos Giménez Zapiola of Argentina, whose perfect grasp of English and intimate knowledge of the North American ranching industry enabled this project to be accomplished. We have in common our interest in important ideas worldwide that make a difference. We are also bound by our mutual appreciation of the spiritual values that unite the fine people in our great industry everywhere.

Behind the scenes, there recently have been some encouraging developments. In 1980, Allan Savory and Stan Parsons came to the U.S. from then Rhodesia to teach the art and science of ranching. Their first school, taught in

San Angelo, Texas, was sponsored by Isa Cattle Co. They, and others, have brought about an awareness that ranching is really watershed management, which is probably one of the key issues facing the now-urban United States. Possibly, part of the economic salvation of the ranching industry lies with profitable operation of watersheds for recreation and aquifer re-charge, with production of meat and fiber as a secondary income. In 1997, Senate Bill Number One in the Texas Legislature set forth a Water Plan for Texas. Economists estimate that the drought of the 1990s cost Texas \$5 billion annually. The same economists predict that a 15 percent shortfall in Texas water requirements per annum within the next 20 years will eventually cost the state \$20 billion annually. From these numbers, it is evident that watershed management in the future, like recreation now, will generate big dollars for the ranching industry.

The keynote paper of the 1997 Annual Conference of The Association for the Advancement of Animal Breeding and Genetics, held in Australia, was prepared by a team from Texas A&M University. The paper takes as its thesis that the ideas and accomplishments of the Lasater family over the last hundred years, set forth in this book and my brother Dale's book, *Falfurrias*, serve as a blueprint for the 21st century. The authors invoke Ecclesiastes 1:9 ("The thing that hath been is that which shall be"). The challenges of the 21st century will likely be the same as for the 20th century:

1. Understanding of the production system and the environment.
2. The identification of the right cow-type to match the resources available in the context of a low-cost operation.
3. The outlining and implementation of efficient breeding plans to produce that cow-type.

Since its recognition in 1954, the Beefmaster breed has achieved major status. We are now fifth in registration, ahead of Charolais. This success is unprecedented for a breed that began as a one-man enterprise. It is interesting that the ideas of the Lasater family and those of Allan Savory speak directly to the needs of the people of all nations, both rural and urban dwellers. Population genetics fits perfectly with Savory's ideas for the management of the world's grasslands with vast herds of grazing livestock, under natural predation, producing food, fiber, recreation, and clean water for a thirsty, urbanized world.

Tom Lasater, subject of this book, retired in 1986 after a 55-year career. He made an operating profit every year from 1933 to 1986. Dale, his second son, took over the management of the Lasater Ranch partnership at that time and has done an excellent job. He and Dad go out every day to check the cattle. Dad tells his visitors that "Dale fired me," so those who know him realize that he is still the same Tom Lasater.

The team that went to Mexico in 1964 is now a family of eight. Lorenzo married Leslie Fry, and in addition to being Vice President–Operations of Isa Cattle Co., he and Leslie own and operate Company Printing in San Angelo. Isabel married golf executive J.C. Hernandez, and she is a partner in INK Design Group. Although they live in Fort Worth, they are vitally interested in the family business.

Annette’s book, *Two to Mexico*, was a great success nearly 30 years ago, and will be re-published in a Millennium Edition with this book. In addition to enjoying her new role of grandmother, she continues to do a great job managing our office, as she has done for 36 years.

The *Princeton Alumni Weekly* reported that “I’m holding up well for a grandfather. My son does all the work and my son-in-law is teaching me to play golf.”

Lorenzo and Leslie have a five-year-old son, Laurence Matthews Lasater, III. He is nicknamed Watt, for his great-great-great uncle, Watt Reynolds Matthews, born in 1899, who died in 1998 after a career in the cattle industry that spanned the 20th century. Lorenzo’s and Leslie’s second son, Beau Cameron Lasater, joined the clan in 1998. The sixth generation is in place!

Annette and I would like to echo my great-grandmother, Sallie Reynolds Matthews, author of *Interwoven*: “Surely goodness and mercy followed us all the days of our lives and we are grateful to the Giver of every perfect gift.”

Laurence Matthews Lasater  
*San Angelo, Texas*  
*June 1, 2000*



JOAN TUCKER

Laurence and Annette Lasater with their family



## ***The Editor's Introduction to the Millennium Edition***

Laurie Lasater wrote this book more than a quarter of a century ago, in an effort to overcome the stress of the terrible drought of 1971. He needed to do something which was both useful and which did not add any more costs to those already caused by the adversity of nature. So he decided to write the book which he had been carrying in his head for a number of years. This exercise of willpower produced one of the most important works of his life, as well as one of the classic books of the world cattle industry.

### *Lasater: A Family that Sets the Standard*

Tom Lasater, the father of both Laurie and this philosophy of cattle raising, is a man ahead of his time. For many years, his ideas were considered eccentric or outright crazy. He had the good fortune to live long enough to see the fruits of his efforts, and to receive recognition for his pioneering vision. His philosophy and the Beefmaster breed date back to the 1930s, but both are still out in front of the common thinking at the beginning of the 21st century.

His vision is reflected in his management. Since 1937, he has put back into the herd only bulls and replacement heifers of his own raising. He gives all the calves a two-way Blackleg shot and the heifers get a calfhood vaccination for brucellosis—and nothing else. His cattle get none of the numerous other vaccinations, pesticides, or sprays for flies and lice that are the norm among his colleagues. Would you buy a bull from this rancher? His neighbors in Colorado do not. For 50 years they have thought this Texan was crazy. Most of his colleagues thought the same when he founded the Beefmaster breed based on standards of production, not on hair color. Why create a new breed when there are already so many good ones? Probably the same was said about each prior breed in its day.

It often happens that the great innovators are identified with a product or a brand and not with the ideas which allowed them to succeed. Henry Ford is remembered by the cars that bear his name, but his most far-reaching legacies were the assembly line, and the idea that cars should be available to the common man. Lasater's uniqueness is found in his innovative perspective in a profession where many new ideas come from outside, far removed from the everyday realities on the ranch.

This perspective is summarized in the Lasater philosophy, an approach to selecting cattle and managing a livestock enterprise. Tom Lasater's ideas evolved as he was developing the Beefmaster breed. And yet these ideas are as independent of the breed as the latter is from a cross between Hereford, Shorthorn and Brahman cattle. This book is not a manual for future

Beefmaster breeders; rather it is a guide for anyone desirous of making better use of his rangelands and the cattle grazing them.

*A Little History: The First Lasater*

Tom Lasater, born in 1911, is not the product of spontaneous generation. His father, Edward Cunningham Lasater, was a noted cattleman in South Texas, owner of some 350,000 acres bordering the King Ranch. He had started his career as a horse and cattle trader in 1883, but an uncle's endorsement on a loan allowed him to make his first purchase of land and cattle. A few years before the railroad's arrival, he began his activities in the southern tip of Texas, where he founded his ranch, and later the town of Falfurrias.

The Texas cattle business was formed in the beginning on the Longhorn, a local adaptation of the cattle brought to the New World by the Spaniards. Longhorns were crossed with the most widely disseminated British breeds at the time, the Shorthorn (then called Durham) and the Hereford. As in other tropical areas of the world, this cross improved the end product while complicating the cattleraiser's task, because the British breeds were poorly adapted to the climate, forages, insects and diseases of South Texas. While the quality advanced, production diminished. To their credit, Texas ranchers were quick to recognize the benefits which resulted from infusing *Bos Indicus* genes into their local herds. This is the origin of Brahman cattle in the United States, and the forerunner of the Beefmaster and Santa Gertrudis, two typical creations of American ingenuity.

Ed C. Lasater was an innovator, and he immediately understood the economic advantage which these exotic animals offered. While many maintained that the Brahman influence would destroy the American cattle business, the first Lasater began using Brahman bulls on his herd in 1908, ten years before his famous neighbors. He had developed a well adapted Hereford herd, selecting for milk production and for pigmentation around the eyes and on the udders. He also developed a herd of Brahman X Shorthorn cattle.

Debt was the weak link in Lasater's business strategy. There was no problem while land values stayed above the mortgage figures. But each time the cattle cycle or the economy in general took a downturn, his business was in trouble, and his operation could not support the weight of his extensive indebtedness.

*The Second Lasater: A "Child of the Great Depression"*

Ed Lasater died in 1930, in the midst of the economic crisis which inaugurated the Great Depression, and young Tom felt obliged to leave his studies at Princeton University to return to Texas to help his family deal with the financial debacle. He was barely 20 years old. He was able to salvage a few cows, and he began his cattle operation on leased lands while working for the

family business. These cows embodied a priceless treasure: the genetic material developed by his father during decades of selection for adaptation to the environment. That was the foundation for a new approach to cattle raising and of a new breed, and that would allow Lasater in due time to build his herd, to buy a ranch, and to send his sons to Princeton to finish what he had been forced to leave behind in his youth.

Instead of falling back on traditional ranching practices to deal with the economic reversals he faced, Tom, looking to the future, decided to alter the approach to cattle raising. His first innovation was to put bells on all the horses. Working wild cattle in brushy pastures, he made his cowboys move slowly as he began gentling his cattle. He admits that he was able to do this because it was during the Depression and the cowboys needed work; otherwise, he would have been left without a crew.

On roundups, they were never able to pen all the cattle, some always stayed behind in the brush. So he put an elderly cowboy on a cart rigged up with a large bell and carrying a bag of corn. While ringing the bell, he would drive through the pasture to the working pens where he would feed the corn to whatever cattle had followed. Over time, he was able to do with one man what he had been unable to do with an entire crew of cowboys.

Despite the Depression, Lasater could see that in the future labor in rural areas would be more scarce and more expensive. Since the brush pastures wouldn't change, the only solution was to raise cattle that required less handling. To that end, he made a drastic decision: select for disposition. Against the advice of friends and neighbors, he began to cull wild cattle. "Tom, you're crazy. You'll end up with only 30% of the herd," they said. And so it was, but the results achieved over 65 years of selection for disposition are remarkable: despite being raised entirely in extensive pastures, the bulls in his herd are so gentle that a stranger can approach them and swat the flies with his hand. Scientific research later proved that temperament is a highly heritable trait.

Another revolutionary concept in those days was to select cattle for their ability to produce quality meat, ignoring any aesthetic breed traits. Instead of looking at the live animal, one needed to visualize the hanging carcass. With the hide off, the color was of little importance. These concepts collided with accepted selection practices based on breed association guidelines. Bonsma began his selection for functional efficiency precisely in 1937, the year Lasater closed his herd.

By 1940, Lasater had some 2,000 head of cattle. In 1948, he paid cash for his first ranch purchased in Matheson, Colorado, where he moved his herd and established the Lasater Ranch. He is proud of having shown a profit in the cattle business throughout his career.

His father's herds at that time were Hereford, Brahman, Shorthorn and

their crosses. Prior to 1920, he had developed a top herd of Brahman X Shorthorn cows which Tom Lasater loved as a child. Tom brought in two registered bulls to cross with Brahman cows. For financial reasons, he was not able to buy more bulls, so he began to use the best bulls from the two crosses with the females of the other cross. He quickly realized that both the bulls and the replacement heifers produced by the three-way cross were superior to the calves from either of the original crosses.

Lasater set out to perfect the genetic combination of these Brahman, Shorthorn and Hereford bloodlines, which he baptized, with enviable accuracy, Beefmaster. To disposition, he added five other traits: fertility, weight, conformation, hardiness and milk production. These became the famous “*Six Essentials*,” the minimum number of essential traits. Selecting for any fewer traits would have left out a vital one and for any more was unnecessary. The method of selection for these traits is even more interesting; the ruthless culling of every animal which didn’t meet the established standards. His son, Laurie, says that Tom Lasater is the only person he knows of in the cattle business who never made a single exception with regard to the selection criteria. For that reason he was forced to cull his herd down to 350 cows in the early 1950s, a result of low breed-ups during the drought.

Initially, he followed the conventional wisdom—select the superior sire, and maximize his progeny. Around 1940, he thought he had produced the super-bull, the breed founder, named Bim. A few years later, he decided to expose his heifers at 14 months-of-age, only to find that all the daughters of super-bull failed the new requirement—they either failed to breed as yearlings, or else to re-breed a year later. They were too big for the environment and this management system. In only a few years, this bloodline had disappeared from the herd. From that experience he concluded that natural selection was a wiser judge, and he decided to let nature do the selecting and culling for him. He returned to all multiple-sire breeding, since, over time, the superior bulls would tend to dominate.

Since then, he doesn’t believe in the ideal bull, but rather in a constant turnover of herd sires. If a bull is good, he will leave progeny. The important thing is that the progeny be better than the sire, maintaining an elevated requirement with regard to yield, without being concerned about external characteristics.

### *A Cattle Business in Harmony with Nature*

Tom Lasater’s idea—that nature is smarter than we are—caused him to gradually modify his approach to managing the environment. After having battled a number of problem species, he began to understand and favor the balance of nature. He was one of the first to protect all native species, including predators like the coyote—if a cow cannot defend her calf, her

progeny should not be perpetuated. Ultimately he prohibited killing rattlesnakes, believing if they are present, it must be for some reason. He stopped poisoning red ants, discovering later that the cows preferred grazing areas that had experienced large ant populations. He stopped trying to control the yucca plant with chemical and mechanical methods, and instead was able to accomplish that through the timing of grazing certain pastures. His vision of working with nature fit together harmoniously with Allan Savory's ideas, increasing herd density while benefitting forage health and diversity.

In animal health, he gradually replaced treatment with the selection of cattle with greater resistance. In 1969 he stopped using insecticides for horn flies, leaving that matter in nature's hands. Under his strict selection methods, the animals with the greatest natural resistance leave the most progeny. Earlier he had proven this approach when he stopped treating internal parasites. Twenty-five years later, his cows have few flies, and do not seem to be bothered by the ones they do have. Likewise the bulls seem unfazed, even though they exhibit more than the 200 flies which would necessitate spraying. Nature, if we give it time, will solve our "problems" better than we can, even with our technological vanity.

### *The Darwinian Pedigree*

His selection ideas attempt to promote the process of genetic refinement and turnover, culling the bottom end of each generation and mating those that remain. The usual approach is to pick the best bull and limit the diversity, trying to get as many as possible to look like this model specimen. By contrast, Lasater tries to maintain the diversity, letting the most fit from each crop prevail in a competitive environment. His goal is to have better bulls and females born in each successive crop. For this reason he keeps 80% of his heifer calves, finding it more profitable to sell cows and bulls, the older models of a herd that is constantly improving.

It is a breeding program based on natural selection. Genetic progress is dominated by adaptation to the environment under a management system that treats every animal equally; it is not a matter of trying to multiply the extreme top of the normal curve, since super-bull and super-cow can lead to dislocations. The selection process itself prevents cows from getting bigger than the range conditions and management practices will support—those that are too large fail to breed and are culled. This selection for adaptation to the environment is no different from that which produced the other breeds existing today, which typically are named after their place of origin. That environment—hot or cold, dry or wet, wooded or open—favored certain traits in each breed, which do not necessarily adapt to other environments. Thus, Lasater's bulls are raised and developed under the same conditions where they will be expected to work and reproduce.

The antelope and the coyote which populate the Lasater Ranch are already perfectly adapted. It is necessary to continue selecting and refining the Beefmaster so that one day they will achieve the same level of adaptation. This view of animal evolution brings to mind the succession of climax plants. The cattle must be adapted to their environment, not vice versa, a very simple yet powerful concept. According to Lasater, nature is smarter than all of us together, and everything in nature has been proven over the course of millennia. He limits himself to lending a hand where he can, while letting nature do most of the work.

The Nobel Laureate, Konrad Lorenz, founder of etiology, maintained—against the ecological tide—that mankind could create, through agriculture and cattle-raising, a new, balanced environment, altered to fit our needs. This landscape may be as lasting and productive as it was prior to human intervention. Tom Lasater has been shaping it since 1931. Anyone can do the same in his own environment. It is not necessary to buy Beefmasters, but rather to think—like Lasater—from the perspective of the cow pasture.

### *The Third Lasater and the Universal Beefmaster*

Tom Lasater is the prototype of what is called in the U.S. “a child of the Depression.” Raised in the midst of large-scale ranching and other business ventures, the crash of '29 precipitated the liquidation of most of the first Lasater's holdings. From that time forward, his greatest aspiration was to be independent, and that, along with his aversion to financial risk, led to the creation of the Beefmaster (and later to the move from Texas to Colorado).

Lasater is an unassuming person of unimposing stature. He does not have the self-important bearing or the charisma that one might expect from a living legend. His lack of affectation is surprising, given his well-demonstrated determination, especially having received wide recognition for his success. He has always had a Socratic approach, explaining his ideas and answering queries without trying to impose his views. Laurie remembers the light going on in the eyes of listeners when they suddenly understood some concept which perhaps they had heard all their lives. But Tom never would have gone to visit a ranch to make management suggestions; maybe he did not want to see something wrong and to upset the owner by pointing it out.

By contrast, Laurence Lasater is a robust, out-going and expansive man. He is unconcerned with what others think; he simply tells it like he sees it, and if the reaction is negative, too bad. And he feels that his mission is to advance his father's work to an international level, both in terms of the breed and the breeding philosophy. If the second Lasater left Texas, the third one returned to his native state. Laurie realized when he was 20 years old that he liked to sell bulls. Later he learned that he could sell many more bulls than he could raise,

and that he could market bulls for others who did not enjoy that part of the seedstock business. The problem was, there were not enough bulls, and he had to promote more production.

In 1964, he got married and went to Mexico to make his fortune. He took 70 Beefmaster cows, a wedding gift, and borrowed \$10,000. He first leased a pasture and then, with the backing of an investor group, bought a 30,000 acre ranch, with a note payable over five years, an impossible situation given the returns from a ranching operation. Perhaps he did it for that very reason. The genes of the first Lasater re-surfaced in the expansive impulses of the Sixties, with the dark clouds of the Great Depression then only a distant memory. By 1972, he had paid for the ranch, had a net worth of \$250,000, was an established rancher, had introduced the breed to Mexico, was marketing a large volume of bulls, and piloted his own plane.

Two years later, having sold the ranch and begun feeding cattle in Texas, he had a negative net worth. What had happened? While he was doing what was necessary to become a rancher, he was speculating without realizing it. The financial crunch of 1973 began with grains, then spread to oil and later to livestock. He had to start over again. Part of his experience of adjusting to the new economic landscape is covered in the second part of this book—the separation of land ownership from the ranch operation, the need to minimize the investment in fixed assets, the importance of the human element, and the role of financial and business administration. When he began to sell bulls on consignment in Texas, he discovered that some of his father’s customers were not successful breeders. His father had sold cattle, but he had not followed through to teach them how to manage their cattle. That was Laurie’s role. He sold them bulls, then went to their ranches, explaining in detail of how to manage their herds. He set up in the cattle business a number of people who weren’t as experienced as the Lasaters. He wrote this book, and created the breed’s largest market, with an annual auction of Beefmasters in San Angelo, Texas. These are the activities Laurie Lasater sees as his business legacy.

If the father teaches us how to collaborate with nature, the son shows how to survive while doing that, making use of modern management methods, while adapting them to the new cattle business. One teaches us how to view cattle raising in its natural setting, the other to understand the cattle raising economics. But both accomplish their mission from within an agricultural context. The originality of the Lasaters’ work is found in that rural perspective—it is work done by ranchers and for ranchers.

#### *About this Revised and Expanded Edition*

This edition was first published in Spanish. Most of the original book is still relevant to the subject. Tom Lasater’s ideas, expounded here by his eldest

son, seem to improve with the passage of time. Styles come and go, Lasater endures. His continuing presence helps us to understand the foundations of our work, to distinguish between passing fads and fundamental, unchanging ideas.

Although many of the ideas presented here appear to have been written today, the text is from 1972, and is unchanged except for the items detailed here. The author and the translator agreed to cut chapters 12 and 13 of the original edition, dealing with suspension fences and a proposal for marketing cattle, which are not integral parts of the Lasater philosophy. A few paragraphs of chapter 13 have been incorporated into chapter 11 of this edition. Chapter 13 in this edition, “The Origin of the Beefmaster Breed,” is an expanded and updated version of the earlier chapter 15. Otherwise, the first part of the book is the same as the original edition.

The second part of the book is new. It is comprised of three chapters, taken from Laurie Lasater’s writings and speeches between 1982 and 1993 dealing with the current challenges of cattle raising. I am unable to adequately express my gratitude to the author for his confidence and understanding with regard to this revised and expanded edition.

Dr. Marcos Giménez Zapiola  
*Buenos Aires, Argentina*

(Translated by Dale Lasater)





Tom Lasater and Marcos Giménez Zapiola  
(Lasater Ranch, 1995).