

PORTRAIT OF THE EAST

*Edwin Wagoner and the Black Lick Cattle Company.
Words and photo © Alan Hart.*



An often-overlooked truth is simply that the spirit of the West is alive and well in a lot of rural areas in the East, and arguably there are few places where it is more apparent than at the Black Lick Cattle Company near Rural Retreat, Va.

Edwin Wagoner can look back on a lot of changes in the livestock business since his early days of roping and wrangling in the Appalachian hills.

“Times were pretty tough and Dad gave me all the help he could, but there was never any doubt I would have to stand on my own, so I started raising cattle on five deeded acres and a rented 20-acre grazing boundary.”

Edwin found time to attend a local community college, then later, an auction school in North Carolina.

“Along about 1975, I threw in with another young feller and we paid the princely sum of \$400 for the first month’s rent on the old abandoned stockyard in West Jefferson. At our opening sale upwards of 250 folks showed up to watch us sell three cows. I was shaking like a leaf, but it worked, and pretty soon word got around that we were in the business. The interesting thing about livestock sales back in those days is the fact that cull cows were going for

30 cents and meat horses would bring 60 cents. A lot has changed since then.”

After many years, a few location changes, diversifying into real estate, equipment and estate auctions, and a few tough setbacks along the way, the Black Lick Cattle Company was finally established in the lush rolling hills between the Iron Mountain and Big Walker mountain ranges in southwestern Virginia.

“We still provide our usual auction services, but our annual bred heifer sale has now become a big event with repeat clients coming from as far away as Nebraska.”

So with an economy teetering on edge, an investment market marked by volatility, a world in turmoil and inept political leaders standing in the shambles playing with their “violins,” what do we do? With a wry smile Edwin draws, “Well, I reckon I’ll just pull them boots up, and keep on going.”

That’s the spirit we’re talking about. ■

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