



**A.J. O'Neil, President**



**G**reetings fellow Devon breeders and Devon enthusiasts. I am A.J. O'Neil and I write to you from Pennsylvania, USA. I have served on the Red Devon USA Board of Directors for 6 years and am the newly elected President.

As I reflect on my experience with the 2024 World Devon Congress and the celebration of 400 years of Devon cattle in the United States, I recognize that relationships are at the heart of it all — it's how everything started. Early settlers understood that they needed cattle for meat, milk, and labor to thrive in the new world, and with that, came the responsibility to care for their animals.

The Devon Congress brought us back to those roots, uniting us in a shared commitment to our cattle, nutritious food, soil health, quality forage, and responsible stewardship. During my four days on the tour, I saw the legacy of the early settlers. Together we focused on Devon cattle, our need for healthful food, and a lifestyle that gives us peace at the end of the day.

I was blessed to be born into a family of butchery. My parents started O'Neil's Quality Foods in 1989 and from my work there, and with my own Devon herd, I've been fortunate to see my Devons from birth, to carcass, and then to retail sales. Working alongside my father for many years in both butchery and catering, we had the opportunity to "feed the multitudes" and develop many relationships during our four days on the Congress tour.

We began at Lakota Ranch where we served turkey, ham, and roast beef sliders for lunch. Afterwards, I shared insights about the research Jeremy Engh and I conducted with the Pennsylvania State University meat science lab. From samples of Devon beef and choice Angus, we sought a comparative analysis featuring the Warner-Bratzler Shear Force test, PH testing, color grading, and marble score.

The results of the study showed that Devon beef was quite comparable in all categories we tested. The shear force testing revealed Devon beef required slightly more force to cut but would likely be unnoticeable to a non-professional taste tester. The Devon beef samples were fed only grass and were 28-30 months old in comparison to the 14-16 months old Angus that were grain fed. The beef industry tells us that meat with a higher marbling score and of a younger age should be substantially more tender. The exciting part of these results was our devon samples were close and this one test didn't tell the whole story.

We also measured fatty acid composition. Our ratio of Omega 6 to Omega 3 fatty acid average was 2:1. Feedlot beef can average 16:1 up to 30:1. This means that grass-fed Devon beef can lead to significantly less inflammation after digestion while still offering nearly the same level of tenderness — and to me it offers a far superior flavor compared to grain-fed beef.

Following this discussion, my father and I demonstrated meat cutting featuring the beef rib and plate sub-primal. We showed different ways to cut and market the rib, including the tomahawk Rib Steak, Rib Steak, Boneless Ribeye, Longissimus Dorsi, Spinalis Dorsi, and Complexus muscles. We then cooked the steaks over a charcoal and wood fired

grill, along with a slowly cooked prime rib that I sliced and plated for the guests.

The next day, we attended Thistle Hill Farm in Hume, Virginia, and enjoyed the hospitality of Carolyn and Church Matthews. We were educated on "Reproductive Management and Factors Affecting AI/ET Programs" by Dr. Vitor Mercadente from Virginia Tech. The second presentation was "Building Resilience in the Cow Herd with a Systems Approach," taught by Dr. Gerald Stokka. We also had time to evaluate their Devon herd featuring genetics from Great Britain.

On the third day we traveled to Bob VanKirk's 4 Seasons Farm, in Tyrone, Pennsylvania. Bob showcased a variety of bulls with vastly different pedigrees and invited the attendees to rank them. He later reported on the "choice bull" of the day.

Before lunch, I gave a presentation on "What's in your Hotdog?" Using a cull cow from Bob, we made jerky, hotdogs, and beef sticks. Bob requested I exclude artificial binders, synthetic nitrites, and phosphates from the hotdog. We called it 'Bob's Bare-Bones Devon Dogs.' In my presentation, I compared our ingredients to the commercial 'Sugardale Hotdogs.' I discussed each hotdog, explained its ingredients, and the function of the ingredient in the recipe. I discussed the science of making a proper emulsion, adding certain ingredients at precise stages, relevant temperatures to make the protein and fat bind together properly, all to avoid the use of artificial binders. Following this presentation, dad and I prepared the hotdogs along with a full lunch that included bacon wrapped Devon beef filet mignon, Devon hotdogs, corn, potatoes, and dessert. The bacon wrapped filet mignon cooked over a wood fired grill was a hit!

Our fourth and final day of the tour was hosted by Steve Montgomery of Lamppost Farm in Columbiana, Ohio. In addition to Devons, Steve also raises pastured chickens. Our menu was wood fired grilled boneless chicken breasts topped with BEEF BACON and melted Smoked Gouda Cheese. Folks who tried the beef bacon cooked on the grill were impressed and intrigued with how it was made. I explained the source of the bacon, different curing and smoking methods, along with packaging and marketing.

We also talked about how to make jerky, including how to slice it properly, flavoring the meat, how certain ingredients can change





the texture of the meat, smoking, drying, packaging, and labeling. Prior to the event, Steve brought me boneless strip loins out of a few of his cull cows. I processed those loins to make 3 flavors of jerky: Teriyaki, Hillbilly, and Appalachian. Attendees were able to sample all the flavors of jerky prior to our meal.

As part of the presentation, I spoke about the government food regulations required for moisture content and shelf stability. I explained how companies must prioritize water activity when making jerky because that directly affects their yields, total sellable products, and profitability.

Our final day with Steve and his family was on a Sunday. This was so fitting because Lamppost Farm is a non-profit farm that focuses on combining the aspects of farming and growing food with the ministry of employees, family, and customers. The day began with a morning worship service, followed by lunch, cattle evaluation, my presentations on meat, dessert and honoring those in attendance. It was truly a great day of rest.

As a board member, breeder, and member of Red Devon USA, I am thankful for the Devon Congress and the relationships I've made. The congress tied together many of our best breeders, our board of directors, our friends overseas, and our fellow Milking Devon breeders. We saw Devon cattle working in all climates, we learned about cattle nutrition, cattle breeding, and multiple ways to enjoy Devon beef.

Of primary importance to me, however, was the deeper

relationships I was able to build with my fellow board members as we worked together to plan the tour. Our weekly meetings over several months helped build trust, especially when plans would shift outside our control. We built a relationship with Backyard Green Films owners Rick and Elara Bowman. Rick and Elara filmed, took photos, videos, helped with social media, DROVE THE BUS for the entire tour, and helped keep Jeremy Engh on his toes.

I was also privileged to build a stronger friendship with Bob & Jo Crawford, Paul & Loma Wright, Lisa Roper, and Di O'Keeffe. I got to share a few drinks and laughs and see my dad play a practical joke on Bob and Paul. At the top of my list, however, was my time with my dad. It was a once-in-a-lifetime journey traveling hundreds of miles over just a few days, sleeping no more than 5-6 hours a night, and working almost non-stop. There are very few people that get to share those one-on-one moments with their parents and I am so grateful for that time. Although we've worked together for over 20 years, I know I'm fortunate to add this memory to our archives.

Thank you to all the host farms and attendees. Thank you to all our friends from different countries that made sacrifices to attend the tour. And, I extend a very special 'thank you' to Jeremy and the Engh family for their imprint on this tour and all those that have preceded it.

Cheers to our Devon cattle and to all the relationships that have evolved over the past 400 years — may the next 400 be just as remarkable!

<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=y6eqaqhPr-I>



*Bob Van Kirk with Bob Crawford.*

## **World Devon Tour and Congress April-May 2024 Di O'Keeffe**



*Cows and calves at Edgeworth Plantation.*



*Lenoir's Creek Farm.*

