

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO ... WILL HARRIS

On-site plant beefs up rancher's business

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From the front door of his home, cattle rancher Will Harris can see the future rising in a pasture across the road.

The tall, tan metal building looks like many other utility structures, except for the rocking-chair porch stretching across the front. But it's a revolution in the making.

Harris hopes to make White Oak Pastures a profitable farm again, a mission that could give his three daughters a reason to hold on to land first farmed by their great-great-grandfather, James Edward Harris. To do that, he needs to find a more lucrative market for his grass-fed cattle.

Thus the building, which will let him control every aspect of his cattle's lives — and deaths — right on the Early County farm where they were born.

It's a big risk. A \$1.5 million risk. Harris worries, but he's forging ahead.

"I wish somebody could answer for me today, are there enough sophisticated consumers who are willing to pay the premium required for me to keep raising cattle like this, and pay for this plant and entice one of my daughters to come back?"

Three years ago, Harris notched his first success. He tapped into a growing interest in locally grown food and in grass-fed beef, which offers a healthier fat profile than grain-fed, and landed a tryout for White Oak Pastures ground beef at 15 Publix stores in North Atlanta. It opened up a bigger market beyond the natural foods stores that stocked his beef.

He made the 200-mile drive from his southwest Georgia farm every week, handing out samples of beef to shoppers to convince them to give it a try. It was a tough sell: \$8.69 for a one-pound frozen package. But enough shoppers bought it, and Harris' operation grew.

Publix started making the beef available to 200 stores in its Atlanta region and sold it fresh, at a lower price that encouraged more purchases. But Harris' first processor went out of business, and instead of taking a load of six cows nine miles down the road for processing, he had to take them 100 miles.

Even though the beef sells well in Publix stores, Harris still has more cattle than he can sell directly to retailers. Many calves get sold through the conventional route, where buyers shipping them to feedlots out West don't pay a premium for features sought after by consumers, ones that make a calf more expensive to raise. Harris does not bulk up his cattle with antibiotics or hormones. The farm is certified humane for its animal welfare practices, and Harris is working toward organic certification.



Andy Sharp/AJC

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Southwest Georgia rancher Will Harris hands out samples of his grass-fed beef at the Harry's Farmers Market in Marietta.



Andy Sharp/AJC

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Marietta resident June Brown tried Will Harris' grass-fed beef at Harry's Farmers Market and said she liked the product. Harris is building a beef-processing plant on his Early County farm.

He looked for more buyers closer to home. Last fall, Whole Foods Markets started stocking his steaks, roasts and ground beef in some Atlanta stores, charging \$5.99 to \$29.99 a pound. It can't keep the steaks in stock.

Still, Harris was selling cattle to feedlots because there weren't enough processors to handle even the 12 cattle a week his 1,000-acre farm produces. The meatpacking industry is heavily concentrated, leaving just a few small processors scattered across Georgia.

Building a larger facility on-farm seemed the best solution. Harris got a low-interest loan from the OneGeorgia Authority, which disburses some tobacco settlement funds to promote the rural Georgia economy. He expects another loan from a Whole Foods program set up to bring more locally grown food into its stores, and he's kicking in another half-million.

Temple Grandin, an authority on humane animal handling and a professor at Colorado State University, designed the facility. Harris is building a retail store in front, in case travelers headed to the Florida beaches want to pick up steaks on the way. The plant should start operating in April.

When it does, he will step up the pace of his trips to Atlanta, to greet shoppers with a smile, an offer to taste his beef and a meatball on a toothpick.

Back home, he'll talk with friends and fellow ranchers about sending their cattle to his facility for processing. It can handle from 50 to 100 a week, far more than he raises.

By the end of this year, Harris expects his farm to make its first profit in years. He hopes the processing facility will do the same. He's 53 and wishes he'd built the facility years ago.

"I had two real choices," he says. "I could live on the farm the rest of my life, and then leave it to my daughters, who would probably sell it and divide up the money. Or I could try to create a business on the farm that would allow them to have more than pride of ownership."

Before long, he'll have an answer to his question.

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