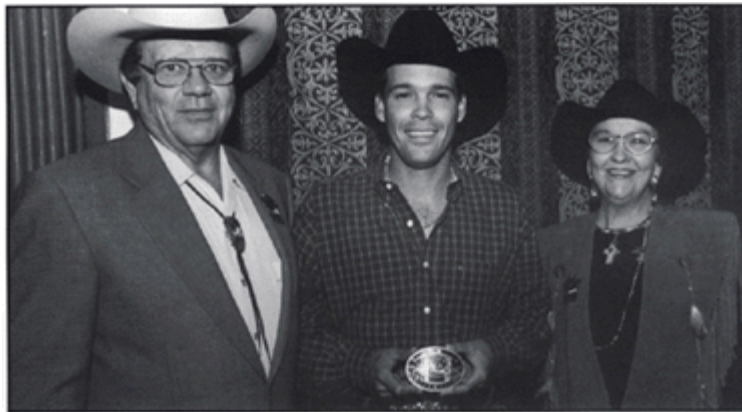




Clay Walker— Home-Grown Superstar

By Susan K. Williams



Clay Walker, flanked by then-Show President Jim Bloodworth and his wife, Ruby, was presented a special commemorative belt buckle for performing at the 1999 Show.

What's the difference between a rancher, a farmer and a country music entertainer?

To the soft-spoken, satin-voiced Clay Walker, there are no differences. Country music and agriculture go hand in hand. "It's a way of life," said Walker. "If you listen to the old, old music, if you listen to the songs they sang, they were about working in the fields, or even about what they were going to have for supper. They're real songs. That's my love of country music -- it's real music about real people."

Walker grew up on a small farm in Beaumont, Texas. With that beginning, his love of animals, agriculture and music became the way he lived. "It was a good life," he said. "We were taught a lot of values through farming and animals, and the roots that I have there are what made me what I am today."

That's why performing at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is so important to Walker. "I realize how important animals and livestock are to people's lives, either as pets or livestock. It's a natural part of their existence."

With the help of the Show as well as radio, Walker gained the national attention that has made him a star today. "The fans have really embraced us. We're the hometown act, and since I grew up just down the road from Houston, I feel very close to Houston. It's where I feel my best. I don't feel like that anywhere else," Walker said. "There's no other show like it on earth."

"It [the Show] is something that we all enjoy as a family and as a touring act, and I want the [Houston] fans to know that wherever I go, I always think about the Rodeo. Every night that I'm on stage, every time I perform, I think about the Rodeo. We all have mental pictures that we paint. Driving to work each day, you might see a tree, a house or something that reminds you of your grandparents and the special times you had with them. Every time I see a corral, I think of the Rodeo. So, I'll always be thinking about them [the fans], and I can't wait to get back.



Perennial crowd favorite Clay Walker provided a night of top-notch entertainment for 55,146 fans attending his 1998 performance at the Houston Rodeo. Photo by Frank Martin

"Everyone who works with the Show is dedicated to the kids and the youth of Texas," said Walker. "You won't find that anywhere else." Houston is not just about the Rodeo, according to Walker. "The emphasis is on the word 'livestock,' and that's something no one else does. We have some of the best livestock right here in Texas, and with the livestock I've seen, I wouldn't go out of the state to buy horses or cattle."

Walker also knows how much the Show means to the youth of Texas. "I believe, philosophically, whenever you watch horses and cattle, most of them really take care of their babies. The babies out there depend on their parents completely, and that's the way children are. I think if kids are raised with animals, they will learn a lot from the animals. They learn responsibility and how to care for something. In today's world, responsibility is something every kid needs to learn early on. When they become adults, they will need to know how to take care of themselves and their possessions and how to regulate their lives. I think having the responsibility for livestock teaches children to have good values, and that's what the Show does -- teaches those values."

Growing up on his farm, Walker always had animals of some kind. Horses, cows, pigs, chickens and sheep -- "just about every kind of animal you can imagine," said Walker. "I've always enjoyed taking care of animals."

Raising cattle on his ranch just west of Houston, Walker has 85 "mama" cows. Raising his cattle is not work to Walker. It's the knowledge he gains from watching and learning about them that he loves. "You learn things. Every year I learn something new about grass or what type of animals do best here. It's fun stuff, and it's gratifying for me to go home for a couple of weeks in the spring to get the cattle to market. "When I come off the road, life keeps right on going. I don't just come home and rest -- there's a list of 'honey-do's' that seems to go on forever. It's a family thing," he said. "Even friends and neighbors get involved in the 'spring work.'

"I think that's why kids love 4-H and FFA so much, because they feel like they're a part of something -- something that will carry them through life. That's the way I feel about the Rodeo. It rewards people for participating -- for putting in their time and hard work -- and it magnifies what they've done. Anytime you can magnify something good about yourself or someone else, you should take that opportunity."

Walker appreciates the people and the places he encounters during his travels to different states and countries. "Learning a new language and experiencing the people allows you to learn how to associate with different cultures, and it teaches you social skills," he said. Walker said that places like Montana, Idaho and California are absolutely gorgeous. "But, there is something about Texas -- it has everything to offer," he said. "Even when I'm traveling and seeing all those different places and enjoying it, I'm thinking about Texas and realizing what we have here. It makes me appreciate where I'm from."

He's also learned some cooking tips from trying different kinds of foods. He has become interested in seasonings and how to make things taste good. "I love to cook," he said, but he qualifies that remark by saying, "On the road I have to cook, because Lori [Walker's wife] cooks so good at home. It's hard for me to go out and get fast food. I'm spoiled by her cooking, so, when I'm on the road, I use her recipes, cooking for myself and my manager."

Walker, besides being a country music superstar and a successful rancher, is first a family man. His parents played a very large role in his life, teaching him core values that he hopes to pass on to his children.

"No matter how you were raised, it's up to you to seek out the right path for your life and to follow it," said Walker. "I had a good Christian upbringing, and I appreciate that, because the lessons I learned are invaluable. Every night before we go on stage, every night before we perform, we give thanks to the Lord for our job and pray that everyone who comes to our show will be protected when they go home."

"We love our fans, and we love the people around us. Although my parents never pushed religion or music on me, it's something that's in my blood. It's something that's stuck with me and will always be with me. I don't separate myself from those two elements -- my faith or my music. They are who I am."

What do you call a farmer, a rancher and a country music superstar? Why -- Clay Walker, of course.

Letters and comments should be sent to:
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