

Brae Foust:

Hey. Howdy. Hey, folks. Welcome back to the I Am WT podcast, where we talk all WT all the time with guests, students, faculty, former alumni, and much, much more involving WT. I'm your host, Brae Foust, not along with our Queen Bee from I Am WT, Tearanee Lockhart. She's had the day off today, so I'm taken over by myself. But along with me is a very special guest with us. Is it former CEO?

Ross Wilson:

Former, retired.

Brae Foust:

Yes. Former CEO of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association, Ross Wilson. How are you doing, sir?

Ross Wilson:

Great, Brae. It's good to be with you today.

Brae Foust:

It's very good to be with you as well. How's the drive over here?

Ross Wilson:

Gorgeous weather. As you know, it's sunshine, no wind or very little, so it's a beautiful day.

Brae Foust:

No wind in the Texas Panhandle.

Ross Wilson:

It's always a good day to be on the WT campus.

Brae Foust:

That's for sure. That's true.

Ross Wilson:

But it's a beautiful day outside.

Brae Foust:

That's for sure. That's for sure. Well, tell us a little bit about yourself.

Ross Wilson:

Well, I can do that pretty quickly. It's not a lot of exciting things.

Brae Foust:

Oh, I bet it. Come on. Kidding.

Ross Wilson:

But anyway, I am a native of the Texas Panhandle, grew up east of Canyon, went to school at Claude, the big city of Claude, there on 287, attended WT back before you were born, probably, 1975 to '78. And so that was West Texas State University back in the day.

Brae Foust:

Oh, yep. That's correct.

Ross Wilson:

And little would I have imagined that my career would lead me to all these great opportunities over the last several years to work closely with the university, the leadership, faculty, staff, students. So it's been a long-term and great relationship with West Texas A&M.

Brae Foust:

So tell us a little bit about your time as a student here at West Texas as something maybe a story or a fond memory that you keep with you.

Ross Wilson:

Well, you're asking me to rack my memory banks, which are getting a little weaker with age, but I think just the family atmosphere, which was in existence then and is still in existence today. And of course, I know the College of Agriculture much better than the other colleges, so I'll stick to that. But I think the faculty and staff have worked hard to maintain that even as the university has grown significantly. I married my high school sweetheart after my first semester in college, so my life changed a little bit as far as being involved in on-campus activities. I lived on campus the first semester, but then we moved off campus and I actually was ranching and farming with my dad when we got married. So I was a part-time student for several years, and then I decided if I was ever going to complete my education that I needed to get some distance.

So we moved, not because I didn't love WT, because I did, and what a great place, even more so that it has become today. And we will talk about that in a little bit. So that's just a quick overview.

Brae Foust:

How has the agricultural department and program changed since you were a student here?

Ross Wilson:

I think it's improved immensely. They had great faculty and staff. In fact, one of the best professors I had in my collegiate career was at West Texas A&M in the Ag Eco department. So it's continued to improve, and grow, and expand, and pick up new skill sets and areas of expertise within the faculty. But now with these new incredible facilities, its growth, as you know, has gone up exponentially in the College of Ag and I think, and it will continue. So that's one of the challenges is there's a lot of good things have been done in the last five to 10 years, they need to continue. We're still riding that wave and we want to continue to work hard to do that.

Brae Foust:

I absolutely agree. In 2019, you were presented with the Presidential Panhandle Pioneer Award. Let's say that five times fast. I will say it. Under your leadership, you raised \$10 million for then new WT

Agricultural Sciences complex, which sits at the corner of Russell Long Boulevard and WTAMU Drive. What was your experience in doing that?

Ross Wilson:

Well, it was an incredible honor, first, but it's an example of one individual getting some recognition that truly a lot of individuals that worked together on that project deserve. So that includes the leadership and staff at Texas Cattle Feeders Association at the time because they were a part of that. It includes a name that you know very well and the Schaffers, Stanley Schaffer, Mr. WT, as I like to call him sometimes.

Brae Foust:

I know that name. Yep.

Ross Wilson:

You've heard that name?

Brae Foust:

I've heard that name before.

Ross Wilson:

Oh. So it includes a lot of people. The leadership, President Wendler provided great leadership. At that point in time when that idea began for the new Ag Complex, Dean Topliff was here and then Dean Hawkins, and now Dean Pond and Associate Dean Keith. So WT has and continues to attract great faculty and great leadership. And I think you see that in that transition from those deans as just one example.

Brae Foust:

Yes, very much so. Do you have a favorite moment or aspect during that time of fundraising? Who came up with the idea about the Ag Complex?

Ross Wilson:

Well, again, being part of a group, not just as one individual effort, but yes, I didn't mention Stan Sigman, who is another Mr. WT, as far as I'm concerned. The initial idea for the Ag Complex started as a new meats lab because it was sorely needed at the time. Some of the WT faculty and leadership, I believe it may have been Dean Hawkins who was sharing that TCFA and others were going to help with the legislative process on getting authorization for tuition revenue bonds, and also raise private sector money to build a new meats lab. And Stan Sigman said, "Why are you going to just do a meats lab? Why don't you do an entire Ag Complex?" So that project morphed because of that challenge, that vision and challenge from Stan morphed from probably 12 to \$15 million to approximately 50 million. And they asked what we thought and we said, "We're in, let's go."

And then Stanley Schaeffer as a part of the working group that worked so hard, and I can name several others, I'll leave somebody out, so I'll stop. Stanley Schaeffer challenged us as far as, okay, how are we going to move forward and how are we going to execute on this private sector? We'd taken care of the public part of it, which was the legislative support. The university had to be supportive of this is going to

be our major ask. At the legislature, the Board of Regents and College Station were supportive. So now it's down to how are we going to raise the 10 million?

Brae Foust:

Definitely. We've been talking about TCFA, Texas Cattle Feeders Association. Were you a founder?

Ross Wilson:

Oh, no. TCFA was founded in 1967 by some visionary people. And I had the great fortune to work with two former CEOs, outstanding CEOs and Charlie Ball and Richard McDonald. So I succeeded Richard when he retired. So I've been blessed and I grew up in the cattle industry, as I mentioned. It's always been my first love. I moved off to Washington and worked for a member of Congress for a few years, but then came back to go to work for TCFA in 1985, and had been blessed to have a career there with outstanding leaders and staff. And so, the things that I've been able to accomplish at TCFA really are a reflection of our leadership and our staff, our team members.

Brae Foust:

You and TCFA were recognized in 2021 as Volunteer Fundraiser of the Year by the Association of Fundraising Professionals' Texas Plains Chapter at the National Philanthropy Day for your leadership and continued support of WT and the Paul Engler College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences. What in your opinion, makes a good volunteer?

Ross Wilson:

Well, first let me say that that was very much appreciated, but undeserved recognition, again, for one individual because it's a reflection of the accomplishments of a team, as I've noted. But what makes a great volunteer in the area of philanthropy? First, you have to identify and recognize, and for higher education being one of the pillars of a successful and prospering society, and WT being one of those pillars, a pillar of higher education here in this region. I recognized that I had this long-term relationship with WT, as I've noted, and then benefiting the agricultural industry, which I've been a part of my entire life. So it's about identifying a passion. What is that purpose that you want to raise funds for and support? And it's not always dollars. It comes in different ways. And then the passion, I don't know if I'm answering your question very well.

Brae Foust:

No, absolutely, you answered it perfectly.

Ross Wilson:

But that's what motivates me. And I believe that's what I've observed in others like Stanley Schaeffer and David and many others that I've had an opportunity to work with through the years and have learned a lot from. I think I've observed those same focuses and passions as to what motivates them.

Brae Foust:

Doing stuff like this podcast myself, is this is a passion. It's a chance to talk with amazing, impactful people like the Schaffers, like Dr. McCurdy, like you, and many others. As a journalist myself, this is a chance to hear stories from other people and learn from them. I feel like it's a blessing to get a chance to share someone else's passion as well. And I think that's very important.

Ross Wilson:

That's a good point. I mean, we all have 24 hours in a day and we get to choose. We have obligations with work, and family, and church and other things, and we all get to choose how we're going to use our spare time as it might be, if we can find that passion. That's an important part of philanthropy.

Brae Foust:

I 100% agree. We are going to take a quick break, but first I'd like to ask Mr. Wilson about what is your favorite thing about "retirement"?

Ross Wilson:

That I'm still able to work. I don't sit still very well, but I have flexibility. I have more flexibility today on the projects that I can choose to spend my time on. So that's a nice thing about retirement.

Brae Foust:

And we'll get to those projects in just a moment, but we're going to take a quick break. You are listening to the I Am WT podcast. We'll be right back.

Speaker 3:

Donors to West Texas A&M University give more than their material support. They devote time, expertise, and commitment. WT would not be what it is today without individuals dedicated to our forward progress.

Brae Foust:

Welcome back to I Am WT podcast. I'm your host, Brae Foust, along with our special guest, Ross Wilson. Now, you are technically retired, but as you said before, you don't really sit still that often. I hear you've been working on some new projects in your retirement. One in particular is an interest in the new research for the feedlot at WT. Can you go into a little bit detail about that new feedlot?

Ross Wilson:

Absolutely. Another exciting and great project going on at West Texas A&M University. So there's been a Research Feedlot for a few decades at WT that has done and continues to do because of the faculty and the graduate students and even industry partnerships at West Texas A&M. But it's worn out, it's fulfilled its purpose. So we're very interested and excited to grow and expand and enhance in many ways the Research Feedlot capabilities, that'll really be more reflective of the capabilities of the faculty and the staff that are here today. And there will be opportunities to grow beyond that. So we're working closely with university leadership and the faculty and on what that looks like, the capabilities. And it's not just a research facility, it's a teaching and educational facility as well, because within 150 mile radius of Amarillo, approximately 25 to 28% dependent on fluctuations in cattle inventory, 25 to 28% of the nation's fed cattle supply is produced.

You can see it's a natural partnership or relationship between the university. Their students that graduate and go to work in the university, there are researchers that help cattle feeding continue to improve. Because what the cattle feeding industry does is first based on sound science and a lot of that sound science, cutting edge, whether it's animal welfare, animal health, productivity, any long list of things, environmental protections comes from the university and comes from West Texas A&M. So, we're excited to be a part of that.

Brae Foust:

Why do you think it's important for the region and WT itself to have this updated feedlot?

Ross Wilson:

The current facility is not able. I mean, it's doing a lot of great things, has and continues to do, but we can do so much more enhancing the research initiatives at the university that serve the industry. And actually in the end, it's all about producing beef in a sustainable, economically viable manner, which benefits consumers. So it comes from the consumers. So if you don't have that demand for the beef, there's no need to go there. And then to teach and train the future leadership and employees of the cattle feeding industry. One of the overarching goals of all the leadership, volunteer and staff at Texas Cattle Feeders Association has been to make this the number one area in the world, the nation, but also the world to feed cattle, to produce beef. And it takes a partnership with outstanding universities like West Texas A&M to get that done.

Brae Foust:

Yeah. The Texas Panhandle is the beef capital of the world. I actually think Hereford makes that claim to fame, but this whole area thrives in the beef cattle industry.

Ross Wilson:

This is one of the, some people would say bread baskets, I would say beef baskets of the world in this region. And WT has been and will continue to be and probably even be a bigger part of making that happen. So when you connect all those dots scientifically and educationally, WT and TCFA, and the cattle feeding industry have had a great partnership and working relationship for a long time and it just continues to grow and get better.

Brae Foust:

So if you didn't go into the ag business, what's something that you would've wanted to do with your life if you had a chance to go back?

Ross Wilson:

Oh, that's a great question. Like a lot of kids that grow up in agriculture and around animals, I thought initially I might want to be a veterinarian. And so, I was motivated in that direction for a while, but then I got interested in the business side of the industry, ag economics. And then I got interested in the policy side of the industry, and that's what led me to accept an offer to spend a few years in Washington. When I was in high school and even when I was here as a young student at WT, I would've never imagined that I would've had the career that I've been blessed to have.

Brae Foust:

To sort of bridge off that question, you could have gone and supported Texas Tech or gone to our mother college, Texas A&M, but why do you support WT?

Ross Wilson:

Well, and that's a very good point because we actually do support some other universities. In the world of agriculture in this region, you've got WT, you've got Tech, College Station, obviously Texas A&M, Oklahoma State, New Mexico State. Texas Cattle Feeders Association represents a three state area. The

name is misleading. Maybe I should have touched on that a moment ago. So as a result of that, we work with a lot of universities, but WT is in our home base. It has become because it's earned that position, become a member of the cattle feeding club family, whatever you want to call it. So there are a lot of long-term professional and personal relationships between the cattle feeding cattle agriculture industry and West Texas A&M. And location is a part of that, as I noted, but it's really, it's because of the professionalism and the personalities and the quality of the leadership, the faculty and the staff.

I've got a lot of connections with WT through the years, whether I was new of WT, new of the great things that were going on here for a long time before I ever was professionally associated with the university. And I think it's the people, it usually always boils down to the people, and whether it's the leadership at the top or the deans in the colleges, the faculty. So it's all of those items, for lack of a better term, that have made it really so easy and such a natural fit. Not only when I was at Texas Cattle Feeders Association, but from a personal perspective to be associated with WT. And I think that's probably true of a lot of the other people that are volunteers that have supported the university through the years. And there's a long, long list, as you know, that is at the heart of all of that. I hope that makes sense.

Brae Foust:

Yeah. The people of the Texas Panhandle are also very generous and very kind people as we were always taught. Please, thank you. How are you sir? How are you, ma'am? All that stuff. And it's reflective of other regions of the country. I mean, I went to Boston one time when I was 10, and the atmosphere was just completely different. There wasn't a whole lot of pleases and thank you. It was, "Ah, we got to get going, you all. Let's move." "You want your Boston cream donut? Let's go. Come on." It was not like a, "Hi. What would you like?" It was all that stuff. So yeah, the area itself for us, that's one of my favorite things about the Texas Panhandle and Canyon, and Emerald, is that it is a kind society, it is always thoughtful of other people. We are literally the people that will take our shirt off our back and help out as much as we can.

Ross Wilson:

I think you said that very well, Brae.

Brae Foust:

Well, I appreciate that. So you're discussing about other communities and other volunteers. Why do you think others should support WT?

Ross Wilson:

I think I've outlined a few of those topics. I don't know that I can add a lot to that because I'm biased. I've got this long time emotional student professional connection with West Texas A&M, so it's easy for me to see why we should do that. But like I said a moment ago, you can just look at the large number of people, whether they write a small check or a large check, or they give a few hours or they give many, many hours. There's a lot of people that have been motivated, and I think it's because of the reputation that West Texas A&M enjoys, not only just locally, but I think nationally. And it's not just the College of Agriculture. There's some other nationally recognized colleges. Engineering business obviously has been rated as number one.

You mentioned Paul Engler just in a name of a complex, I believe a moment ago. What a great example of support by a gentleman who hails from Nebraska, but built his cattle feeding business in this region

and he recognized the role that WT and the College of Agriculture played in... maybe it was large, maybe it was small. I think it depends on the particular topic. Just having a chance to know and work with Paul has also been a motivating factor.

Brae Foust:

Paul Engler is a perfect example. You're right. We appreciate his support, your support, and all of our donors volunteers, whether they give five bucks or a million dollars or just their time, really. Well, Ross Wilson, we're about out of here. We want to wrap it up in just a moment. But like you said, you're retired, plans for the day where you're going to be going, you're going to-

Ross Wilson:

Well, let me mention one thing-

Brae Foust:

Go ahead.

Ross Wilson:

... if you can give me an opportunity. So as a part of WT at College of Agriculture and Sciences, they're going to host the first ever WT Fall Gather, which promotes agriculture. But more importantly, that relationship and connection between agriculture and the community, our agriculture and the cities and towns in the panhandle or just say at Agriculture and Society. So that's going to be on Saturday, September the 30th from 3:30 to 6:30 before the evening football game. So I would encourage, and people can find out more about that in the coming weeks from West Texas A&M. There'll be tickets to purchase. There's a lot of ways to support this. There's some group packages and sponsorships available. And then I think it's the week before, we always have a Saturday event for the College of Agriculture that's focused more on resources. But this is really focused. This is a great vision that actually originated with some WT students, and the leadership and the faculty saw the value. Dean's Pond and Dean Keith saw the value of doing this, of that connection between society and agriculture and where people's food comes from. So I hope people will find out more about that and participate.

Brae Foust:

You said September 30th?

Ross Wilson:

September 30th from 3:30 to 6:30 PM prior to the football game that evening.

Brae Foust:

So make sure you mark your calendars folks. Make sure you're at that event. All right. Well, Ross, we're going to go ahead and wrap this up a little bit. You want to give a quick shout-out to your wife and just say hi? Just say hi.

Ross Wilson:

Wow. The best partner I could have ever hoped for. So a lot of my success is attributable to my wife.

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Brae Foust:

Wives are the best. I understand.

Ross Wilson:

Absolutely.

Brae Foust:

My wife is my block as well, so I understand for sure. Ross, it's been an absolute pleasure discussing and talking with you about this. I think a lot of our TCFA is very much something we can all be thankful for.

Ross Wilson:

Well, now that I've recovered a little bit, I do want to give a shout-out to my wife Melody.

Brae Foust:

We can't thank you enough for joining us here on I Am WT. I hope you all have an amazing day wherever you're listening to. We'll see you all next time. This has been the I Am WT podcast and we'll see you all later. Take care.