

A Profitable, Palatable Plan

Western Kansas rancher carries on Prime mission for posterity.

by Nicole Lane Erceg, Certified Angus Beef LLC

In 2000, Lex Bush had a commercial cow herd of 35 near Dighton, Kan.

The cattleman returned to his family farm, Bush & Sons, in the 1970s after serving in Vietnam, but 2000 was the turning point for the herd.

Local grassland came up for sale, opening the door for expansion as his father handed him the operating reins.

The herd quickly grew to 300 as Bush began using artificial insemination (AI) to elevate genetics. Each year he invested in better bulls and kept replacement heifers to incorporate those genetics. The breed choice was always Angus, as earlier experiments in crossbreeding turned him on to “the business breed” for good.

“Darn Angus are so nice to be around, easy to handle, and I’m not getting any younger, tagging calves,” he says. “I just don’t have any trouble with them — excellent mamas, good keepers and carcass results.”

Today he operates that herd of 320 with his son, Tanner, and veterinarian son-in-law Curt Vogel. Together they are pursuing one simple, long-term goal: “a nice set of Angus cows that are easy to work with, hang up well and pay



Using artificial insemination, Lex Bush says they are making progress on female performance and quality grade faster than ever, while spending just one-third as much time on calving assistance as before AI.

premiums for the quality of the meat.”

Some would say they’re already there.

In 2007, Bush decided to retain ownership of his cattle for the first time, testing the merit of genetics he’d carefully selected for seven years. He recalls his first set of carcass data showing about 15% had met the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand standards, about 80% graded Choice with a Prime or two, and the rest were Select. The data told him he was on the right track, but there was still work to do.

“You’re not going to hit a home run starting out, but you’ve got to start somewhere,” he says, recalling the premiums earned at the beginning.

Gradually the reports got better and better, with recent cutout sheets

showing 100% Choice or better with 60% earning the CAB brand, including 22% Prime. Although he’s already earning quality grades far above the national average, his focus is on producing as much Prime as possible.

He says the key to reaching his goals is about much more than bulls.

“The biggest thing that helped me get here is raising our own

replacement heifers,” says Bush. “We knew how they were bred, and that gives me the confidence to feed their progeny. We know they are going to have better marbling, better growth, better all-around genetics.”

He emphasizes better *all around*. “Since we are after the marbling, because that’s what is going to make you Prime, and it has to be in the genetics, you might think you’d give something up on the other end,” he says. “But our cattle continue to perform. They are gaining well and our percent CAB and Prime continue to go up. So if we are giving up anything, I don’t know what it is.”

When choosing a sire, Bush begins his selection criteria with birth weight and the expected progeny difference (EPD) for calving ease maternal (CEM), as he intends to keep back

PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

daughters. Then he creates what he calls an EPD “floor,” numbers he won’t go under for docility, marbling, ribeye area and growth.

“It’s gotten so easy with the selection data that heifers aren’t a big deal,” says Bush. “Three years ago, we Aled (artificially inseminated) 140 first-calf heifers and only assisted one.”

In sparsely populated Lane County, where good labor is hard to come by, the proven calving ease means dollars that stay in Bush’s pocket.

Surviving adversity

Life on those High Plains is “not for the faint of heart,” he says with a warning about rattlesnakes. He and the next generations farm the same ground their family has worked for more than a century, often hearing stories handed down of life during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. He tells his own tales of the Farm Crisis in the 1980s and the more recent severe drought in 2011-2013.

“It’s been tough,” he says. “The rain just shuts off out here sometimes, but on the cattle end, retained ownership and having the genetics to capture premiums has helped as much as anything.”

Some may categorize retained ownership as a risk, but Bush considers it risk management, something he’s relied

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on to carry their business through tough times. During the drought of 2012, he says, he recalls cussing the heat while building fence around Conservation Reserve Program land released for grazing.

“It was hot and not any fun,” he says, “but I was making about \$1,000 an hour because we held onto them, and then off went the cattle market.”

Year in and year out, Bush says retaining ownership has made them money, but he also focuses on low input costs.

“It’s about having the genetics to capture the premiums when we hang the carcass up, and then just watching costs,” he says. “I’m watching my inputs, keeping costs as low as you can keep them so that when the cattle market is bad, we can still make money because our costs are so low.”



In about 10 years, Bush went from 15% of his cattle earning the CAB premium to more than 60%, including 22% Prime.

Having built a herd that sustains his family now and into the future brings satisfaction, to say the least.

“I’m having more fun than the law ought to allow,” he says, beaming. “I’m the luckiest guy in the world.”

Part of that is just knowing the beef from his cattle create fine dining experiences for consumers from the state of Kansas to the Pacific Rim where he once served his country in other ways.

“Some of those top-notch restaurants in the world, I’m feeding those people CAB, and that’s a good feeling,” Bush says.

It’s something he thinks about from the very beginning.

“Every cut from that critter winds up on a plate in some form or fashion,” he says. “It’s not just about the pounds, it’s about quality pounds and producing really good meat.”

His journey in the cattle business has brought many blessings. For Bush, high-quality beef is more than a target, it’s a calculated part of his succession plan. Grandfather to five, he hopes the investments will leave a cow herd set up for success for the next generation.

“Any extra profit you can make is important these days,” he says. “It’s tough to get things passed down. Now with our retained-ownership business model, genetic investments and Tanner and Curt’s involvement, we have these cattle set up to just go on.” 

Editor’s Note: Nicole Lane Erceg is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.