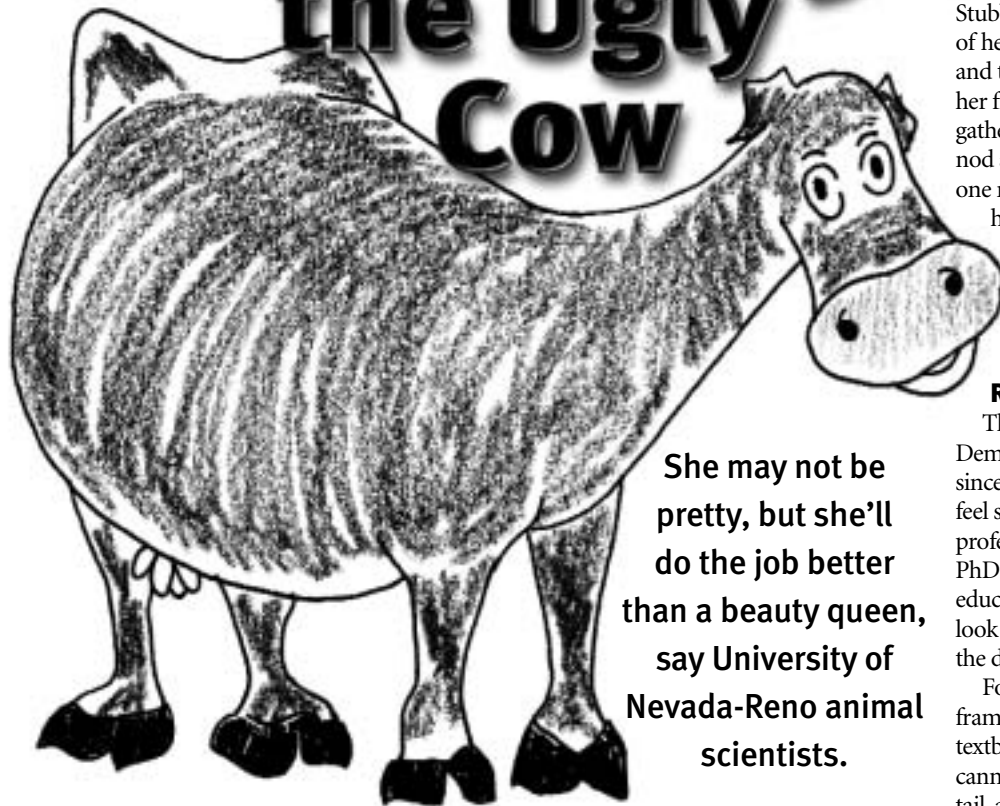


Stubby, the Ugly Cow



She may not be pretty, but she'll do the job better than a beauty queen, say University of Nevada-Reno animal scientists.

by Ron Torell, Ken Conley & Jon Wilker

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Take for example Stubby, the ugly cow. Stubby is her cowboy-given name. She lost her tail and both ears to frostbite the day she was born, March 5, 1988. It was 5° below zero in the central Nevada desert that chilly morning. Stubby had a will to live and the vigor to overcome the frostbite and hypothermia that often accompany being born unassisted on the sagebrush rangelands of the central Nevada desert. It was just Stubby, her mother, and 10,000 acres of desert on that brisk March morning.

It was Stubby's will to live that convinced the University of Nevada-Reno (UNR) Gund Research and Demonstration Ranch cowboys to cut her into the replacement pen in fall 1988. "Any calf that has that much will to live has earned a chance as a replacement, regardless of her appearance," the cowboys reasoned. Stubby was certainly not selected based on her physical appearance or conformation. The decision to cut her into the replacement pen has proven to be a good one. And that is where the story really begins.

Earning our respect

Stubby always has a "dare me" look in her eyes, and she holds her head high in a defying manner as if to challenge horse and rider. She is coarse in the shoulders and wasty in the brisket. She shows very little femininity because her body is muscular and coarse. You would think that her name "Stubby" was descriptive of only her lack of ears and tail, but actually "Stubby" also describes her frame size.

Stubby will win no milk production contest. She produces just enough milk to raise a moderate-sized calf, and not a squirt more. The old saying "one more doughnut and she would be fat" fits Stubby. She is always in her working clothes even though she is often borderline fat. She's a real range cow that has never seen a showring, nor has her sire or dam.

The cowboys often compliment Stubby with such statements as: "Stubby is so ugly, she has to sneak up on a drink of water;" or "She only drinks from a moving stream because she might die of fright if she saw her

reflection." The older Stubby gets, the uglier she gets.

Several positive traits stand out about Stubby. No. 1, she is the trendy black color and always has a black calf. Every fall the cowboys have to ride to the top of the mountain to retrieve Stubby and her four-weight calf. Usually two of her ugly friends, Shovelhead and Schlitz, and their calves are with Stubby. Stubby and her friends are always the last cows to be gathered in the fall. Stubby always gets the nod at pregnancy checking time, giving her one more year. For 13 years in a row, Stubby has raised an average-sized black calf that has gotten on the truck at shipping time. As ugly as she might be, Stubby is a true range cow. We wish we had a thousand more just like her.

Rethinking ideal

The UNR Gund Research and Demonstration Ranch has employed Stubby since 1988, and she is still going strong. We feel she is a valued state employee. UNR professors, administrators and those with PhDs behind their names have been educated to know what the ideal cow should look like. The ideal cow looks nothing like the description given in this story.

For starters, Stubby's coarse build, smaller frame size and wasty brisket do not fit the textbook description of the modern cow. You cannot ignore the absence of her ears and tail, and Stubby does have a range-cow attitude.

Some may say a cow like Stubby has no place on a land-grant university research and demonstration ranch. When you film these cattle for the video market, make sure Stubby and her friends are not in the picture. Needless to say, Stubby has not received any state employee cost-of-living allowances or any merit pay. You see, the administration decides who gets those raises. It makes no difference to Stubby; she gets by just fine on what she has — very little. Stubby is a low-maintenance cow.

Perhaps we should be less concerned about looks and more concerned about a cow's economic performance. Research clearly shows that reproduction, or simply having a saleable calf, is 10 times more important than weaning weight and yearling weight, and 20 times more important than carcass traits. In other words, having a bunch of low-maintenance Ms. Congenialities that produce an average-sized calf year after year in the desert is more economical than owning high-maintenance beauty queens that fail under desert conditions.

We are certainly not saying that a cow should not be structurally and

conformationally correct. We are not saying that a cow that fits our preconceived vision of the ideal cow couldn't produce under a desert range condition. We are not saying we should not be concerned about the end product and consumer satisfaction.

We are saying, however, that some in the cow business and many in the professional and seedstock world do not have 20/20 vision when it comes to bovine female selection for a desert-range environment. They do not walk in our shoes.

It is the opinion of the authors that for those of us who carve a living in a 7- to 10-inch (in.)-precipitation zone, we have to be more concerned about having a saleable calf than do those who produce beef from behind a desk or on irrigated pasture with registered cows. Reproductive performance of beef cows under desert conditions is much more difficult than in more favorable environments. The desert can be brutal.


On one hand, we put too many constraints on our bovine female selection criteria, such as appearance. On the other hand, we do not put enough constraints under these conditions on such things as frame and milk limitations. We are setting our cows up to fail using our past or preconceived selection criteria.

Perhaps less emphasis should be

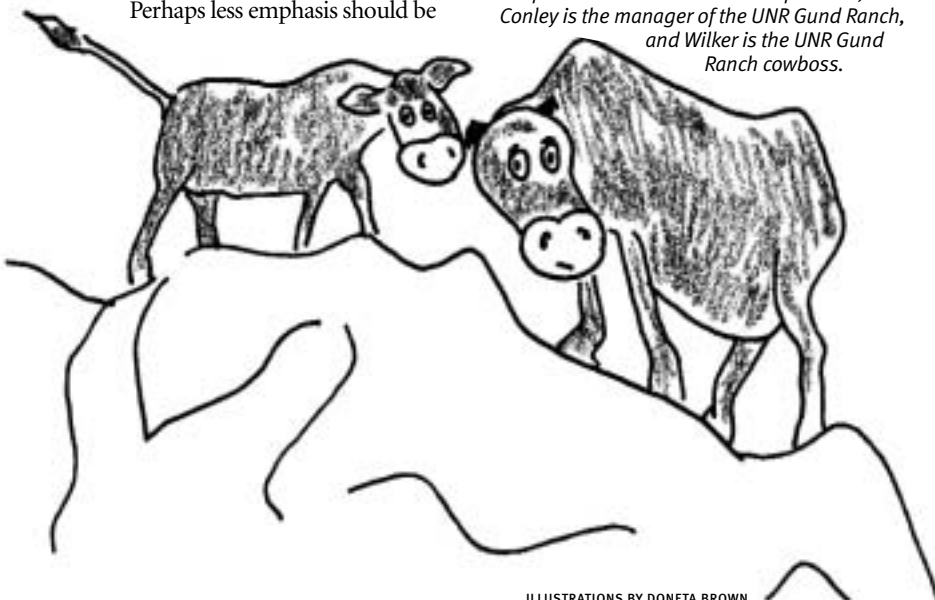
placed on appearance, growth, high milk and large frame and more on economic merit. That is the message we need to send to the seedstock producer, not that we want more growth and prettier cattle at the expense of increased frame and milk, particularly for our desert-range environment. Milk is a nutrient-demanding trait, not a maternal trait.

The authors would rather own 100 cows like Stubby that know how to scrap and are low maintenance than 1,000 of the high-maintenance, barn-sour, pretty kind.

Yes, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. We happen to think that Stubby is a real beauty queen. Stubby has calved on time and unassisted in the brush every year of her productive life. She had her 13th calf in spring 2003. She weans a 450-pound (lb.) calf every year with minimum input in a desert-range environment. This has resulted in a \$150 net profit annually for the last 13 years.

That is our idea of a beautiful cow. That definition is hard to argue with, isn't it? I am sure you have a cow similar to Stubby on your ranch. Don't you just love her? 

Editor's Note: *The authors of this commentary are specialists at UNR. Torell is a Nevada Cooperative Extension livestock specialist, Conley is the manager of the UNR Gund Ranch, and Wilker is the UNR Gund Ranch cowboss.*



ILLUSTRATIONS BY DONETA BROWN