



Meant To Be

Close-knit family settles into ranching for high-quality life and beef.

by *Steve Suther & Jackie Eager*

Aiming for the best future and quality of life for their family, the Davidsons gravitated toward a high-quality commercial Angus herd that now includes at least 300 head. They operate a 6,000-acre ranch next to the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands in South Dakota, so close to the state line that they identify with Chadron, Neb., as much as Oelrichs, S.D.

They've been there since the mid-1990s — not long by most local measures, but the family has carved out a future that should keep them there for years to come.

"We were born and raised in California," says Mary, taking in her husband and partner, Wes. "We left in the 1970s to manage an irrigated operation in Montana and sold a lot of alfalfa hay to dairies back on the Coast."

Wes maintained a career as a union steamfitter working on everything from breweries to rocket propulsion systems. He made it a point to be home for haying and other rush seasons, some of which came to include a beef cattle enterprise.

Starting the cow herd

"My cousin's ranch near Lander, Wyo., ties

into a big 40- by 80-mile summer range, so we got a few Hereford cows to run in there, and they were bred to Salers bulls," Wes recalls. "We tried out a lease on a place south of the Black Hills, but then moved out to my cousin's area for about six years. By then we were thinking Angus. I've always thought that breed offers the best genetic base."

In the 1990s, they bought the place they would call home and began breeding up to a higher percentage Angus herd. While still in Wyoming, Wes had called a seedstock operator in Nebraska.

"I first met Bill Rishel on the telephone, but really got to know him and his family once we started going to their bull sales," Wes says. "Now it's 44 Rishel Angus there at North Platte (Neb.), but Bill's still involved. We've bought bulls there for 15 years because they work. He's been out here to help us sort replacements."

Disposition is important in those decisions.

"We don't keep anything snaky," Mary says. "I'm the one who usually calves all our heifers, and sometimes the grandkids help." All calves are tagged, weighed and vaccinated

at birth, then entered into computerized records that calculate efficiency.

"They have a passion to breed good cattle that are functional," Rishel says, crediting the Davidsons' thirst for knowledge and details. Moreover, he appreciates that they share in the goal of satisfying beef consumers: "They are able to see the big picture."

Family is paramount

Cow families are important, but even more so are the human kind, the Davidsons say. That's why they do business with Rishel. That's why they've started doing business with David Ranch, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot at Lenora, Kan., that shared data with them the last couple of years.

"They're both great families," Wes says.

The Davidson family history unfolds "like a storybook tale," Wes says, though it includes the tragedy of a firstborn son killed by a drunk driver almost 28 years ago. That left Jeff, who ironically met his future wife about then, but at the age of 12, neither of them thought beyond friendship.

"He and Suz were always buddies," Mary says, "riding out on horses; then they coyote-hunted together. But Suz went to college and had her boyfriends. Jeff had his girlfriends, and all of them were friends."

Following his father's footsteps into the union steamfitter trade in California, Jeff came back to help for all of those rush seasons on the ranch. Then in the late 1990s, the two young people realized they were meant to be together. Recently, they bought a place contiguous to his folks' ranch, forming the current 6,000 acres. Just last summer, Jeff moved the family to the ranch for good.

"It's always been a dream of ours to raise the kids here and get back to the basics, working alongside my folks," Jeff says. "The good, clean living of ranch life."

Operating costs have gone up in the 20 years since he embarked on that first union apprenticeship out west, but information and analysis will help keep the ranch on solid financial footing, he says.

"There is a lot more data available to ranchers across the board," Jeff says. "I look forward to contributing to our programs and dialing them into their full potential, using our records to lower costs and become more efficient."

Bull selection

He's still a consultant for the steamfitter company, traveling back to Los Angeles once a month, but the ranch is home now. The schedule will work much better than the one Wes lived with for more than 40 years, until 2003.

► **Above:** Wes and Mary Davidson say their ponds were dry in 2008, after a five-year drought, but a change in the weather filled them up and restored pastures on the family's ranch south of Oelrichs, S.D.

"I'd come home for haying or to ship cattle, and Christmas and New Year's," he recalls. "Mary took care of all this." That's one reason disposition has always been important, and that certainly includes bulls.

Their bulls are easy to work with, Mary says. "You can come out here with a bucket of cake and four panels and load them right up."

The bull battery features balance, but there are always a few that seem to hold the most promise for the next generation of heifers. To capitalize on that, the Davidsons let a couple of the top bulls breed for the first two weeks before the rest of the crew joins in. Conception rates have been as high as 100%, and the early-born heifers are impressive.

The older grandkids have helped on some horseback operations, like branding, when they visited, Mary says. "Now they're here to stay, they'll learn to rope, because in these big pastures that's the best way to help a calf in trouble." Suzanne has been a top hand since those days in Wyoming when roundup took two months every fall.

Nature itself conspired to welcome the extended family home, with the best rainfall year in the decade. Ponds that were dry last year now stand nearly brim full, though waterlines are the main source for stockwater. Even in 2008, at the end of a five-year drought, the 14-pasture rotation delivered

calves that weaned at 180 days in September at 3.22 pounds (lb.) per day of age.

"Our old brand inspector joked that we were feeding them corn and stuff," Mary says with a grin. "Heck, we don't do that."

In fact, the Davidsons consider supplementation cheating. "We don't cheat to get the weights, and we don't let a cow cheat on us," Wes says. Individual records allow for strict accountability. "If they don't produce every year, they're gone."

Bottom line

After weaning, the calves have no need to cheat. Feedlot performance has been above average with quality grades better than 90% USDA Choice. *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance was nearly 40% last year, but harvest group reports showed figures above 70% CAB a couple of years earlier when David Ranch fed their first load.

Pounds add up, and the Davidsons like to see that average weaning weight above 600 lb. But they know that's not enough.

"The bottom line is carcass quality," Wes says. "That's the end product, any way you look at it.

We are not interested in cattle that look great but don't have marbling. When someone has a piece of meat that started out here, I want them to have an enjoyable experience."

That's part of the big picture.

"The family aspect of the ranch is the biggest thing," Jeff says. "It's something that we all preach and practice." They share the passion for producing the best for future generations of Davidsons and consumers.

"In good times and in bad, the ranch holds us all together," he says. "We are here for each other."

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► Home at last, Suzanne and Jeff Davidson with children (from left) Taylor, Wyatt, Dylan and Layne.