



## 2012 CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF

2012 Feedlot Partner of the Year, <15,000 head



# Details From the Wall

CAB Partner of the Year raises sire groups to feed the river of data, satisfy consumers.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

It could be any other in-barn office: dusty floors; a well-worn couch; stools for pulling up to the workbench or leaning on while discussing the hot, dry weather and the list of daily chores it creates. In the corner there's an old, but trusty fridge for vaccines. It has every appearance of an average gathering spot for ranch managers and workers until you see the wall, which is literally covered with an extraordinary amount of data.

At Guggenmos River Ranch, near Brewster, Neb., there's no need to tuck away important information to analyze on a rainy day. They look into it constantly. There it hangs, easy to explore.

► **Above:** At Guggenmos River Ranch, near Brewster, Neb., there's no need to tuck away important information to analyze on a rainy day. It hangs on the wall, easy to explore.

► Carcass bulls can make good cows — if you find the right ones, says George Epp.



The quick reference piece doesn't just cover calving records and doctoring notes. Since all ranch calves are fed out in the pens adjacent to this office, they have carcass data to match. The family is anchored by Walter "Bill" and Ramona, who started building the cow herd with Angus cattle in 1953, the year after they married.

They incorporated the business in 1991 and licensed the feedlot with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) in 2003. This year, it was honored as the Feedlot Partner of the Year for yards with less than 15,000-head capacity.

The Guggenmos family — which includes son Larry and his wife, Patty; as well as younger son Roger and his wife, Cindy, and their children — shares the recognition with longtime employees George and Loretta Epp.

“The long, long story short is a bunch of years of trial and error in genetics, and this is where we are,” says George Epp, who has been with the family for a dozen years.

Larry pipes up to make the point that it takes a system to find those errors.

“You can’t discount the data, because if you don’t have the data, you just don’t know,” he says. “If you sold a potload of cattle and you don’t know who’s who and you have five outliers in there, which five cows do you get rid of?”

Genetics start the story, but it gets length and depth with each strategic decision and documented outcome.

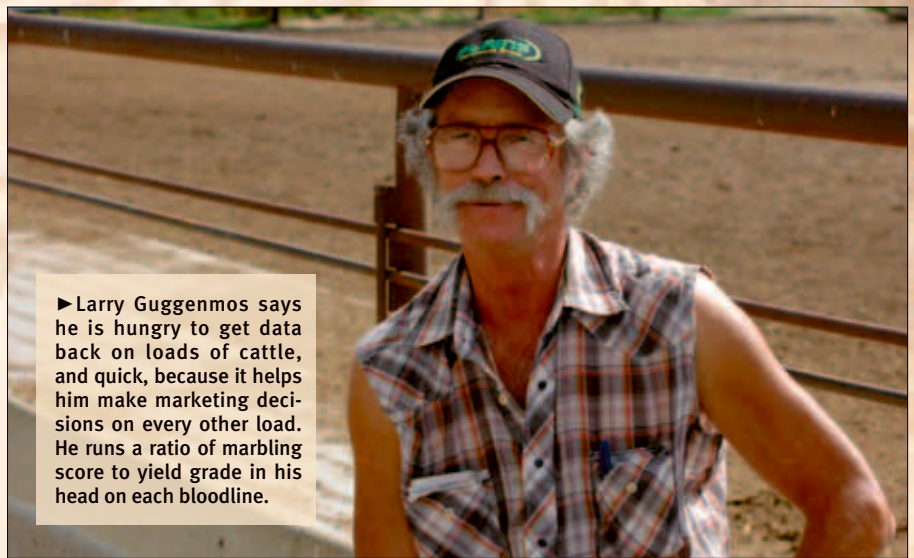
Larry and Patty came back to the ranch after 14 years away, when Larry traded power plant construction for building a cow herd. It numbered 350 head when the family asked the Epps to join their team and redouble efforts.

Today, around 700 Angus-based females keep them flipping through bull sale books and reading the next issue of the *Angus Journal* to find the outcross that fits seamlessly into their program.

“We have all the papers stacked up all over the table trying to do our homework,” Loretta says, noting that’s a passion she and George share. “If I see a different name, we go home and look it up.”

Their progeny-testing relationship with Accelerated Genetics laid the foundation.

“You talk about an infusion of good genetics,” Larry says. “We changed more



► Larry Guggenmos says he is hungry to get data back on loads of cattle, and quick, because it helps him make marketing decisions on every other load. He runs a ratio of marbling score to yield grade in his head on each bloodline.

in five years than most ranchers can do in a lifetime.”

They measured that progress. Patty still enters the data into a spreadsheet each year, and they use it.

### Sorting plays role

“We try to get the hardest-feeding and the easiest-feeding genetics so they meet in the middle,” he says. If they’re not grown first, some high-marbling cattle will finish before they hit 1,000 pounds (lb.) live weight, Larry notes.

“That’s why we’ve come to the point of sorting,” says Loretta.

Calves get a taste of grain on grass, when Larry dresses the pasture with creep feed. Then they’re weaned into the feedlot in October and November. Groups are split four ways, according to their pedigree.

“To really work it right, we need more pens to sort these phenotypes down even tighter,” Larry says. As it is, they put the most genotypically alike groups together and feed to the average.

To limit stress, processing waits until a couple of weeks after calves enter the feedlot.

Roger ramrods the farming operations, which supply the cattle enterprises with corn, hay and silage. Distillers’ grains are procured locally, and Larry steps the ration up so cattle are ready for marketing after six months on feed.

They don’t head south to the Grand Island, Neb., JBS plant the following spring without additional scrutiny.

“If people help us sort, it drives them nuts because it doesn’t look like it makes any sense,” Larry says. One animal might look overdone, but they say it needs a few weeks. Another might appear like it still needs some time, but Larry says, “With George’s ability to remember three generations back, we know it needs to be gone.”

Those data-filled office posters may contain all the details, but they’ve developed a system for identifying cattle on the fly. During calving season, they turn to an over-the-door shoe organizer that houses nine different color ear tags, each one dedicated to a different bloodline. New progeny soon sport a slice of that rainbow, from blue to red to purple, but never pink.



► The herd numbered 350 head when the family asked Loretta and George Epp to join their team and redouble efforts. Today, around 700 Angus-based females keep them searching for the right bull.

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“They had a pastel pink, but in no time it looked just like the peach because it faded so bad,” Loretta says.

That’s not an irrelevant detail. Knowing just who came from which sire makes all the difference because it determines how each calf is fed, for how long and on what ration.

### Testing the waters

They usually start off selling a “sample” group sold for a flat bid, just to test the new genetics and make sure their eyeball sort is precise, but this year Larry took a chance and gridded the first cut, too.

“If I’d have taken flat money on those, it would have hurt. They graded like a house afire,” he says. They made 68% CAB and Prime.

He’s hungry to get that data back, and quick, because it helps him make marketing decisions on every other load. He runs a ratio of marbling score to yield grade in his head on each bloodline.

“These ones averaged a Yield Grade 2.8, so I could have fed them another week or two easily and shoved more of them to CABs,” he says while thumbing through pages of detailed data.

The system is proven. This year’s 454 head went 61% CAB and CAB Prime overall.

Those cattle also helped the family reach the silver level in the brand’s Thirty-aught-six (30.06) program, which honors feeders’ commitment to marketing loads of cattle that hit the target of at least 30% CAB acceptance with less than 6% outliers. They’ve sold more than 1,000 head that meet that designation.

“When we started on this high-quality trail, I thought everybody else would be right behind, but it hasn’t happened yet,” Larry says. “I can’t figure out why.”



►Tags are color-coded by sire groups. Knowing who came from which sire makes all the difference because it determines how each calf is fed, for how long and on what ration.

George thinks a general disconnect plays a role.

“I had one seedstock producer flat-out tell me that he tries to stay away from those carcass bulls because those carcass bulls don’t make good cows,” he says. “Yeah, they do — if you find the right ones.”

It’s the combination of feedlot traits and mothering ability that led the ranch to Angus. It’s that same all-around package that keeps them from crossbreeding.

“That’s the thing, after all these years of building up quality, it’s kind of hard to want to change anything and more than likely go the other way,” Loretta says. “There’s nothing that disgusts me more than somebody who

says, ‘I’m not in it for the meat.’ Whether you keep them or somebody else buys them and feeds them, they’re going to end up on somebody’s plate, and everybody benefits by the better products.”

There is always work to be done. That leaves little time to gather in that modest office, but if they do, there’s a good chance somebody is talking about the next bloodline that will keep them inching quality upward. Then they’ll chat about all the details that follow, like procuring a new color of tags.



**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

### Straight back home to Angus

Walter “Bill” Guggenmos was serving in the Korean War when he received a letter from his dad.

“It was the only letter he ever sent me ... Mom always wrote,” he remembers. It wasn’t long, but the handwritten scribbles asked Bill to join the family’s ranching operation when he got home.

Bill left the service Nov. 6, and jokes that he was “a free man” for 20 days before marrying the local school teacher on Nov. 26, 1952.

Together, Bill and Ramona Guggenmos raised crops, cattle and kids: Larry, Rhonda and Roger.

When they bought their first set of Angus cattle, their coat color was to help them stand out among his dad’s Hereford herd.

“That first sale in Burwell, I topped the market with that set of calves, so then I really liked them,” he says.

Local breeders in their county and those bordering it were among some of the top names in the country, so he didn’t have to go far for genetics, though there were convincing competitors close by, too.

“I had a neighbor who raised purebred Simmentals,” Bill says. “The biggest mistake I ever made was saying, ‘This crossbreeding thing sounds like a pretty good deal.’”

They “tried about everything” in the following years, but when they started feeding their own cattle in the early 1990s, direct feedback led the family back to that original breed.

“The second or third year we sold them flat, the local cattle buyer suggested we pay attention because of the way they were cutting, especially the black ones,” Larry says. “So we’ve been pretty much Angus ever since.”