

Etched in the Land

A cultural saga of natural Angus traditions in the Northwest.

Story & photos by **Laura Nelson**



A dusty trail cuts through the Owyhee Mountains, still rugged and barely forgiving of its trespassers. The ruts turn and climb up, up, up until they open to a view of the lower Reynolds Creek Valley that once assured prospectors their long journey west was nearly over.

In the 1860s, the trek to Silver City was filled with visions of precious metals and the new life those riches would offer. A century and a half later, the trail near Murphy, Idaho, still holds dreams for those who travel it. But those now belong to the Jaca family, and may involve the black cattle that dot these summer ranges and fill the valley in the winter.

Raising the sixth generation on the ranch, Martin Jaca, wife Susan and parents Elias and Inez have built Jaca Land and Livestock Co.

around values worth more than gold. The setting includes 800 Angus cows, producing calves to help fill their 2,500-head-capacity feedlot.

They feed in partnership with Niman Ranch, one of two suppliers to the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand Natural program. Transforming grass from these ranges into high-grading cattle is no easy task,

but the Jaca family has managed to increase their CAB acceptance rates to above 50% in the last three years, says John Tarpoff, head of the CAB Natural program for Niman Ranch.

Meeting a challenge is second nature in the Jaca heritage.

Inez's ancestors arrived in the valley in 1906, among the Basque emigrants who came in with the immense sheep herds of the time. Representing a culture with a homeland but no nation, from the Pyrenees Mountains on the French side down to the Spanish Bay of Biscay, they excelled as herdsmen in the American West. Elias' grandfather started, like many others, as a herder on the Nevada side of the Owyhee range, but built up a ranch that encompassed up to a dozen bands of sheep, 1,000 cows and a herd of horses.

Also like many others, the stock market crash in 1929 turned most of his assets over to a bank. But the family was already ingrained in the land and its livestock. Their culture carries on through the storytelling tradition that tells of resilience and a deep-

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► **Above:** In the late 1980s, faced with the worst hard times in 50 years, the Jacas knew it was time to look for something else. “We always got the top of the market as far as commodity prices went, because people were capitalizing on our carcasses. But that just wasn’t enough because the market was so bad,” Inez (right) says. “That was when Elias (left) said: ‘We have to start niche marketing, get into a natural brand, or at least start finishing these heavy feeders. We have to do something, or we are going to lose it.’”

rooted connection to the land. Susan and Elias speak the near-extinct Basque fluently and other family members understand it. In any language, stories keep ranch tradition alive.

On the Idaho side, Inez's family flock passed from great-grandmother to great-uncle and then to her father in 1945. He sold the sheep to focus on cattle, drawing from the historic Wyoming Hereford Ranch dispersal. In 1967, they started buying land in the valley to winter cattle, then developed a grower yard that fed into a Simplot finishing yard. The next year, Inez and Elias were married and it was time for another change.

Experience leads

"We were always in the Hereford business until Inez's dad bought one black bull. Buster was his name. After we butchered a few of Buster's calves, they tasted so good! So we started buying more and more black bulls," Elias recalls. "It all started in 1965 with Buster, and now 90% of our bulls are Angus."

So the Jaca family went on through the 1970s, growing their herd and feedlot with the progeny of "Buster" in mind. They also kept natural production methods in mind.

"My dad never used growth promotants or hormones, and neither did Elias' family," Inez says. "We tried it a few times, but we were just never happy with the results."

The most unsettling results came from the carcass data. "We double-implanted a group of cattle back then, and when we were finished, boy, were they big," Elias says. "But they were blanks. Instead of grading Choice, they were Selects. We didn't like that, and I just don't think it's a natural way for cattle to grow."

A trip to the World Meat Congress solidified his resolve. Sitting with a group of European producers, he doubted that the world market would accept implanted animals, but he realized the need for a better domestic market, too.

"We were buying these expensive bulls, the top bulls out of sales to breed our cows to. Then we'd get ready to sell the calves and just get commodity prices," Elias says. "We were looking for something better."

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"We always got the top of the market as far as commodity prices went, because people were capitalizing on our carcasses. But that just wasn't enough because the market was so bad," Inez says. "That was when Elias said: 'We have to start niche marketing, get into a natural brand, or at least start finishing these heavy feeders. We have to do something, or we are going to lose it.'"



► Following in the tradition of the old shepherders who used to leave messages carved in the aspens, Martin Jaca carved the names of his children in the trees on the ranch. Roughly etched on the bark, vertical inscriptions lay claim to Josune Jaca, Matea Jaca, Maialen Jaca and Elias Jaca. The trees will hold lasting significance to the kids.

Healthy premiums

"Used to be a dollar for horseback riders and five for wagons to pass through here." Elias points through the trees from the two-rut trail to a tollhouse ruins in the canyon. "That old barn was the place for horses to unharness and rest. Then they would hitch back up, come through here to Democrat Creek and then over those hills to Silver City and Ruby City in 1860."

That was before his family's day, of course, but he and Inez know every trail and line shack, even names and stories behind rock formations and caves.

"When you get up further, that's where

they raised apples and prunes and pears; other things that went to the miners in Silver City. Those fruits brought a premium because they were close by — fresher. They got a dollar an apple just to deliver them to Silver City."

By the 1990s, the Jacas were looking for premiums on the cattle that grazed the mountainside. They had always raised and fed natural animals without extra compensation. Finally, in that decade, they found in their cattle the premiums once associated with the land's fruit orchards.

The Niman Ranch group first wanted to

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buy the feedlot, but the Jaca family struck a deal instead. Niman would contract for naturally raised calves from Jaca and nearby Oregon ranchers for Jaca to own and grow to near 900 pounds (lb.). Then they would sell to a Niman Ranch finisher at Caldwell, Idaho. At last, there were premiums for raising cattle the way they liked to do it.

"I know it makes a few dollars more to implant cattle," Elias says. "They might gain 4 pounds a day. If you don't implant, they might gain 3½. But I've never liked implanting my cattle; so now I get that money back through premiums for keeping them natural."

Herd health is the key to actually getting that money, and it starts with rigorous disease prevention, low-stress handling and quality nutrition.

"You really need a good vaccination and prevention program if you want in on natural production. If you have cattle that aren't vaccinated twice and in a prevention program before hitting the feedlot, you'll have a wreck and lose maybe 10% out of the program. You just can't afford to have to pull a sick calf out in the feeding stage," Martin says.

He's in charge of all the farming operations, and the feedlot is where the harvest of high-quality feed and grain helps

set up high-quality and natural beef for consumers.

"We've fed cattle from the same ranches for 10 years, and we know which ones live or die," Martin says. "The guys who don't have good calves don't come into our program anymore. If we lose four or five of them, we won't go back the next year. We buy at high prices and we sell at high prices, and we want every one of them to live."

Up, up, up and down

The expectations and commitment follow through to the feedyard. Calving starts in late November, followed by a first round of vaccinations, AngusSource® tags and freeze-branding at the lower ranch. Come early April, the family begins pushing the cattle up the mountain.

Starting at the 2,500-foot-high Snake River Ranch, near feedlot and farm, they eventually trail the cattle to 6,800 feet in the "high pastures" of the Owyhees. In all, the sojourn spans about 40 miles, with pastures totaling 90,000 acres of public and private land. The cattle are moved every seven to 10 days by horseback, constantly pushed to better grazing.

"Elias is always worried about those cows hanging down near the fenceline. Our cows never stand in a corner somewhere. He's on

them all the time so they are moving on to that good feed, because just two days without the really good grass can make a real difference on how that carcass is going to perform," Inez says.

By late July they've nearly reached the peaks, and they start on a return descent.

"We try to keep these cows on green grass all the time. It's an intense summer, moving all the time, but these cows have alarm clocks in their system. They know what time of the year they are supposed to be where. They [have] to have good grass all the time to have calves that grade Choice," Elias says.

In November, it's time to drive the cattle back down to the valley before the snow gets to be too much. That's where a premium lifestyle pays off for the family.

Starting young

"I've been here my whole life — I started riding these pastures with my dad when I was 10," Inez recalls. "Now, this was the first year the little girls got to come along on the cattle drive."

Martin and Susan's oldest daughters, Josune, 7, and Matea, 5, were amateur horsewomen by 2009, riding the ranges along with mom, dad, grandma and grandpa.

"We had to get those cows up the mountain, and it was so steep. I just held onto my saddle so tight," Matea chimes in from Grandma Inez's lap, her eyes as big as saucers. "But we got 'em!" She grins from ear to ear and goes on about her horse.

It's hard to miss the excitement the kids have for their animals and the ranch — sparks from the fire in their parents and grandparents. Even Maiaalen, 4, and little Elias, make themselves at home around the cattle, playing in feedbunks and mooing at passing cows, though it will be a few more years before it's their turn to ride. By then, they'll have a full understanding of what it means to be a part of the Jaca family ranch.

Once the herd returns to the river ranch, they soon reach a full understanding, too. Weaning is inevitable.

"We wean a heavier calf because they are a little older and fed well in the pastures," Elias says. That's another key; previous attempts to creep-feed and wean earlier resulted in concentrated feeding areas and more health challenges.

Now, they avoid such concentration, even when the cattle arrive in the feedlot for stocking at 150 head in pens that could handle 400 at other yards. The Niman program brings in similar calves from just a few ranches, and that reduces illness from commingling.



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“There’s more bunk space — they’re not fighting, they are not bumping into each other or competing for bunk space. And we can identify problems quicker when something arises. That, again, all results in better quality cattle,” Inez says.

Culture clash

Some challenges to better beef come from people who don’t grasp those basics of production.

The Jacas and their neighbors who make up the Chipmunk Grazing Association own 31 sections of land amid the thousands of acres of public land.

“People fail to realize that right where they cross the river here at the gateway to the Owyhees, it’s mostly private land,” Inez says. “People from the valley come up through here and steal stuff from our property, leave gates open, mud bog all over our grazing land. A neighbor even found an arrow in one of his cows!”

In recent years, they lost the use of nearly 200 acres of grazing land taken to establish a public recreational track for dirtbikes and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs). They struggle to keep trail riders on the public trails and off theirs.

“It’s hard to explain, but when I see all those trails and the land torn to shreds, it gets me right in my heart,” Inez says. “This land is like family to me. My great-uncle would tell us, ‘You take care of this land and it’ll take care of you.’ That was just entrenched in our minds. My father was born on the ranch, and it would hurt him to come out to visit in recent years and see some of the land.

“I know it’s public property, so they can do with it what they want, but it just makes me sad. To think, people are after cattlemen for every little carbon footprint a cow makes, but no one balks at these four-wheelers running everywhere,” she laments.

During fall hunting season, the Jacas concentrate grazing areas to keep the cattle together and away from prime hunting grounds to minimize disruptions. A group of area ranchers filed lawsuits several years ago for the right to block private roads, which they finally won. Still, it’s not uncommon to have a stranded traveler on their doorstep at midnight, looking for help to pull a vehicle out of a mountain ditch or mud hole.



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They help, but their concern goes back to one thing: “We have to be really cautious about stressing the animals. People up there all over our land are constantly moving the cows around, and that stresses them. All of those things have an effect on that carcass,” Elias points out.

The visitors don’t understand.

“In the end, our goal is to put meat on the world’s table that is tasty and safe,” Inez says. “And consumers want it, although some of

the people who come through here have no clue what it takes to raise an animal. But, there are a lot of ranchers who are disconnected from their consumers, too.”

Involved and rooted

The family has made a point to serve in state, national and world industry groups to bridge those educational gaps. Inez and Elias have each led state

organizations, served on conservation district boards, state beef boards and councils and National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) committees. Inez served on the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) board and executive committee, and Elias and Inez went to the World Meat Congress when it was in the U.S. Their daughter, Luisa, has also served on the USMEF, and as NCBA treasurer for three years. Martin is a past president of the Owyhee Cattlemen’s Association and continues to lead through service on committees, giving back by taking part in the larger industry.

“Dealing with people in the industry that are outside of your production segment is so

important. It makes you more aware of all the issues that affect your animals. You’re not just in this little cocoon producing your calves, worrying about what happens at your place. There’s a lot more out there to worry about than just yourself,” Inez says.

Of course, Inez and Elias aren’t worried about themselves — they’re worried about their cattle, about their land, about their consumers and about how all those will affect the next generations of Jacas.

“I’m sure there will be huge changes in the future of the beef

industry, just like the changes we’ve seen in the past 44 years,” Inez says. “I’ve told Elias, I don’t know what our grandkids are going to see here when they’re grown. I know it won’t be the same, but I hope we’ve preserved the important things for them — the rugged individualism of living here. I hope they still know how to be self-sufficient, that they’ll be independent thinkers and never be spoon-fed.

“You can see the changes in the land itself. You can imagine in the 1800s when they were mining in Silver City, the traders used to say that they couldn’t find a piece of wood to put in the wheels to lock the wagons,” she recounts. “Then about 20 years ago, we had to log the area to reduce fire hazards and then re-seed grass.

“But some of these old trees, they tell stories. The old shepherders used to write things on these old aspens — where they’d been, where good water was, who they were and what time of year they were in the area.” Inez points out some etchings on the trees.

The kids start watching the trees, too, as they walk past, looking for the ones their father, Martin, has carved each of their names in. They finally spot them — four trees in a row just off the trail. Roughly etched on the bark, vertical inscriptions lay claim to Josune Jaca, Matea Jaca, Maialen Jaca and Elias Jaca. The trees will hold lasting significance to the kids. All their lives, they’ll come back to visit that turn in the trail where “their” trees can be found.

By then they’ll know it takes more than a label or carving to lay claim to the land. The miners of Silver City tried to call it theirs, but those ties faded as quickly as the mineral seams. Ranchers like the Jaca family, on the other hand, will remain tied to it long after the aspen tree etchings fade.

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