



The Bricker family owns and is deeply involved in the Bear Creek operation. Pictured are, top row, from right, Bill and Doris Bricker and their son-in-law Mark Vujovich (he is married to their daughter Sue, not pictured). In front, from right, are brothers Patrick, Tom and Jeff Bricker.

Big-Business Fundamentals Have Guided This Rapid Success Story



by Nancy Ann Sayre

BEAR CREEK ANGUS RANCH

The setting is picture perfect. The mountain views are some of the finest Montana has to offer. The operation is first class to the last detail. This idyllic spot near Cameron could be a vacationer's dream—a safe haven far from Wall Street worries and money's concerns.

But Bear Creek Angus Ranch is no such retreat. Cattle are the core, the purpose. And owner William (Bill) Bricker speaks as a businessman. An experienced businessman.

"At Bear Creek we are, of course, in business to make money. But how do you make money?"

To Bricker, the answers boil down to simple rules: "First of all, you have to have a quality product. Somebody who buys from us has to be able to turn that investment around and make money. That's the only way we'll be able to stay in business . . . we have to offer a product that will give a return on investment. Second, customers must know we stand behind our product. In the long run, that earns a loyal clientele . . . And last, we must have a unique product. Many people supply a good product—good cattle that offer a return—but this registered business is a merchandising business."

Merchandising . . . return on investment . . . unique product . . . customer satisfaction. The terms come easily to Bricker. No surprise. He is chairman of the multi-billion-dollar Diamond Shamrock Corp. His steady success in the world of big business made Bear Creek possible. And the operation's relatively simple guidelines stem from those at Diamond Shamrock. The operation's quick strides to the limelight of the Angus industry reflect Bricker's background and approach.

The family-owned ranch, however, is an independent enterprise and represents Bricker's first venture in the livestock world

on his own. His ties have been close to agriculture and animal science since he graduated and received his master's degree from Michigan State University (MSU), then worked in agricultural sales and marketing before moving into management levels of Diamond Shamrock.

Bill, his wife Doris and their family appreciated the Cameron area as a vacation spot before buying the 8,500-acre ranch in 1977. Although Bear Creek started strictly as a commercial operation, the family soon became involved with the ranch and the resulting shift to purebred Angus was a natural move.

"We had a predisposition to Angus after looking at growing conditions here," says Bill (weather conditions are extremely severe in this mountain country). "And it was also clear that to make this thing pay, we had to have greater concentration than the traditional animal-per-unit point of view and we had to realize more sales value out of each animal. It didn't take much of a push to put us in the registered business . . . and Jeff (his son) had indicated an interest."

Jeff, also an MSU graduate, is now purebred manager. Limited experience with dairy operations had him familiar with registered cattle, but Bear Creek's advances over the past three years have demanded rapid initiation into the Angus world. Jeff's responsibilities span A.I. work, breeding and marketing decisions, and day-to-day management of the 200-head registered herd.

His brother Patrick, a business student at the University of Texas, assists during the summers and holidays. Their brother Tom helps with management decisions and brother-in-law Mark Vujovich has also been involved in Bear Creek progress.

In Three Short Years

From a 400-head commercial unit, Bear Creek has been transformed to an elite purebred firm which caters to a national purebred market as well as strong local commercial bull trade. Black commercial cows still make up the difference in a carrying capacity which increases with better management. The commercial herd has been upgraded genetically and serves a dual role as recipient herd for Bear Creek's expanding embryo transfer program.

Current plans aim for a 350-head purebred unit complimented by a commercial recipient herd of 100 females. And nothing has been spared in developing the best. Facilities are functional but extensive, including new show and sale barns and an elaborate transfer center (complete with indoor flushing area, heated lab and embryo freezing equipment; Bear Creek does a limited amount of custom work in addition to their own program).

The first registered pairs were purchased in 1980; foundation females came from the MSU herd and the R&J Ranch in Texas (Bill and Doris live in Dallas). Since that time a great deal of effort and expense has been

concentrated on Angus genetics—the industry's most popular genetics. Bear Creek's present roster boasts of the well-known High Voltage and several nationally recognized females. "Instant marketability" was the bottom line in Jeff's mind and the operation's recent production sale average of \$4,417 is proof they attained the goal of their search.

Diamond Shamrock philosophies surface again. In anything he does, Bill Bricker believes firmly in doing it big and doing it well. Bear Creek operations are a case in point. Big from the start, they have nurtured a first-class, competitive image, dubbing themselves "the new breed of breeder." At the same time, though, they paid close attention to all marketing angles.

"After all," says Bill, "the people I compete with to buy top sale animals, I must also compete with in the marketplace."

To stay aware of the market's pulse, Brickers leaned heavily on the advice of area breeders and the genetic strength of their herds. (Groups of pairs were selected from the heart of Green Valley Angus Ranch and



Jeff Bricker is purebred manager of the operation. Finding the industry's top genetics has been his major concern for the past few years, but now concentration is on combining those genes and merchandising the product.

On Center Stage

The Bear Creek name was first heard across the country when Brickers bought Cow Power VIII's top seller, Sayre Miss America. Since then, Brickers have chosen their elite donor females from Schearbrook Angus, Windy Acres Angus, R&J and others. Indeed, they have invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to put themselves on the industry's center stage.

Embryo transplanting advances justify the large investments and, in Jeff's mind, are the logical tool to keep Bear Creek in the forefront. The very best genetics Brickers can find and purchase are intensified within the herd. After three short years, they feel comfortable with their herd base and look forward to building upon it.

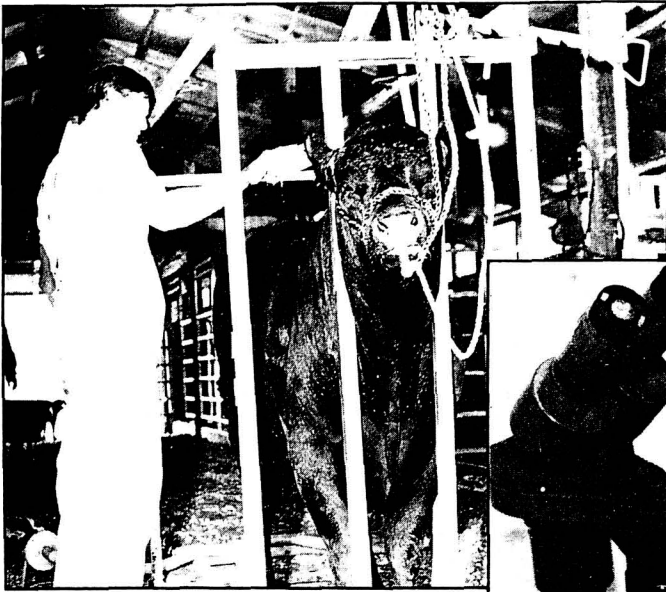
Embryo transplanting has been an effective means of increasing the value of Bear Creek's product while the basics are kept in mind. Quality and return of investment are the key fundamentals and the favorable

Arntzen Angus Ranch; neighbor Bob Rice helped Brickers set their sights.) The Bear Creek operation gained years of management experience and cattle know-how when they hired Jeff Dorsey as general manager. Preceded by a reputation as the best in commercial cattle and grassland management, Dorsey came from the nearby 3,500-head Flying D Ranch. He heads up a work force of three men responsible for commercial cattle, irrigation and crops.



Bear Creek owner Bill Bricker discusses details with general manager Jeff Dorsey. Bricker is chairman of Diamond Shamrock Corp. and although his time at the ranch is limited, his business expertise accounts for much success here. Dorsey brought vast experience in commercial cattle management to the young Montana operation. The biggest difference with an elite purebred herd, he says, is that everything is magnified, making proper management vital.

BEAR CREEK ANGUS RANCH



Bear Creek has had the resources to establish a first-class image, from the cattle to the ranch headquarters. Extensive new facilities include show and sale barns and an elaborate embryo transfer center.

response to Bear Creek's product by local commercial men is encouraging. The first bull sale (spring of 1983) saw 90 percent of the 55 bulls head for herds within 90 miles of the ranch. To Jeff, reception of the cattle was the ultimate compliment to Bear Creek's program.

Like any business venture, cattle breeding is a risk. Brickers, however, have had the resources and facilities to eliminate much of that risk. The rest they put in the hands of experts. Dr. Gerry Kitto does the embryo transfer work for Bear Creek and many top Montana herds. Bulls are put on feed test with folks who know that end of the business well; last year bulls were fed at the Midland facilities and this year bulls are on feed at the Treasure Test at Great Falls. The reasoning is two-fold: First for the professional management and second for the increased interest and buyer traffic.

Many of Bear Creek's approaches, guidelines and fresh successes must be attributed

to Bill Bricker's firm grasp on the business world, but he also sees the family's newness in the beef cattle industry as a certain plus. He is a maverick by nature, and is unafraid to put innovative ideas to the test at Bear Creek. Although corporate demands keep Bill quite removed from daily life at the

ranch, his interest in the cattle industry is sincere and stretches far beyond those acres.

Ideas range from more efficient marketing strategies such as an area packing plant or joint sale facilities, to the future production goals of commercial breeders, to international agricultural trade development (already in motion in three countries).

The "new breed of breeder" slogan signifies more than just a catchy byline to Bear Creek's dynamic head. He discusses its implications on two separate levels.

"I believe what we're doing from a management point of view will be required of my associate purebred seed stock producers—and we'll all have to get better at it."

On a broader scale, Bricker sees Bear Creek trying to blaze new, but vital, trails for cattlemen in general. He is critical of traditional "rugged individualist" attitudes and idealistic views.

"We need to turn our attention," he comments, "from competing strictly among ourselves to looking at our external competition and becoming more involved in what's going on." He is concerned with check-off programs, dietary information scares and other industry issues. The cattle business, as he compares it to others, is one of misguided economics where cattlemen are reactive rather than proactive, and hesitant to spend money in order to make money.

Through Bear Creek, then, Brickers are trying to make a statement. They are determined to buck a few tradition-set ways of cattlemen and apply some big-business fundamentals to a young Angus operation.

They have invested heavily in the cattle business and in the future. And it seems to be working. **AJ**

Brothers Jeff, Tom and Patrick Bricker check AHIR records on a few members of the Bear Creek purebred unit. Current breeding programs center around featured herd sire High Voltage and on the basis of its recent sale, the future looks bright for this young operation.

