

McClung Ranch

*An Angus Legacy
Of the Southwest*
by Janet Mayer



During the early part of the 20th century in Texas and throughout much of the Southwest the Angus breed had a reputation — a bad reputation.

Based on mismanagement of early herds brought into the state from the north, the reputation was unjust. It is common knowledge that the Angus breed did not always enjoy the popularity in the states that it does today. In fact, there were so few Angus breeders in Texas during that period, there was no need for a Texas Aberdeen Angus Association until 1936.

Sometime in the late 1930s, Texas cattle breeder Luther McClung of Saginaw decided to buy some Angus cattle and see for himself what the breed would do. His decision to try another breed of cattle stemmed from udder and eye problems he had been having with the Herefords he had been breeding. Sometime about 1940, at his farm just north of Fort Worth, McClung put his 4M brand on the first Angus cattle he had bred. The 4M brand, representing the four members of his family - himself, his wife Evelyn, and daughters, Lucian and Barbara — was as new as the breed he was branding. He had high hopes for the future of both.

As time passed, McClung found the



Lucian and Muri Richardson carry on the McClung ranching tradition in Texas.

Angus breed to be a thrifty, hardy breed that gave no calving problems, was fertile, and was versatile when crossed with most other breeds. Within his herd he initiated a progressive breeding program that over the years resulted in a high producing herd that supplied seedstock to breeders in the Southwest and to many of the top herds throughout the country.

Until his death at the age of 76 in 1986, McClung endeavored to promote the Angus breed in his homestate and throughout the Southwest. He served two terms on the Board of Directors of the American Aberdeen Angus Association, serving on major committees, and was president of the Texas Aberdeen Angus Association in 1950.

McClung's daughter, Lucian McClung Richardson, says her father was highly respected in both the cattle and oil industries. "My father was a self-made man," Lucian recalls. "His mother was widowed when he was four years old and she supported her family by operating a boardinghouse in Dallas. My father married when he was quite young, only

17, and started working for a newspaper in Dallas. After moving around a bit, he became the circulation manager for the *Fort Worth Press* and later got into construction and then into the oil business. He was one of the original stockholders of the Coastal Gas Producing Company. This is when he had the opportunity to start buying ranch land and got into cattle breeding. I don't know the year he bought his first cattle, but I was very young at the time. He bought Herefords and began breeding them at a ranch near Chico."

In 1945, McClung added another ranch to his operation by buying about **5,200** acres near Kiowa, Okla. In the early 1950s, however, the encroachment of Fort Worth forced McClung into selling the original farm at Saginaw. Today, Interstate 35 goes through the farm acreage with Fossil Creek Golf Course occupying part of the site. The old native stone barn in which the McClung cattle auctions were held was kept intact for use as an information center by the golf course.

The 4M Angus herd was completely dispersed in 1953. About a year later, McClung bought a 3,000-acre ranch at Rising Star, Texas, about 100 miles south of the former ranch near Fort Worth. New cattle were brought in, and the operation was in business once again. The operation in Texas was managed for many years by William Wells, husband of Barbara, Luther's second daughter.

On July 26, 1973, in a *Texas Livestock Weekly* article about the Rising Star Ranch, McClung described some of the ranch land as old sand fields that had been worn out by conventional row-cropping since the 1870s. The article said he used progressive methods to turn about half the 3,969 acres of sandy land into improved dryland pastures of coastal bermuda, weeping lovegrass, ermelo lovegrass and Kleingrass. McClung was recognized as one of the first ranchers to plant lovegrass in the area, having done so about 15 years prior to the article's publication. His intentions were to make the place carry 400 cows, year-round.

According to the article, he believed that better grass produced better cattle, and along those same lines, he believed that he could take care of most of his herd's winter protein needs by putting a lot of fertilizer on the coastal bermuda haycrop in the summer. He was quoted as saying, "Fertilizer is a considerably cheaper protein source than cottonseed cake."

About 1976, McClung retired from the oil business and moved to the Rising Star Ranch to work full-time with his cattle herd. Ten years later, at the time of his death, the two ranches were running a total of about 900 head. After his death, the ranch properties were incorporated into a trust for Lucian and her sister, Barbara, with Murl Richardson, Lucian's husband, acting as administrator and trustee.

Since McClung's death, Murl and Lucian live about half of the time at the Rising Star Ranch and the other half in



Fort Worth, where Murl operates his own consulting company, Richardson Company. With the help of ranch managers who live at each location, he oversees the operation of both ranches. R.W. Sartor is manager of the 6,200-acre Oklahoma Ranch, where about 220 straight-bred Angus commercial cows are kept. Phil Donaldson is manager of the 3,000-acre Texas Ranch. He and his wife, Elizabeth, take care of the 430-head registered end of the operation.

Murl's job of taking over the McClung operation was helped by the fact he had always worked at the ranches with his father-in-law after his marriage to Lucian in 1951. "We worked well together," Murl says. "I had worked all of my life in the production of equipment for oil wells, first in my own company, then at Oil States Rubber Company and later for LTV as vice president and general manager of production. Three years ago I retired and started my own company. Luther and I had common interest of oil and cattle, so we were closer than most in-laws."

"Luther was a very aggressive manager-type person, and while he was alive, he called the shots, but he filled me in on everything about the cattle. He also said he wasn't going to tell me how to run the ranch after he was gone, because he

Murl Richardson and Phil Donaldson, Rising Star Ranch manager, believe the Angus cow's efficiency and performance have paid off for their Texas purebred and commercial operation.

knew I would run it my own way."

Like McClung, Murl has also taken a leadership role in the Texas Angus Association. He served as president in 1992.

Murl has changed a few management tactics and continually tries to upgrade the herd. Since he firmly believes in using Expected Progeny Differences (EPDs) and participating in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR), and McClung did not, these are the two areas where Murl has made the most changes. All breeding information on the herd is computerized, giving easy access to all cattle records.

"In years past, without EPD's it is hard to comprehend how ranchers were as successful as they were in their breeding programs," Murl says. "Since all of our registered cows are bred by artificial insemination, we pay particular attention to EPDs and the National Sire Evaluation, which to us is a major tool in determining what bloodlines to use. We study the cow for her structural



soundness and performance and from there, we choose a sire based on EPDs to blend with the attributes of the cow.

"Hopefully, she will give us a superior calf. We do believe in EPDs and rely about 50 percent on them and 50 percent on what the animal looks like. I feel you can have the best EPDs in the world, but if that bull or cow just doesn't look right to you it's not going to be successful. All of our commercial cows are bred by proven Angus bulls."

The breeding of heifers is another area where Murl takes particular care. All heifers, both registered and commercial, are bred AI to low birthweight bulls such as Traveler or Bando 155. Nutritional levels are kept high for the first calf heifers, watching the cattle carefully to make sure they don't get too fat. They are bred to start calving in January, with the cows beginning in February. Since the cattle are heat synchronized in groups, calving is fast and usually done by April. After calving is finished, the heifers and young cows are kept together, and older cows, whose body condition is more difficult to maintain, are also separated from the main herd.

The amount of protein, which is 41 percent cubes, and coastal Bermudagrass hay, is doubled until there is enough grass growth to support the herd. During the grass season the cattle are rotated rapidly, still keeping the groups separated.

In the past, the commercial calves were sold at weaning time, but over the last few years Murl says they have been keeping the calves longer and feeding them wheat. By doing this the calves have a minimum weight gain of two pounds a day. The calves are then sold to a feedlot.

"We feel this is pretty good, considering the price per pound versus the cost of the wheat," explains Murl. "We have also started to put heifers on wheat, later breeding them and selling them as bred heifers."

The 4M herd is and will always be 100 percent Angus. The reasoning behind the



commercial herd being full-blood is that both Luther and Murl felt that it gives them a marketing edge when they sell their cattle to other commercial breeders, going back to the theory that the basic Angus breed will improve the characteristics of any breeder's commercial herd.

"People are always ready to buy our commercial Angus cattle," Murl says. "We have breeders waiting to buy our commercial cattle every year, which means our animals have a tremendous drawing in the industry. I feel there is a gap between the way purebred and commercial breeders operate, but there isn't that much difference between the types of cattle. However, at this point in time, the commercial herd is supporting the purebred herd."

Last year a lot of McClung commercial heifers were bought by a breeder in New Mexico who intended to breed them to a Wagyu bull. "This lady went over all of our commercial heifers, one by one, and in the end, she paid a premium price for the group she bought. But we always felt that if we did all we could to breed and raise the best quality possible, then we should get a premium price," Murl says. "I am real eager to go over to see her first calves which will be hitting the ground soon."

Back in the late 1940s and early 1950s the operation held an annual production auction at the ranch to market their cattle, but Murl doesn't see returning to that type of marketing in the foreseeable future. Instead, he favors the private treaty method of selling 4M cattle. The top bulls are sold to registered breeders

McClung Ranch females are selected for performance and structural soundness. Sires are selected based on EPDs to blend with the attributes of the cow.

with the remainder of the bulls being sold to commercial breeders. Occasionally some cattle will be sold through a consignment sale.

"I think a cow is like a machine," Murl says, summing up the subject of marketing. "You put money in one end, and you sell what comes out the other end. It takes less money to support an Angus cow, and you get peak performance and a premium product in return. You can't beat that combination."

Lucian says Murl's job of caring for the ranches is a labor of love, and she is understandably proud of the job he has done.

"My father was successful in just about every venture he undertook," Lucian says. "We are just trying the best we know to carry on what he started and do what he intended. He always told Murl what he wanted done after his death, and the main thing was, he didn't want the ranch to be sold. He wanted it to carry down through his grandkids."

More than 50 years after Luther McClung put 4M on the first Angus calf, the brand is still being used on Angus cattle bred at McClung ranches. What does the future hold for the operation? Standing in the wings are three Richardson children, Murl Bay Jr., Barbie Dee Koker, Amy Cone, and a total of six grandchildren. Time will tell.

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