

At Godley Angus Ranch

Function is Fundamental

Story & photos by **Troy Smith**



► Godley cattle forage on the range during both summer and winter.

Gary and Cheryl Godley are an eclectic pair. While both were ranch-raised, their multiple interests and vocations might not be considered typical of Wyoming's ranching culture. The couple's log home on the north fork of the Powder River is a long way from Maryland and Johns Hopkins University, where Gary earned a master's degree in piano performance. That home includes a special room dominated by Gary's 9-foot Steinway grand piano. Other atypical activities include Gary's interest in Wyoming's rich deposits of dinosaur fossils and volunteer work with the Paleon Museum in Glenrock.

Cheryl once taught college-level statistics, and now is a licensed clinical and counseling psychologist with a private practice in Casper. But at Saturday-night dances she sings, Nashville-style, accompanied by Gary and fellow members of "Cowtown," a local country band.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the Godleys maintain a fairly traditional cow-calf operation. Gary takes pride in managing his registered Angus in much the same way as neighboring commercial ranchers. To produce seedstock suited to this environment, he contends, the Godley herd must survive and thrive in the real world, without special treatment. And Wyoming's real-world environment can be inhospitable.

Godley Angus Ranch is located just north of Kaycee. With a population of 250, Kaycee is the largest among a cluster of tiny ranching communities located midway between Casper and Buffalo. It's where the Great Plains meets the extent of its westward reach between the Bighorn Mountains to the northwest and the Laramie range to the southeast.

From gently rolling to rough and rugged, the hills consist of

shallow soils ranging from sandy loam to gumbo. With only 9-12 inches (in.) of precipitation annually, limited opportunity for irrigation, and a short growing season, farming is a risky proposition. On the range, both short and tall grasses compete with sagebrush for minimal moisture, with buffalo grass, blue grama and big bluestem being dominant species. Most locals say they figure it takes 30 acres, on average, to run a mature cow year-round.

"But when it's dry, like this year, you have to adjust," Gary offers. "This really is a land of extremes, from hot summer days to 20 below zero in winter. It can get really cold, but right in this area, we usually don't get a lot of snow and wind. So I consider it a pretty good winter country."

The right stuff

The country is harsh enough to dictate its own terms. Gary says he believes survival depends on brood cows with the right stuff — cows that are functional and easy-fleshing. Based on the experience Gary and his parents (Hap and Shirley Godley) gained in the stocker business and with their commercial cow herd, they chose Angus for their seedstock enterprise.

Originally, Hap ran Hereford cows in southeastern Colorado. After Gary joined the business, they moved to a yearling operation located near Sheridan, Wyo. They purchased 400- to 450-pound (lb.) calves of nearly every kind and color, and marketed yearlings weighing over 800 lb. When calf prices reached a dollar, the Godleys decided they ought to be in the cow business. After a few years, they relocated to Kaycee and a

►Our environment requires cattle to have a little fat under the hide," Gary Godley says. "A good, solid dam that has a live, healthy calf and does it for 10 or 12 years is profitable for ranchers out here."



ranch better suited to a cow-calf operation.

With several breeds represented, Gary admits their first commercial cows made a rainbow herd. They used Angus and Charolais bulls and sought more consistency. Deciding to go into the Angus business, the Godleys wanted to do it right, but really couldn't afford to jump right in.

"We didn't know pedigrees very well. That was a blessing, in a way, because I didn't have the prejudices against some bloodlines that I now have. Since then, we've done a lot of homework," says Gary with a grin. "My dad and I went looking at dispersion and production sales offering the kind of cattle we needed. We looked for affordable Pathfinder cows — functional cows that were good mothers. We figured that if we bred them with the goal of producing good females, we'd produce good bulls, too.

"We looked to programs that typified what we were looking for in a female and had a fundamental philosophy that they adhered to. There are many good programs out there, with tremendous herds, but Arntzen Angus Ranch, Alberda Angus and Baird Angus offered what we wanted, and were from an environment similar to ours. Now, after 10 years of maternal work, I feel we're raising better females than we can afford to buy."

What works

With his dad as chief consultant, Gary is now the primary decision-maker, handling day-to-day management and genetic planning. In the registered business for only a decade, he doesn't claim to be at the top of the game, but Gary has a feel for what works for most ranchers in an often unforgiving environment. At least, he has made conclusions about what is least likely to work.

In general, animals with a frame score of 7 are too big and don't make optimum range cows. Females with moderate frame, and a mature weight of 1,100-1,150 lb. are more to the liking of Gary and his customers.

"I look at a cow from her feet up. She's got to have good feet and legs to travel in big country. She's got to be structurally correct or she won't last. She has to have a good level udder, but I don't want her to milk too heavily. We just don't have an abundance of feed. She has to raise a calf and breed back without much supplement, so she needs to



► Wyoming breeder Gary Godley says he believes good females are the foundation of a solid breeding program.

be easy-fleshing. And I'm really calving-ease oriented," Gary explains.

He says he believes most area buyers still look to Angus for ease of calving, and not just when buying bulls to use on heifers. Gary caters to buyers who want trouble-free calving and optimum, rather than maximum, growth. A majority of Godley customers plan to keep their own heifers as replacements. For some buyers, use of expected progeny difference (EPD) information weighs heavily in the selection process. Some buyers use the numbers less, however. Gary offers advice to both, encouraging use of all available tools.

"EPDs and ratios are good tools, but there aren't any numbers to predict things like structural correctness, good udders and disposition. I think those traits are equally important, so you have to take a balanced approach to balanced-trait selection," he says.

"I look to EPDs as a measure of industry acceptance. Growth and performance are important; but you can't go at it with the idea that more is always better, not if you sacrifice fertility and traits that allow a cow to function in her environment," Gary adds.

"The same is true for carcass traits. The packer would like us to do all of his work for him by breeding for more muscle and less fat, but there have to be limits," he says, adding that he doesn't select herd sires based on their body composition EPDs gathered by ultrasound.

"Our environment requires cattle to have a little fat under the hide. A good, solid dam that has a

► Godley diversions include digging through Wyoming's abundant fossil deposits.

live, healthy calf and does it for 10 or 12 years is profitable for ranchers out here," he says, "as opposed to an animal with great carcass EPDs, but lacking calving ease, maternal traits, or that simply is not functional."

Herd management

Godley cattle forage on the range during both summer and winter. Depending on range conditions and snow cover, Gary usually starts feeding a little hay (alfalfa-grass mix) in January. The amount of alfalfa is boosted after calving begins.

First-calf heifers are synchronized and bred via artificial insemination (AI) to calve around the first of

February. The cows start two weeks later. As a rule, 90% of all calves are born within a 45-day period, with calving completed after 60 days.

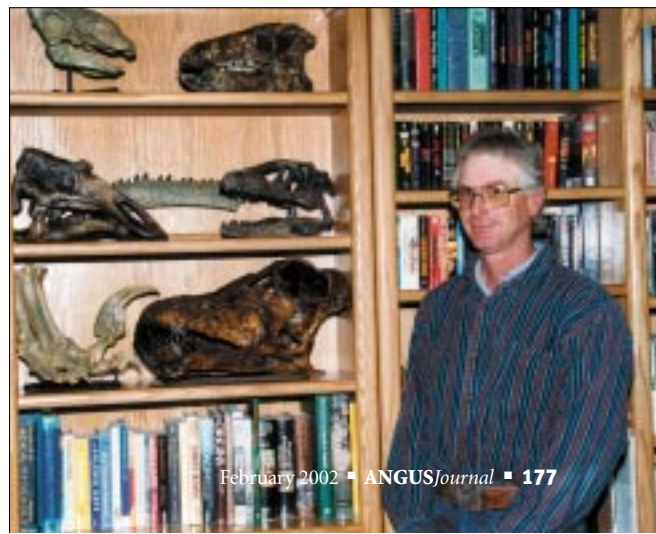
First-calf heifers are kept separate during their second breeding season, and mature cows are sorted into breeding groups. Rather than haying the ranch's flood-irrigated meadows, Gary has divided the acreage into several breeding pastures. By mid-summer, after the bulls' work is done, everything is moved to the hills.

Calves are weaned in October — earlier if the summer has been particularly dry. After the calves have been penned for a few days and the bawling subsides, the cows are moved to fresh grass. Heifer calves go to the meadows to graze regrowth and bull calves are introduced to a growing ration.

"We don't have any silage, and I don't like to feed corn or other grain to developing bulls. I think it's too easy to feed too much, and you can run into foot problems. And too-fat bulls can have fertility problems, too," Gary says.

The bulls run in a 50-acre pasture, rather than a feedlot, receiving prairie hay and a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 178





► Pianist Gary Godley plays classical music, but also delivers country tunes with a local band.

combination of pelleted feeds. Gary says he buys pellets made from oats that didn't make it into Cheerios and mixes them with high-fiber sugar beet pellets for a mix containing about 12% protein. Bulls periodically receive a dose of rumen microbial culture and are weighed once a month to monitor development.

Starting out on 8 lb., the bulls are eating 18 lb./head/day of pellets by the end of the development period. They weigh an average of 1,100 lb. by April, when the Godleys conduct their annual production sale.

"I want bull buyers to be able to turn bulls right into their own breeding pastures. If a rancher has to put his bull on a diet for a month prior to breeding season, then something is wrong with the feeding program. And without an extra 200 lb. of unnecessary fat, a rancher can see

exactly what he is buying," Gary says.

Seventy to 80 heifers are sold annually. Gary would like to calve all of his home-

raised females, at least once, before selling any of them. Time and space constraints won't permit that, but Gary can see how they develop on neighboring spreads, as most Godley heifers sell locally. Demand for the females has been built on the operation's reputation for focusing on maternal traits and calving ease.

"Those are two of the most fundamental

characteristics that separate Angus from other breeds," Gary says. "I'm glad we've had diverse experience in the commercial cattle business and with a variety of breeds, including crossbreeding. It has made me fiercely loyal to Angus."

"I'm glad we've had diverse experience in the commercial cattle business and with a variety of breeds, including crossbreeding. It has made me fiercely loyal to Angus."

— Gary Godley

