

Legacies for a Living

*Wyoming rancher leans on technology.
to build a better tomorrow.*

Story & photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Jordan Willis had no interest in a day job. By the time he was a teen, he'd surely put in enough hours for tenure, but ranch life doesn't work that way. There's only so much land, so many cattle to support a growing family, and the Willis brood was big and getting bigger.

So he did what his grandpa did — his father, too — and found a way to fit.

"This wasn't used for pasture," he says, eyeing the land out back of the house. "It was all in native grass."

A different picture now, this morning's colors are vibrant. Lush alfalfa stretches toward the blue summer skies, and Willis does the same.

"Back when they bought it," he says, "it was just enough to sustain the cattle." Today, Willis Ranch supports the future.

Branching out

The Willises are from Cokeville, Wyo., a valley town of 500 so close to the Utah border that the surrounding community straddles both states. Originally from Laketown, Utah, it was Jordan's grandfather who bought the place in the early 1950s. About that time, a parcel of what the family still calls the B.Q. Ranch came up for sale and allowed growth across the line.

Jordan; his wife, Jennie; and their three children (a fourth on the way), Jackson, Joslyn and Jentry, claim the Cowboy State as their own. His mother, Linda — Roland, his father, passed away in October — and one brother, Jed, still live in Utah, while oldest brother James lives just up the hill. The family partners in cattle and crops.

"It's always different," Willis says, "and there are always challenges, but just about when you get discouraged and don't think anything's going to go right, something positive comes out of it."

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With technology and modernization, the family does their best to ensure it.

“My parents, in the early ’60s, started out with 90 head,” Willis shares. When he and Jennie married 13 years ago, that number was 1,200.

Looking to expand even more, Willis just glanced out his kitchen window.

“We couldn’t find any pasture we liked that was reasonably priced, so we said, ‘Why don’t we just graze them here?’ ”

Rather than leave the land to its native grasses and the admitted weeds, the family plowed up the sagebrush and became pioneers of alfalfa in the region, dispelling long-held beliefs, creating farmland and plenty of green grass.

Nineteen pivots cover nearly 2,000 acres of flood-irrigated soil; 1,800 commercial cows surround it.

The larger herd still summers on state and federal land to the north, but replacement heifers spend their time in that backyard, as do bulls in the fall.

“We graze around 250 head in the summer, and it still grows enough for fall feed,” he says.

With Jordan the cattleman, James the farmer

and Jed assisting both, the brothers grow their own feedstuffs to support the herd for 150 days of the year. The rest they sell to dairies down the road or ship overseas.

“We’ve got one guy who does the range riding, but otherwise it’s just family, so we’re busy,” Willis says.

“We’re always up.”

That’s what it takes to stay in the game and build a legacy for the next in line.

“In our valley, the younger generation [isn’t] taking over,” Willis explains. What could support a family in the ’60s and ’70s can’t today, and many decide to sell or get a day job.

The Willises choose to grow.

“I used to think there’s no big difference between 1,500 and 1,800 head. You think, ‘that’s only 300 more,’ but it’s quite a big jump.”

Adding to the load, the ranch is scattered across town and states.

Data difference

“We run quite a few cattle, but we try to be progressive and efficient with what we have,” Willis says.

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— Jordan Willis



Stacked for generations, the inclusion of carcass traits in the balance leaves the Willis cattle destined to hit targets like the CAB® brand, putting premiums in the pockets of the ranchers who purchase them.

The Angus pairs that graze from the backyard and on up the hill show off that commitment.

“We like our cattle to be long and wide and deep and square and uniform,” he says. “Carcass has always been important. I guess we want it all.”

Yet, achieving is different than wishing, and the more cattle, the harder it is to stay consistent.

Genetic and genomic testing makes the difference.

“Not many commercial cattlemen in my area are utilizing technology and data like the Willises, and their cow herd shows it,” Toby Hoffman says.

As senior territory business manager for Zoetis in three states, he sees plenty of cattle and says that level of expertise at the commercial cow-calf level is impressive.

“They do their homework so they can make better decisions.”

For Willis, that’s meant running GeneMax® (GMX) Advantage™ tests to measure commercial heifer potential on 500 females each year.

Of the 80% of heifers tested, 250 will return to the herd as replacements, and others will be sold private treaty. Along with the steers, the rest are marketed via Superior Livestock Auction, drawing buyers who value information.

“By keeping the heifers that meet their goals, there are still another 250 head that they can market and get a premium out of, as well,” Hoffman says.

“We probably put too much emphasis on data,” given they don’t retain ownership through



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the feedyard, Willis says, before agreeing there’s no such thing.

“They’re matching, refining the balance between genotype and phenotype,” Hoffman says. “The Advantage test is not to say ‘let’s

pick out one trait;’ rather, ‘let’s strive for a balanced herd.’ ”

Stacking the deck

Stacked for generations, the inclusion of carcass traits in that balance leaves cattle destined to hit targets like the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, putting premiums in the pockets of the ranchers who purchase them.

“We’ve outbid registered guys our whole lives to get the bulls we want,” Willis says. In a sale, he’ll bid on growth, uniformity and a frame score of 6 or higher.

Replacement heifers are artificially inseminated (Aled), while the cows are bred to HD50K-tested bulls from Basin Angus Ranch, Columbus, Mont. Use of AngusSource®, electronic identification (eID) and GPS tracking gives Willis insight on which bulls likely sired which calves prior to birth and, at tagging, access to production records and GMX scores of sisters.

There are enough cows on the ranch now.

“We’re kind of where we want to be,” Willis says. “Now we’ve gotta fine-tune and move our herd forward.”

The next generation stands to benefit — his kids, and consumers, too.

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