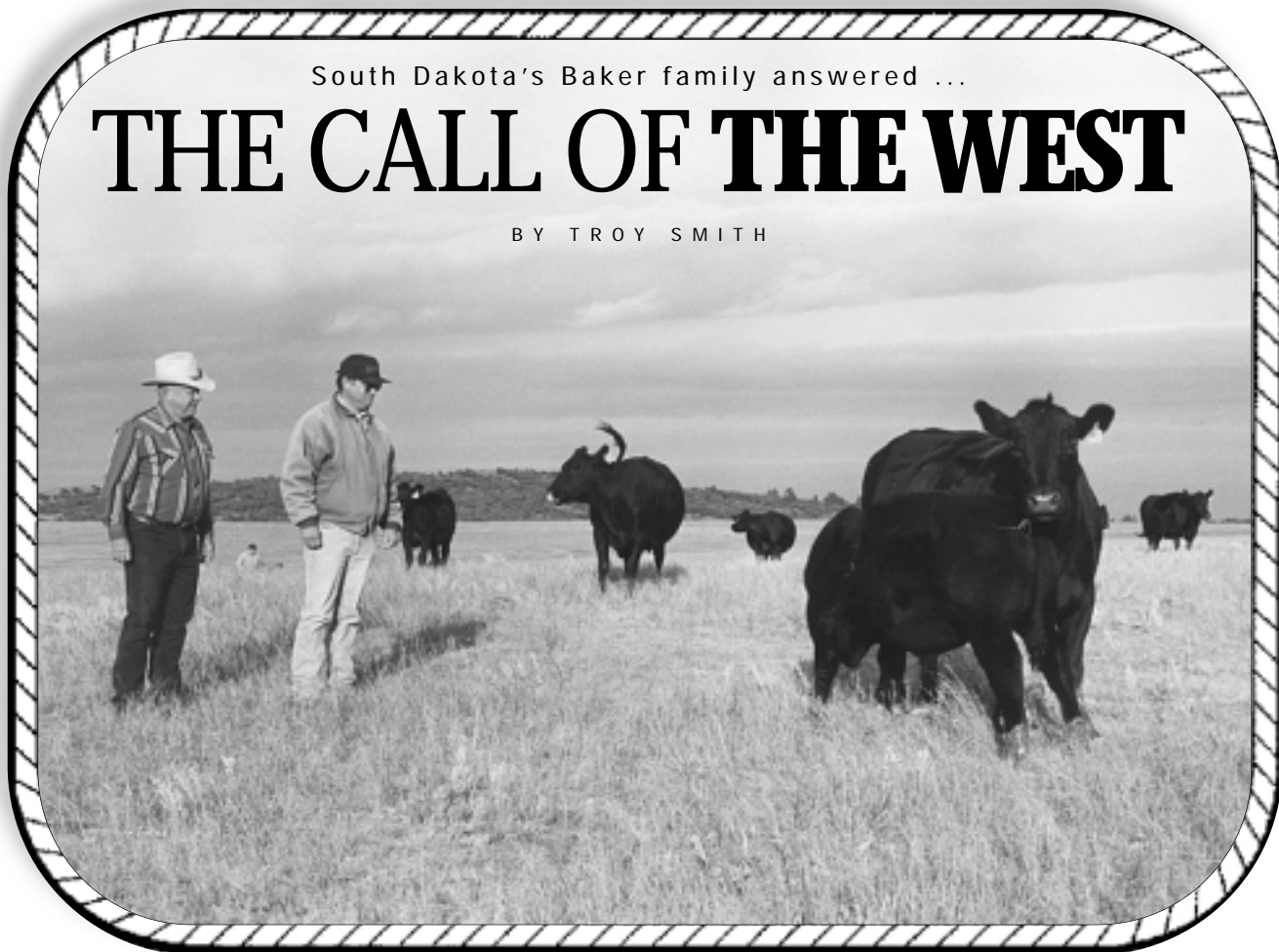


South Dakota's Baker family answered ...

# THE CALL OF THE WEST

BY TROY SMITH



TROY SMITH PHOTOS

Leo and Mike Baker, LeMar Angus Ranch, St. Onge, S.D.

**N**ineteenth-century newspaperman Horace Greeley was an advocate of agricultural development and western migration. The words really weren't his own, but he popularized the phrase, "Go West, young man!" Thousands took his counsel to heart, implemented the westward expansion of this country and made it an agricultural giant.

More than a century after Greeley's death, people still heed his advice. Many are drawn to the West, and a few are summoned to life on the land.

Such was the case with the Baker family. While theirs was not an epic migration, they did leave the farm fields of Minnesota for the grass ranges of western South Dakota. While the Bakers were already rooted in agriculture, relocation allowed pursuit of a treasured ambition — to concentrate on

the breeding of Angus cattle.

Leo and Marilyn Baker, along with their son, Mike, and Mike's wife and daughter, Sandy and Elizabeth, operate LeMar Angus Ranch near St. Onge, S.D. Leo and Marilyn founded their LeMar herd in 1951, long before moving west. But for the past 21 years, they have ranched along the fringe of South Dakota's Black Hills. There they run their registered cows in ranch-country fashion and cater to the seedstock needs of commercial cattlemen.

"I grew up in farming country so I farmed," confides Leo. "But I always wanted to concentrate on raising cattle. Eventually we came west to do that in good grass country."

#### ■ Minnesota start

Originally from near Ada, Minn., Leo grew up in that fertile Red River Valley well-

known for grain production. The area was home for many purebred livestock farms, too, and Leo's father bred registered Guernsey dairy cattle and Percheron horses. He also bought unbroke horses out of Montana to train and sell as work teams. Wounds suffered during World War I left the senior Baker incapacitated in later years. As a result, young Leo had to grow up fast.

"When I was 13, I started working out on area farms for a dollar a day," recalls Leo. "But I did keep going to school. When I got out, World War II was underway and I joined the Navy. I landed in the Philippines shortly after my 18th birthday. After the war I returned to Minnesota and went back to work. I got interested in Angus cattle while working for McGregor Stock Farms. Ken McGregor was quite

a well-known breeder and a big influence on me."

#### ■ Buying Angus

Leo attended North Dakota State University, then Morehead State University, to study business. While in college he met Marilyn, and they married in 1950. Leo worked several years for the Ada branch of the Production Credit Association, but the couple also rented some farm ground and started a registered Angus herd with 13 heifers of McGregor breeding.

"That first year, they all had bull calves," grins Leo. "We had something to sell, but it was a slow start on building a cow herd."

Subsequent calf crops yielded heifers to save as replacements, so herd numbers did grow. Leo preferred cattle with some bred-in growth. He selected for frame and muscle, even when styles

trended toward the smaller, compact cattle. For help in selecting cattle with enduring usefulness, Leo credits South Dakota's Erdmann family. Later, Montana's Gartner-Denowh program had a significant influence on the Baker operation. The result was buyer acceptance of Baker-bred seedstock marketed at private treaty.

The Bakers gained more widespread recognition by producing LeMar Eileenmere Lad 549, better known as "Skyhigh." The 1975 son of Eileenmere Lad 173 combined relative calving ease with respectable performance and maternal traits, earning prominence as a Pathfinder sire. Skyhigh proved to be particularly popular among Western ranchers.

Skyhigh's popularity was not limited to a particular region, however, and the bull's influence was magnified through a son, Pine Drive Big Sky, bred by Ohio's Leroy Billman. That famous bull was Roll of Victory Show Bull of the Year for 1986. To date, data for the *Angus Sire Evaluation Report* have been collected on more than 2,400 Pine Drive Big Sky daughters representing more than 11,000 herds.

Through more than 25 years of farming and breeding cattle in Minnesota, Leo harbored that longing to run cattle on a grass outfit — farther west where there was good demand for the Baker style of cattle. It was his son, Mike, who finally prompted a decision to pursue the dream. Ironically, Mike's early interests gave no clear indication that he wanted to move west and ranch with his parents.

In his youth, Mike's primary interest was music. He played guitar for a local band while in high school and planned to make a career of music. While attending Berkley College of

Music in Boston, Mike played for jazz bands entertaining at the popular night spots. Growing weary of the nightclub scene and city life in general, he returned to the Minnesota farm.

"I'd just had enough of the urban environment, the crowds and the crime, so I headed back

#### ■ To cattle country

Serious searching took the Bakers to the hard-grass hills of western South Dakota and the tiny community of St. Onge. Not far away is an area where scenes for the motion picture *Dances with Wolves* were filmed. Just to the north is the town of Belle Fourche, whose Main

34, the headquarters site offered easy access. Apparently there was some opportunity for social interaction, too, for Mike soon met and married Sandy.

Today the two households share a mailbox and a well-groomed and shaded yard at ranch headquarters. Trees shelter the corrals, outbuildings



Cattle are summered in outlying rough-hill pastures with the rule of thumb calling for 15 acres/pair during the summer.

to where there was some space, some peace and quiet and clean air," explains Mike. "My dad wanted more than ever to concentrate on the cattle business, but it just wasn't very practical in that heavily farmed region. Wet, cold winters were normal; there wasn't enough good grass available for expanding a cow herd; and the market for bulls was pretty limited. So I told Dad that since he always wanted to find a ranch farther west, we ought to get serious about finding one."

Street merchants attract trade from three states. Only 20 miles from the Montana line and 10 miles from Wyoming, Belle Fourche survives by serving the needs of ranchers in this tri-state area. With the beef business so dominant, it's a good place to sell bulls.

Along with a market for their product, the area held all the elements for which the Bakers were searching: ample grass, water, natural protection and potential for raising supplemental feed for winter. Located adjacent to Highway

and bull-development pens. Deeded and leased land totals 7,300 acres and supports a herd of 350 registered cows plus replacements.

Along with a sale barn to house an annual spring bull sale, improvements to the ranch have included fencing for pasture rotation. Reliance on runoff captured in earthen dams has been reduced and better grazing distribution has been enhanced through installation of an underground pipeline to supply stock tanks. Both yield and nutrient value of

native hay have been augmented by establishing a mix of alfalfa and grass. While part of the reason for moving westward was to escape farming, the Bakers understand the value of planting additional forage crops in anticipation of dry years or tough winters. Consequently, some acreage is planted to millet and harvested as hay.

Management logistics follow established ranch-country common sense. Cattle are summered in outlying rough-hill pastures with the rule of thumb calling for 15 acres/pair during the summer. Protected pastures located nearer headquarters are managed to provide grazing during winter. Normally, the cows run on range and cake (high-protein range cubes) until January. Supplemental hay is offered earlier only if weather dictates. Calving starts toward the end of February for first-calf heifers, while cows calve during March and April.

"The mature cows calve out in the winter pastures and pretty much on their own, just like a commercial herd," says Leo. "We do keep the heifers up close, with easy access to a calving barn. We don't expect much difficulty because calving ease has always been an important consideration for us, and it sure is for our customers."

Leo says calving ease involves more than watching birth weight. In fact, they have relaxed their scrutiny of birth weight in favor of overall "calving ease" balanced with growth traits that customers want.

#### ■ Targeting balance

"While some of our customers retain ownership, most of them sell calves in the fall, so early growth is important to them," Leo explains. "But most are running

spring-calving herds and calving out in the open, so they want the calves to come easy. We've tried to select for structure or shape to complement calving ease rather than putting all the emphasis on light birth weights. The package has to promise adequate growth and muscle plus maternal traits, especially milk. Most of our customers save their own heifer replacements, too."

The Bakers offer a full complement of information for customers to use in selection. Along with expected progeny difference (EPD) values, 205- and 365-day weights and ratios are provided. Buyers are using all of it, and Mike says more customers are looking for carcass information.

"We've heard a lot of ranchers say that they are trying to get back to basics. Maybe they've tried several breeds and have crossbred cows. Now they're wanting to add some basic Angus traits, particularly carcass quality. They're wanting to make their cattle grade, so they really want carcass information," Mike adds.

#### ■ Real world

With the help of their hired man, Bob Whitaker, Mike handles the ranch's synchronized artificial insemination (AI) program. Generally, all of the heifers and about half of the cows are bred AI. Leading the lineup of sires in use are PAPA Universe 515, Alberda Traveler 416 and Double Bar Rogue. They top a list of bulls that the Bakers believe to be balanced for the traits important to real-world ranchers.

Certainly, keeping in touch with the "real world" is important to the Bakers. It's a matter of survival that hinges on matching cattle to the environment. Optimum, sustainable production from the

environment hinges on management, and the Bakers believe that means being good stewards of the land. Multiple awards for soil conservation and range management attest to their commitment to stewardship.

#### ■ Market protection

While the Bakers have enjoyed demand for their seedstock, they know real-world economics are pressuring area bull buyers. As fed-cattle and feeder-cattle prices have continued to lag behind expectations, Northern Plains cattlemen have pointed toward Canadian beef imports as a contributing factor. The Bakers agree, and they have actively supported the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Foundation (R-CALF), a grassroots effort to halt

perceived dumping of foreign beef in the United States. Through a petition process, R-CALF has mustered producer support for a suit against Canada and Mexico through the International Trade Commission.

"We see the trucks from Canada go by almost every day," Mike says. "And we believe the numbers show there's more (beef) coming into the U.S. than going out. Through R-CALF, beef producers are trying to do something about it. They're taking a stand. We're standing with them and encouraging others to do the same. This whole area depends heavily on the beef industry. That's why we came here, so we want to help protect it."

