

# Western Perspectives



Foote's bulls are raised on a high-roughage, chopped-hay ration that provides adequate gain.

*An Angus calf purchased in 1951 started a 50-year tradition for Foote Acres Angus.*

STORY & PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT

Looking north from E.G. Foote's home, the waters of the Snake River are deep blue and shimmer beneath the autumn sky. It's an ideal place to raise registered Angus cows, and Foote has spent much of the last 25 years building it into one of the West's finest seedstock operations.

Foote Acres Angus is located near Melba, Idaho, 45 minutes southwest of Boise. Within 500 miles of the ranch are hundreds of good, large-scale commercial cow-calf operations. In other words, there's a good market for good Angus genetics.

"This is really a fairly productive operation," says Foote, who's in his mid-50s. "It's basically all irrigated. We grow all our own feed. We raise alfalfa hay and produce our own silage for feed. We run all registered Angus cows. Our bulls are raised on a high-roughage, chopped-hay ration that gives us an adequate gain."

But don't think these cattle are pampered. Every bull that sells in his annual sale spends a good part of his life on pastures floored with sharp lava rocks. The beating their hooves take

here ensures they've got good feet and legs long before his customers buy them and turn them out in big-range country.

Satisfying commercial producers has long been the goal of the Foote family. Following the lead of his grandpa, who fed a few Angus calves in the 1940s and found the beef to be of excellent quality, the Footes got into the Angus business in 1951. That was when E.G.'s parents, Marion "Muz" and Earl "Buz," purchased their first bull calf, a twin, which they showed that year at the Western Washington Fair.

"My dad worked at Boeing as an engineer," Foote says. "He was in the Minuteman missile program. The cattle were a means of getting away from the everyday hustle and bustle of his job. He truly enjoyed it — especially when we showed cattle — even after he retired.

"My mom was always very involved in the Angus business," he adds. "She helped kids get scholarships through her work on the Western States Angus Auxiliary. She became synonymous with the Auxiliary's

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Ways and Means Committee. For her commitment to the breed, she was inducted into the Angus Heritage Foundation several years ago. That was truly a proud moment for the entire family.”

### Fifty years in the ring

Most importantly, Foote’s parents showed him the value of the people side of the business. Through their direction, he learned appreciation for showing cattle, not just because of its competitive aspects, but also because he could see the world, meet new people, and learn new ways of producing and marketing cattle.

“My interests in showing cattle started with 4-H,” Foote says. “My brother and I, and my mom and dad, were 4-H leaders, and we had some success there. So we

decided to move on to some other shows and see how we could compete there.”

During college, Foote spent his summers on the road showing cattle in Canada. This helped him earn enough money to pay for his education. After he graduated with a degree in optometry, he married Patsy, and they settled in Spanaway, Wash., with their own herd of Angus cows.

It didn’t take long before they realized seedstock production was something they wanted to do on a larger scale. So they expanded their herd. In 1975 they purchased their current operation. They raised five boys. And they expanded their herd again. Since that time, the family has been producing and selling 100-200 bulls and about 50 females a year.

Much of the family’s success

in the seedstock business can be credited to the family’s ability to get cattle in front of people at the various shows and expositions across the West.

Although they don’t show as many cattle as they used to (their boys have grown), the family recently celebrated 50 consecutive years of showing cattle at the Western Washington Fair, one of the largest fairs in North America. They took honors for reserve grand champion bull, premier breeder and premier exhibitor in the Angus show.

“Showing cattle has always been an important aspect for us,” Foote says. “We have had the pleasure of many exciting wins over the years. However, we have always believed that our emphasis for the family has been on the *participating*, not necessarily the *winning*. Raising and showing the cattle as a family has allowed us the opportunity to make a family commitment, which has kept us intact and very close.”

### An eye for cattle

Foote’s showing experiences also have helped him develop a keen eye for easy-fleshing, structurally sound cattle. And his reputation for being a good cowman has resulted in his operation’s being one of the West’s most successful registered Angus operations. Each year more than 400 people attend his annual bull sale. The majority of his customers are commercial cattlemen who demand cattle that will function under extreme range conditions.

“For us, the first thing that we want to ensure is that the cattle are reproductively and structurally sound — it doesn’t matter what their numbers are,” Foote says. “If they’re not any good, we don’t sell them. Second, the cattle have to work in our environment. For us out here in the West, muscling and thickness are key. They have to be easy-doing cattle.”

The Footes also have a commitment to listening and responding to the needs of their customers. “We listen to the problems they have, evaluate what they’d like to see and try to make these adjustments in our breeding program,” Foote says. “We try to find the bulls that will accomplish the goals that we set out to accomplish.”

Having open lines of communication has helped the Footes avoid some of the pitfalls of the showing. In the late 1980s, when the beef industry seemed bent on raising extremely big-framed cattle, the Footes resisted the trend because they felt they would do a disservice to their customers by doing so.

“That’s when we started backing away from showing because we felt it was hard to raise bulls with the extreme frame size that would work for our customers,” Foote says. “We kept breeding moderate-frame, thicker cattle, sometimes to the detriment of our success in the showing.”

### The next 50 years

Foote sees several challenges on the horizon that his operation must address to remain competitive.

First, the Footes will have to continue to anticipate change in the marketplace. “The seedstock business is a tough deal because you’ve got to be three years ahead of everybody else,” he says. “By the time you breed an animal, calve it, grow it and merchandise it, you’ve taken three years. So you have to make sure [of] these judgments on what you believe will happen down the road.

“Our primary goal is to stay current and knowledgeable about the genetics that are out there, so we’re able to offer our customers up-to-date genetics, up-to-date EPDs (expected progeny differences), facts and figures,” Foote continues. “This is an ever-changing industry. You need to stay current.”



E.G. and Patsy Foote attribute much of their success in the seedstock business to the family’s ability to get cattle in front of people at various shows and expositions.

Footo believes the marketplace will continue to demand — at even greater levels than today — high-quality carcass genetics.

“The Angus breed is going in the right direction,” Footo explains. “Development of *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>™</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) and other branded beef ventures that emphasize quality are definitely here to stay and will play an even greater role in the future. CAB has developed a market out there that’s really second to none. It’s something that isn’t going away.

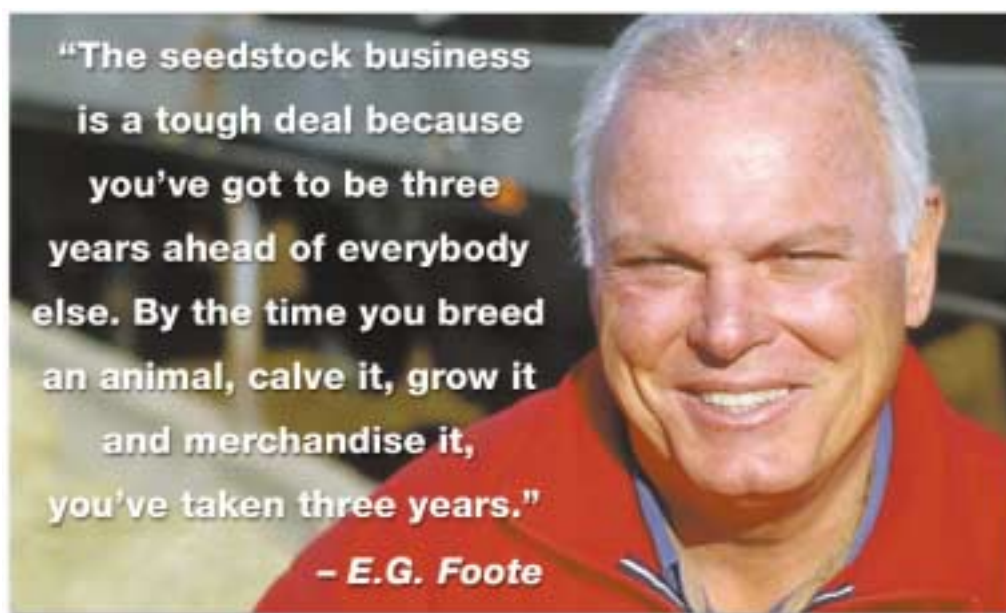
“If you drive through the West, the majority of the cows out here today tend to be black. Twenty-five years ago, most of the cows out here were Herefords. That change has been driven in large part by the foresight of Angus breeders, who had the vision to develop CAB in the 1970s.”

Second, seedstock producers must recognize that, from a merchandising standpoint, the beef industry has gone from a local, state or even national marketplace to an international marketplace, Footo says.

“Globalization is definitely going to be something that people have to deal with in every facet of agriculture,” he says. “Traditionally, farmers and ranchers have been very independent people, so it’s very hard for people like that to work with everybody to merchandise their product. That’s always a challenge within agriculture, but it’s a reality we must learn to contend with if we’re going to survive.”

To position their operation for the global marketplace, the Footos frequently host international guests at the ranch. They see it not only as a way of opening lines of communication, but also as a means of tapping new markets for their cattle.

“We had guests from Japan here recently,” Footo recalls. “When they got here, they couldn’t speak any English, so we had some challenges



communicating with each other. But the important thing was that they knew they were welcome, and they had a chance to look at our cattle.”

Third, Footo believes the industry will become much more information intensive, and commercial customers will respond by wanting as much information as possible on seedstock. He expects his customers to demand more information on carcass quality, in particular. He plans to make more extensive use of ultrasound to identify bulls and heifers with excellent carcass traits and to make his carcass EPDs that much more accurate.

“In the last five years, we’ve seen a lot more people paying attention — not just to growth and maternal EPDs, but also carcass EPDs — than ever before,” Footo says. “Most people still buy a bull on price, but the percentage of people who look at EPDs and not just the animal is going up every year. In other words, the people who buy our bulls are definitely getting more and more educated. They’re doing their homework. They’re not just buying a bull. They’re buying information, too.”

And finally, the family plans to continue to emphasize the



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personal aspects — the friendships, the camaraderie — of the business. This means building long-term, committed relationships with customers and friends across the country and around the world.

After all, Footo says, this is a people business.

“We’ve put a lot of time and energy into building friendships

with the people who buy our cattle,” he says. “The people involved in this breed are some of the greatest people we’ve ever known. We’ve got friends across North America, and we can go to a stock show in Denver or up in Calgary and run into people we know. Sometimes these friendships go back 30 or 40 years. That’s what really matters.” 