

Fifty Years at Denver



A half-century ago, the Rogers family first showed cattle at the National Western. That tradition continues today.

STORY & PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT

Bundled up in his Cargill coveralls, Francis Rogers takes a few minutes to talk to friends who've stopped to visit. Francis shakes a few hands, makes some small talk, then his wife, Mary, pours a couple cups of coffee.

For the Rogers, the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) marks a special time of year. The Colorado Angus breeders spend most of their time during the event in the old stockyards, where they have cattle on display, shows for which to prepare, and old friends and clients with whom to visit.

Seeing it as an opportunity to expose their cattle to potential

clients, they started competing at the event 50 years ago. They've continued to do so every year since. In fact, the Rogers probably have shown and sold more cattle during the stock show than any breeder of any breed in the country.

That's a bit surprising, considering the Rogers never have thought of themselves as "show people." They simply enjoy the camaraderie, the chance to see good cattle, and the opportunity to engage in good conversation and maybe to sell a few cattle at the same time.

"Fifty," Francis reflects. "Fifty years. Hard to believe it's been that long."

Marital compromise

Francis was a small-town boy who left the plains of eastern Colorado to serve his country during World War II. His tour took him to places like Iran, Europe and North Africa, where his small-town eyes saw firsthand the destruction of global conflict. He wanted nothing more of it.

So on the boat ride home, he had two things on his mind: getting back to his hometown of Yuma and marrying Mary, his childhood sweetheart.

On his arrival, the two exchanged vows, married and settled on her family's farm southwest of Yuma. Together,

they began building their dreams and developing their ranch into one of the finest seedstock operations in the business.

There was a sticky point, however. Francis was born and bred a Hereford man. Mary was a dyed-in-the-wool Angus breeder. But after a year of prodding and nudging and gentle convincing, Mary converted him to her way of thinking.

"He was always complaining about pinkeye, sunburned teats and horns," she reflects. "So I said, 'If you'd just go with Angus, you wouldn't have these problems.' That's what got him

Above: Celebrating 50 years in the seedstock business, Mary and Francis Rogers have by far exceeded the average life expectancy of a seedstock operation quoted by industry experts. Francis credits his family's success to customer service.

to thinking about it.”

For Francis’s part, raising and marketing Angus cattle looked more like a gamble than a sure thing. Theirs was Hereford country. His neighbors raised Hereford cattle. The order buyers wanted nothing but red calves with white faces. The odds were stacked against them.

But Francis relented, and a year after their wedding they purchased their first set of Angus females. They also bought a good bull and began a long-term commitment to the breed. The rest, as they say, is history.

Today, their Wagon Wheel Ranch is a diversified and successful enterprise. Francis and Mary manage it with their son, Kenny, and daughter-in-law, Jody. Each year, they calve out 400-450 registered cows. They also grow 600-800 acres of irrigated corn, dryland wheat and alfalfa. And they raise registered Quarter Horses, a passion of Francis’s.

Survival

Admittedly, it hasn’t been easy surviving the seedstock business for 50 years. Industry experts normally peg the average life expectancy of a seedstock operation to be seven years. Francis has seen his share of ups and downs. He credits much of his family’s success to customer service. Nothing more. Nothing less.

“Our survival can be credited to tenacity as much as anything,” Kenny adds. “We stick to it. We try to communicate with our customers as much as we can and breed what they like. We’ve got a lot of repeat buyers who come back year after year. A lot of them never see the bulls until they’re delivered to them.

“We have a customer in Montrose who’s been buying bulls from us for 40 years and has never missed a year. Like many of our other customers, he trusts us to pick out something that will work. We make it our commitment to be honest and fair to deal with.”

That tradition of fairness and

honesty really began when the Rogers first started. To build a market for their cattle, they started bringing a couple of carloads to Denver each year in hopes of exposing their production to other cattlemen.

The strategy has worked. In fact, it continues to achieve good results, considering the Rogers took grand champion pen of commercial heifers (among all breeds) this year, a feat that most certainly will support their upcoming sales efforts.

Through the years, the Rogers have sold the majority of their cattle via private treaty, although they now host an annual production sale. Selling seedstock successfully for a half-century is a feat that only the most hardened seedstock producer can appreciate.

What’s the biggest trend they’ve observed? The shift to Angus cattle, no doubt. During that half-century, they’ve watched the balance shift from Hereford cattle to Continental cattle in the 1980s and early 1990s to unprecedented demand for Angus cattle during the last 10 years.

In fact, it’s hard for Francis to believe the Angus breed is now the industry’s largest, with registrations totaling just more than 271,000 head each year. Angus bulls now top consignment and production sales nationwide. Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) is the industry’s largest branded beef program, creating pull-through demand for commercial users of Angus genetics.

Long-term commitment

Still, Francis credits much of his operation’s success to gradual improvement and long-term commitment.

“We’ve just hung in there like the tortoise in *The Tortoise and the Hare*,” Francis says. “We’ve tried to make sound breeding decisions without chasing too many fads or trends. We want to produce cattle that work for our customers. That’s what it really comes down to.”

Four decades ago, they began selling bulls private treaty, then they decided to host a production sale. They sell 80-90 yearling bulls and about 50 females, some of which are bred, first-calf heifers.

In their breeding program, the Rogers emphasize production of good-doing, efficient cattle. They’ve maintained their focus on one breeding program for many years. Their cows are structurally sound and uniform in phenotype. They maintain good flesh in harsh environmental conditions. Most of the cows weigh between 1,200 and 1,400 pounds (lb.), which may be a little bigger than some would prefer, but Francis feels they have the performance in them the industry needs to remain competitive.

“I don’t like little cattle,” he adds. “We have better luck with cows that wean calves that are a little bigger. The bull calves that we select for the sale are preconditioned right here at our own feedlot. We push ’em pretty hard until they’re yearlings. At this year’s sale, they averaged about 1,200 pounds.”

“We’re always looking for the best herd sires that we can buy,” Francis says. “We not only look at their EPDs (expected progeny differences) and all their records, we like to have good-dispositioned cattle. We want to walk through the herd and not worry about one of them chasing you up the fence.”

The Rogers also work hard at improving carcass quality in their cattle. They use bulls and bloodlines with proven carcass performance, and they evaluate the carcasses of their cattle each year.

“We steer about a third of [the] bull calves and feed them through or sell them as yearlings,” Francis says.

The Rogers evaluate carcass and feedlot performance by receiving information from feedlots and packing plants. The majority of their cattle wind up at nearby Schramm Feedlot, Yuma, Colo., where they’re

finished, then shipped for processing. The Rogers also have participated in the Great Western Beef Expo, one of the nation’s most competitive feedlot and carcass competitions.

“From my perspective, one of the challenges that we have is to ensure progeny from some of our bigger-framed cows grade well,” Kenny says. “If it’s a big-framed cow and we can still get a calf that can grade and yield, then it can stick around. Records are key to identifying the right kind of cattle. Everything must pull its weight around here.”

Perhaps most importantly, the Rogers are not only producers of registered Angus, they’re also friends of the people who buy their cattle. “We’ll bend over backwards to make our buyers happy,” says Kenny, who shares his parents’ enthusiasm for the industry. “We make it known that visitors are always welcome at our place, any time they want to drop by. We really enjoy visiting with folks and showing them our operation.”

That may be an understatement. During their days in Denver each year, Francis and Mary take plenty of time to talk about the cattle business with friends and new ones. They seem to thrive on these few days in the stockyards, where memories and friendships run so deep.

“Denver is kinda like a family reunion. We get to see everybody, our friends and neighbors, even if some of them are still Hereford breeders,” Francis jokes.

Perhaps most important — and most revealing about the family — is the respect and recognition they’ve earned from those friends and neighbors. At their pen in Denver, Francis posted a sign that read: “Mary and Francis Rogers, Yuma County Farm Family of the Year 2000.”

“We’re pretty proud of that,” Francis says.

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