

Ties to the Land

Family histories provide strength to Montana community.

Story & photos by **Corinne Blender**

Ablinking caution light, an old motel decorated with a for sale sign, and a local gas and convenience store welcome visitors to the northwestern Montana town of Valier. Only 500-plus residents live in this rural town, which keeps company with open prairie, irrigated cropland and a mountain range to the west.

It is here that four Angus ranches — Apex, Connelly, Diamond D and Westwind — thrive and compete. Each has its own profile and its own historical ties to the community.

“I think we have a good relationship,” Mark DeBoo, Diamond D Angus Ranch, says of the association of the breeders. “They all have different programs than we have, but they are all good people.”

The four ranches are a mere 20 miles apart, allowing Angus cattle to run truly superior around Valier.

“I would say the four herds in this area are just about on the verge of where they need to be discovered by somebody,” John Holden, Westwind Angus Ranch, says. “They are all just about that good.”

From one pasture to the next, shopping for Angus cattle resembles a strip mall in this area. Buyers can compare a wide selection of cattle. The sales usually run during the same time of the year, giving buyers the option to visit all operations.

“One thing they say in marketing is that if you are drawn to an area for a certain item you want to buy, you’re more likely to go if there are several places to look,” Linda Holden, Westwind Angus Ranch, says.

But Valier, Mont., isn’t exactly what most would call a shopping hub.

“Our geographic location can be a disadvantage for getting people here,” Don Connelly, Connelly Angus Ranch, says. “We are kind of off the main path.”

The producers attribute much of their success to repeat customers and support from outside visitors who do travel the distance to purchase their cattle.

“I think it’s the difference in each program. Each bull buyer that is coming here is looking for something different, and they can find it,” Pam Swanson, Apex Angus Ranch, says.

Trusting the mountains

A 1918 ranch house, settled near the Rocky Mountain Front, is the upper-ranch home of the Swanson family, who owns and operates Apex Angus Ranch. Raising cattle in the high country and prairie pastures near Glacier National Park is an aspect of the operation in which Daryle and Pam Swanson take great pride.

“Our cow herd is probably run differently than many purebred breeders,” Daryle says. “They must perform on native grasses and what Mother Nature provides us with.”

Mother Nature has been tough lately. Area ranges have been suffering from one of the driest summers on record, leaving minimal water and grass available. The Swansons say they constantly worry about fire in this dry, heavy timber.

The ranch is broken down into summer range and wintering grounds. The registered cows and yearling heifers calve during the winter months near Valier, where Daryle and Pam, along with their son Kurt, daughter-in-law Colleen and granddaughters Megan, 10, and Erin, 8, all reside.

The commercial herd winters and calves near Dupuyer, Mont., where Kirby, the oldest son, and his wife, Rita, call home. Daryle and Pam’s youngest son, Klint, and his wife, Lori, live near Chinook, Mont., where they raise their Apex registered and commercial cattle.

The Swansons have haying and farming operations at all three home sites, but when the wild timothy is ready to be cut,



► The Swanson family of Apex Angus Ranch raises cattle in the high country and prairie pastures near Glacier National Park. Shown are (adults, from left) Kirby, Rita, Klint, Lori, Colleen, Kurt, Pam, Daryle, (youth, from left) Erin and Megan Swanson.



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everyone likes to be on hand at the upper ranch. Just like the family, the herd disappears into the lush mountain greenery until gathering time in mid-September.

"Sometimes it seems the cows are up so high they're right next to God," Kirby laughs. "It makes gathering that much more interesting and probably the highlight of the fall."

The Swansons say they know what they have is special.

"High-country pastures are becoming an endangered species," Pam says. "And ranches like us, we are becoming an endangered species, too."

The family's ties are to their land. They have been ranching in the area for more than a century. Megan and Erin are the sixth generation. The family cemetery, at peace on the mountain front, is a tribute to the relatives before them who also shared their love for their homeland.

Pam's father brought Angus cattle to the area in 1945. Among many doubting neighbors, the Angus cow proved her superiority in a time when Hereford cattle were more common.

The cows learned to take care of themselves. Angus cow-calf pairs soon sprinkled the mountain ranges, clear to the tree line, taking advantage of every food source.

"Running cattle in this high country makes for a more hardy line of native cattle," Kirby says. "It shows their true self." Angus soon became the predominant breed of cattle in the area.

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and fall in rough wilderness, they are still expected to perform on grain. A few bulls are sent to Montana's Midland and Treasure test centers each year. The family proudly says they have "rung the bell" several times with bulls that are top performers.

Apex Angus actively seeks out carcass data using their steers sired by Apex bulls for gainability, *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) qualifiers, sire evaluations and other factors that contribute to improving the herd. The Swansons have been performance testing since the mid-1960s. Their efforts have proved fruitful over the years.

"As far as the quality of the cattle, we've come from small weaning weights of 550 pounds (lb.) to now over 700 pounds plus at the same weaning dates," Kirby says.

Their records and sire evaluations are valuable information for themselves, but they also relay the information to their customers so they know what to expect.

"Our customers are in partnership with us. Their support is what keeps us going, and we take care of the partnership the best we can," Daryle says.

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► The Swanson family's ties are to their land. They have been ranching in the area for more than a century.

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► The Connelly family includes (from left) Wendy, Matthew, Don, Mikayla, Lillian, Clarence and Leon Connelly.

An eye for Angus

Before Connelly Angus Ranch was involved in the registered Angus business, Clarence and Lillian Connelly were managing a commercial Angus herd. Neighbors noticed Clarence's eye for cattle. With a little coaxing from these folks, Clarence purchased 20 bred heifers in 1974, and the registered herd slowly grew from there.

Their son, Don; his wife, Wendy; and their children, Mikayla, 3, and Matthew, 15 months, join Clarence and Lillian in their ranching endeavors. Don's younger brother, Leon, also contributes when he is home from college.

"A lot of people really comment on our cows. That's the biggest compliment," Clarence says. "That says we are really on the right track with the cows we are raising."

The Connellys breed for sound udders as well as other structural traits, knowing that their cattle must stand the test of time. The cows roam the range where the valleys plummet to depths that truly test the mother cow's agility.

"We are taking cow families with long-term production and building on them, stacking them up," Don says. The Connellys say their goal is to produce cows that can bring in good calves for 12 years or more.

Longevity is clearly a part of the herd.

Cows have been weaning big calves for the Connellys even at

the ripe age of 14 to 17 years. They say they have to operate accordingly to stay in business.

"It's a big challenge anymore to stay around. There's no room for error," Don says. "We feel we have to grow a little to maintain."

The Connellys have been expanding their hay base by purchasing more farmland. A four-year drought has made it hard on the producers in the state, and Don says it has really tested his cattle and how they perform in tough conditions.

"The big test is to see which ones are the survivors, which ones can excel in tougher conditions," Don says. "They are on high roughage where they have to perform, or otherwise they will fall out."

The drought has been a good time to develop good lines of cattle that really prevail and will benefit commercial producers, Don says. One of the biggest disappointments that he hears from commercial breeders about the overall performance of heifers in the beef industry is that they don't breed back.

"If they calve them out, and they don't breed back, that is going to cost them a lot of money," Don adds.

The Connellys' willingness to listen to commercial buyers and other seedstock producers has driven their program. Clarence says it's vital to be involved and to go to functions where he can interact with other breeders.

"I usually go on the Angus tour every year and try to make as many production sales as I can to see what kind of cattle they are buying and are interested in," Clarence says. "We talk to them to see what kind of cattle they've got and what they are looking for."

Clarence and Don have lent their ear to fellow businessmen, but they still try to stay away from fads that might be gone the next year. They say that if they stick to their belief in what makes a good female, they are on the right track.

"We try to hold our course and raise what works in the commercial man's environment," Don says. And fellow producers have taken notice.

"We are getting more traffic through that is what I call real Angus breeders," Don says. "They are looking for long-term genetics that can really advance their programs. They want longevity, fertility and fleshing ability."

Clarence and Don say their real joy is to be able to get interested buyers out to their place and let their cattle do the talking.

"It has been very humbling what people have said when they come in the spring and look at the whole herd or take a tour of the different groups of cows," Don says. It's important to give your cattle time and "let them slowly build your reputation up for you," he adds.



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► The four-year drought that has affected their area has provided opportunity to develop lines of cattle that prevail and will benefit commercial producers, Don Connelly says.

The family tree

Don and Janet DeBoo, owners of Diamond D Angus Ranch (along with their son, Mark; his wife, Vicki; and their children, Tiffany, 16, and Brandon, 14) have a long family history in the Valier area. Mark is the fourth generation to continue in the cattle business.

"I'm lucky in the sense that my Dad has been through the changes, and I've learned from him," Mark says. "The fads kind of come and go, and you just have to stick with what you believe in."

In 1967, Don purchased 45 heifers from Canada, and with Janet's help, they began keeping records and documenting the history of their registered Angus herd. That documentation is equal to the detailed genealogy of the DeBoo family tree that Janet has spent many hours researching.

Don and Mark have done their studies on their Angus family tree, too. They can walk out in a group of cattle and give the complete pedigree for any of their cows. They know their cattle, and they know what they have seen work.

"We feel that the medium-size cows are much more efficient," Don says. "I don't think it takes too much arithmetic to prove that a cow eats basically from her frame size more than her actual weight."

Mark adds that rather than breeding strictly for performance and expected progeny differences (EPDs), they've striven to include functionality, efficiency and longevity — traits that make a good mother cow.

That's not to say the DeBoos turn their backs on performance. They strive for good carcass merit and use programs such as the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) program provided by the American Angus Association to evaluate each mother cow for traits related to performance.

"No matter what direction you head in, if you put too much emphasis in any single trait, you lose some of the traits it takes to make a good mother cow," Mark says.

Temperament is a very important trait in mother cows, and the DeBoos take it into account. They score each cow at calving because they say that is the best time to evaluate her disposition.



► The DeBoo family, owners of Diamond D Angus Ranch, have a long history in the Valier area. Shown are (from left) Vicki and Mark DeBoo and Janet and Don DeBoo.

"Labor is a big item, and it's hard to find good labor," Mark says. "It's become more and more important to handle cattle alone, and it's a lot harder to handle the cattle without a good disposition."

Just as the family knows its ancestry from its Belgian descent to the time when Don's granddad first came to the area attracted by the Valier Irrigation Project, they know what their cow family inherits from its relatives.

"Without a doubt, longevity and functionality are very heritable," Mark says. "I think there are a lot of commercial cattlemen out there who are looking for those traits."

The DeBoos say they know their focus is not exactly a part of mainstream Angus today, but they see a place for the type of cattle they are raising.

"I'm not striving to get maximum performance, and I don't claim to," Mark



► Don and Mark DeBoo have utilized linebreeding in their genetic program. Mark says the technique intensifies all traits, good or bad, and increases predictability.



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says. "I actually shy away from some of the sires I feel were bred for maximum performance because I feel they've lost some of the functionality in the chase for performance."

The Wye bloodline carries through the DeBoo herd today. They say linebreeding is a good thing if you have the right genetics.

"It intensifies all traits, good or bad. You try to take the best of the best and line them up," Mark says. "Predictability will increase, and each offspring out of a flush will look alike. I don't think we've wavered from outside traits and what we are looking for. We do outcrossing with similar traits and keep with what we like."

Mark says he doesn't want to let the family business branch far from the quality for which they have been striving.

"I'd like to continue on with what my granddad and my dad have kind of started," he says. "I want to have a good reputation and happy customers. There's always room for improvement, no matter how good you think you are."

Don and his son plan to continue advancing their Angus family tree, and they hope that their program will provide the cattle that producers want.

"When cattlemen reach a certain point in their program they might be looking to introduce the traits that we have been striving for. Diamond D Angus bloodlines, being an outcross to most Angus cattle, will allow them to work well in any herd across the USA," Mark says.

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Proven genetics

The Holden name has long been tied to registered cattle, but it hasn't always been registered Angus cattle. Before John and Linda Holden started Westwind Angus Ranch in 1972, the Holden name was best known for its Herefords.

"When Dave got back (from college), he got on the EPD thing, and our breeding program is run by a set of parameters for EPDs," John says. "We like our birth EPD to be below breed average and the rest of them to be above breed average."

John and Linda's son David is now working in California, but he was involved in the development of the present Angus herd, and he still helps with advertising and consulting. Their other son, Jack, operates Holden Herefords just down the road from Westwind. Their two daughters, Laura and Janelle, live out of state.

"We focus on EPDs and do it right. We give our customers the specific genetics to give their cattle the edge by allowing them to select bulls that have six to seven generations of proven genetics," David says.

The Holdens say their philosophy rests on the idea that if they have a group of bulls with good EPDs — and those bulls are somewhat unrelated to the Angus in the rest of the country — then there will be a market for them.

"The big problem with the Angus breed right now is that there are no outside genetics for outcross," John says. "They're all bred the same. Everyone is on the same bandwagon."

John says open artificial insemination (AI) has made the nation's registered Angus cow herd just one big homogeneous group

of cattle all bred the same way.

"I always tell these bull buyers you can buy black bulls anywhere — almost as good as ours," John says. "Actually when you get into the top end of the Angus in the nation using EPD numbers, there's not that much difference. The difference is the people who are selling them."

John and Linda pay close attention to their customer base. They try to keep in close contact with their bull buyers so they know how their bulls perform.

"The buyers that will keep you in business are the ones that buy bulls every year," John says. "That high-priced bull [sold] every 10 years to some guy is nice, but it's a long time between lunches if that's the only customer you've got."

"One thing about when you sell bulls is [if] they don't work for the guy, he won't come back and buy any more. You can brag about them, lie about them or whatever you want, but when the calves hit the ground, anybody that is a cowboy knows what he's got," John says, adding that this fact keeps producers "pretty honest."

EPDs play a strong role in the Westwind herd. They help give credibility to their bulls because John says they reveal the truth. The average Westwind bull's EPDs rank in the best 40% of the breed for birth weight, the top 10% for weaning and yearling weight, and the top 15% for milk.




► John and Linda Holden started Westwind Angus Ranch in 1972.

However, John doesn't put all of his eggs in one basket. "There's still a physical attractiveness — an eye appeal — to cattle that you need to have to sell them," he says.

"A lot of these commercial ranchers in the state have probably got as good or better a set of cows as the registered breeders, and they are quite particular about buying bulls," John points out.

Even though they focus on EPDs, they say they know there is more to breeding than just numbers.

"The most important thing you can breed in any breed of cattle is trouble-free, because labor is in short supply on all of these privately owned ranches," John says. "It boils down to the most efficient converter of grass to meat. All sizes won't fit every type of environment."

John and Linda say the love for their cattle is what keeps them tied to Valier and their registered herd. With a laugh, he adds, "The Lord made cattle breeding just complicated enough to make it interesting for man." 



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