



# A Lifetime Dedicated to Improvement

*Even amongst resistance and challenges, the McDonnells stayed the course to better the industry.*

*by Whitney Whitaker, American Angus Association*

Farmers and ranchers across the country wake up every morning tending their land and livestock to feed the world. For one Montana couple, they take their purpose and passion even further. Leo and Sam McDonnell have dedicated a lifetime to make the cattle industry a better place for other cattle producers.

Leo and Sam were married in 1988, but their history in the cattle business is generational on both sides. Sam grew up on a cattle operation in Montana near Columbus. They met at a Midland Bull Test sale, and she has worked with Leo ever since they got married.

Leo grew up watching his father help to revolutionize the industry. In the early '50s and '60s, cattle were selected on their look. But Leo's father and a group of other breeders set out to make a change and were some of the first "performance breeders."

"This group made it clear there would be no retail beef, no packers, no feeders, none of the service sectors that support all those, if it wasn't for the cow," Leo says as he reflects on a key time in his life. "They wanted to start measuring traits of economic importance to the rancher and quit marginalizing them, so they could improve profits and make the foundation for the whole industry stronger."

Watching his father and other mentors stand up for what they believed in and work together to

improve the cattle industry was a key driver for the McDonnells' success and contribution to the Angus breed.

## Creating change

As performance traits started to be recognized throughout the industry, Leo's father started their first bull test in 1962. The bull test was one of the first of its kind to bring cattle from multiple herds together and compare various lineages of cattle.

"My dad's vision was to build a showcase for performance breeders because they had been battered around pretty hard, but they had a lot to offer," Leo says.

Following college, Leo came home to help his father grow the bull test. Shortly after his return in 1981, they built the facilities now known as the Midland Bull Test.

This would serve as another pivotal moment for the family. Working in the cattle industry poses challenges every day, but the hardships of life struck the McDonnell family from an economic and family perspective as the 1980s brought 20% interest rates. Leo and Sam bought another ranch in 1988, before they had to buy out the farm when Leo's father passed in 1993.

"We never inherited anything except a heck of a set of values," Leo says. "I remember times in the '80s when we were feeding 2,000 bulls, but I couldn't buy you a 25-cent cup of coffee."

Leo says the family kept going with inspiration from mentors.

"Some of the best businessmen I know have made some big mistakes, and I ask if it bothered them," Leo says. "They respond by saying, 'Heck, no. You can't believe what I learned from that experience. Did it bother me at the time? Yes, but I learned from it and moved on.'"

Though they faced their own set of challenges, the McDonnell family continued onward with their goals. In the early 2000s, they set out to improve the industry and create change through improving feed intake and feed efficiency.

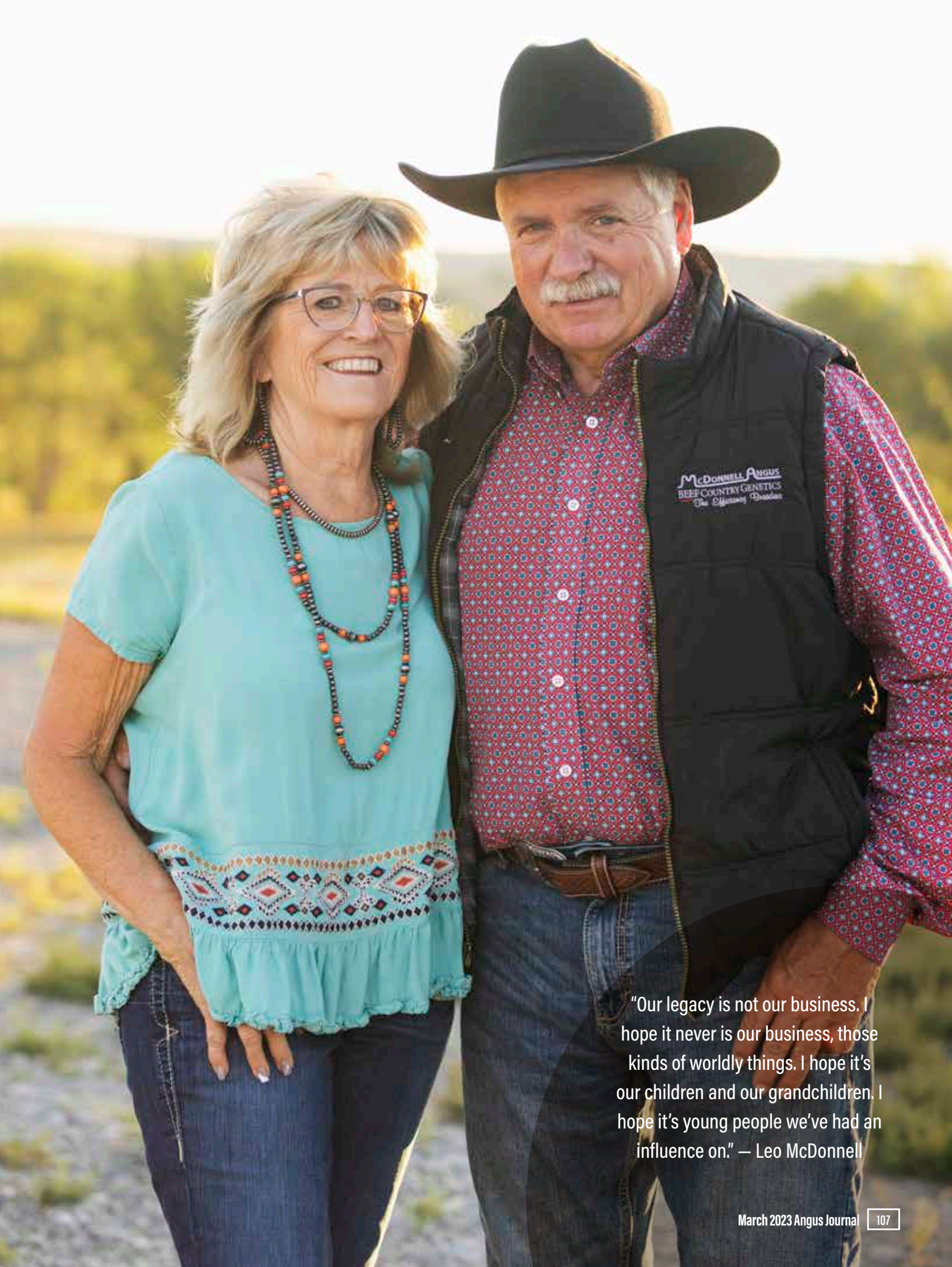
The McDonnells worked toward improvement because they were always focused on serving their customers to the best of their ability, Leo says. The chicken and poultry industries had made tremendous improvements at that time, and Leo wanted to mimic that forward progress in the cattle industry.

"You wonder why those meats are so cheap at the counter; there is a reason. The cattle business is a little different," Leo says. "Different things drive people to be in the cattle business, not just counting pennies like other industries."

Leo and Sam believe with the massive amounts of data collected on their cattle, feed efficiency makes ranchers more profitable.

"Nothing is more important to a

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rancher, feeder or an industry where 70% of your costs are feed related, be it grass, supplements or hay,” he says.

Even as they turned over their feedlot to their son, Leo and Sam still dedicated themselves to improving the industry for others across the country.

## Building relationships

The cattle industry provided the foundation for Leo and Sam, but it was the people in their lives who molded the trajectory of their business and future.

Both McDonnells believe the greatest thing about agriculture and rural life is how their children were always part of everything. Leo worked alongside his five siblings in the early days of the operation, and now he and Sam’s children work together to help run the business.

“You get to spend your time around your kids,” Leo says. “You may not go on a lot of vacations and crazy stuff like that, but we just happen to be doing what we love anyway, so we don’t have to go on vacations. We don’t have to get away from anything.”

Leo and Sam treat their customers like family, too. They understand the responsibility they have providing bulls to their customers, and don’t take the job lightly. Whether it be



mentors, customers or family, the couple treated each encounter with respect.

Leo reiterates the importance of building good relationships with customers as they don’t see a return on their investment for two to three years after their purchase.

“Making sure our customers can get good females that stay in the herd, that breed back, that have good feet, that make them money — that is my driver,” Leo says.

Aside from the people, Leo says discipline helped the McDonnells’ achieve success. The cattle industry is an easy place to get off track, use different genetics or different strategies, but Leo says producers must stay focused.

“You need to be value-based and 100% committed to your customers, just like you are committed to your family,” he explains. “You need to do everything you can to make your customers successful.”

Leo says being futuristic and thinking about what is to come has also provided their family success.

“You need to be able to look on the horizon and say ‘Hey, this is where we are going,’ because if you don’t know where you are going, you are never going to get there,” he says.

Leo and Sam have dedicated their time, business and passion to helping others be successful. To recognize their efforts and contributions to the breed, Leo and Sam were honored as 2022 Angus Heritage Foundation inductees. Today they both stay involved on the operation, but they are also leaving behind a legacy for their children and other cattlemen across the country.

“Our legacy is not our business. I hope it never is our business, those kinds of worldly things,” Leo says. “I hope it’s our children and our grandchildren. I hope it’s young people we’ve had an influence on.” **AJ**

