

B L A C K



SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS PHOTOS

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To Texas rancher Ellen
White, the Angus
business is an art form.

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

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The bumpy caliche road winds and twists through the rolling hills of central Texas, snaking past scruffy junipers and gnarled live oaks, shouldering brushy slopes littered with small limestone rocks, and crossing one narrow creek barely trickling with water. Two miles down the dusty country road, a sign directs visitors to the White Ranch, a 100-acre spread sprawled across the rugged terrain.

Rancher Ellen White knows the land well. Early every morning and evening, she and her two dogs — Rusty and Matilda — traverse the wooded property on foot and in her white Ford pickup, searching for a pregnant cow, checking on nursing mothers, and feeding her six cattle and a pair of horses.

Raising livestock alone in this rocky country hasn't been easy, but still she perseveres, like the colony of freed black slaves who, more than a century before her, barely managed to eke a living from the same poor soil.

"This is not cow country," concedes Ellen, seated in a metal lawn chair, her feet propped on a rocked terrace that encircles a small lap pool.

"It's goat country. Out here, one cow requires 25 acres. That's why I've never had a large herd. In fact, during the drought of '96, I had to cull down my herd. There was no grass, and you couldn't buy hay. The cows were really suffering, so I had to sell four."

From this lofty vantage point behind her modest hilltop home, Ellen surveys the spectacular vista of Texas Hill Country and reflects upon the preceding years that led to her present passion — breeding Angus.

Since 1979, she has lived on the White Ranch, located 10 miles east of Blanco and 50 miles northeast of San Antonio. She and her late husband, Dick,



Ellen White proves it's not the size of the herd, but the enthusiasm for the business, that counts.

moved from San Antonio to the Hill Country to start a nursery business. They built a greenhouse and grew native plants for a few years. "But then the price of propane went out the roof, and we decided we couldn't afford to heat and cool the greenhouse," she recalls.

So they quit the nursery business and tried to start a small vineyard of grapes. "But the trial runs (of vines) didn't

show any vigor, and then Dick got sick (with leukemia)," Ellen explains. So, the couple abandoned that endeavor, too.

In the meantime, Ellen had purchased two bulls — a Hereford and a Jersey — from the Blanco auction barn. Her interest in cattle grew, and she attended animal science classes at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos,

studying artificial insemination (AI) during night classes. She later sold her original cattle and purchased four Angus heifers.

Applying her classroom knowledge of AI, Ellen inseminated two of her cows. She'll never forget the first time those cows bore calves 15 years ago. She was so excited that she sent birth announcements to family and friends.

"You feel so unsure of yourself when you're learning," she says. "Then I went home, did it (AI), and it worked. Son of a gun!"

Though she doesn't mail announcements any more, Ellen is still just as proud and elated when one of her cows gives birth. "It's more exciting than Christmas," she says with a wide smile. "It's just wonderful to see what you get. You wait nine months, then you see the little darlin's."

Creating new life fascinates Ellen, who considers AI to be a form of art. "I have a fine arts degree, so I breed cows," grins Ellen, who later in life earned a fine arts degree at Trinity University in San Antonio. "Breeding cows is an art form. It's not painting or sculpture, but I am creating something — genetics."

Indeed, Ellen meticulously studies the COBA/Select Sires catalog, circling birth weights, growth rates, marbling and ribeye areas.

"I raise seedstock," she says. "I sell genetics, not meat. When I sell a bull, he will produce 'meat animals.' So my breeding goals are small birth weights with a high growth rate. That combination is hard to find."

In preparation for AI, Ellen spends hours observing her cows. "Timing is very important in settling a cow. At first light and last light of the day, I'm out there, watching them cows," Ellen chuckles. "It has to be her (the cow's) schedule, not yours, so it's very time-consuming. You

have to just sit down and watch them and keep records. Records are very important."

Ellen's efforts at producing top cattle are gaining her a respected reputation in the region. Blanco rancher James Blackburn has purchased four heifers from the White Ranch in recent years and plans to buy more in the future.

"She doesn't raise many cattle," James says. "She doesn't deal in quantity. Instead, Ellen concentrates on quality, I'd recommend her place any time to buy a bull."

Al Lindig, who owns an 800 acre ranch near Johnson City, has also purchased from Ellen in the past. "She's got some good cattle," he says. "She's real high on EPDs (expected progeny differences). She's particular, and she uses scales, so her records are legit."

Despite her capable expertise in the cattle industry, Ellen still occasionally encounters men who seem skeptical of her abilities because of her gender.

"There's plenty of women who help their husbands (on their ranches), but not very many women ranch," Ellen opines. "So a lot of men don't think women can produce a decent bull, a decent genetic animal. They don't take you seriously."

"But physically, a woman with small hands is much better at AI," adds Ellen. "It's easier to reach inside the cow and find the uterus and cervix."

Professionally, Ellen finds camaraderie with other women who belong to the Hill Country CattleWomen, of which she is third vice president. She also belongs to the American Angus Association and the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association.

Another of Ellen's endeavors is a bed-and-breakfast business housed in a 150-year-old cedar log cabin

that she and her late husband had moved onto the ranch. Called the Hideout at White Ranch, the two-room cabin once sheltered a German family near New Braunfels, Texas. Today, the quaint little house provides a quiet retreat for guests seeking to escape the stresses of city life. Outfitted with a small kitchen and a claw-foot tub, the Hideout has two double beds and an inviting rocking chair (made for two) on the front porch.

Newlyweds Ivan and Nancy Peight of Belleville, Pa., spent their honeymoon at the Hideout last November.

"In the East, you don't find many places like this," Ivan says. "We have parks and campgrounds, but there's usually a road running past. This is very private, and the cabin is rustic."

"I like the stove and the fireplace," Nancy adds. "It's all very down-to-earth and simple."

The guests who come to the Hideout are often a welcome respite from the sometimes overwhelming solitude of life on the White Ranch. Since her husband's death in 1988, Ellen has mostly worked her ranch single-handedly.

Tenacious as the rugged land that enfolds her, she has survived breast cancer and the deaths of two of her three children, an identical twin sister who succumbed to heart failure 10 years ago, and a close friend who shot himself last summer. Working with her animals, walking the rocky slopes, and watching the sun rise above the Texas hills brings her peace, a therapeutic escape from her personal tragedies.

"I'm doing what I want to do," Ellen says. "I feel so lucky. So many people don't have that satisfaction. But there's nothing else I'd rather be doing than raising black Angus cattle right here on the White Ranch."



Newlyweds Ivan and Nancy Peight of Belleville, Pa., spent their honeymoon at the Hideout, the 150-year-old cedar log cabin Ellen White runs as a bed-and-breakfast business.



Early every morning and evening, Ellen White and her two dogs, Rusty and Matilda, traverse the wooded property on foot and in her white Ford pickup, tending her cattle.