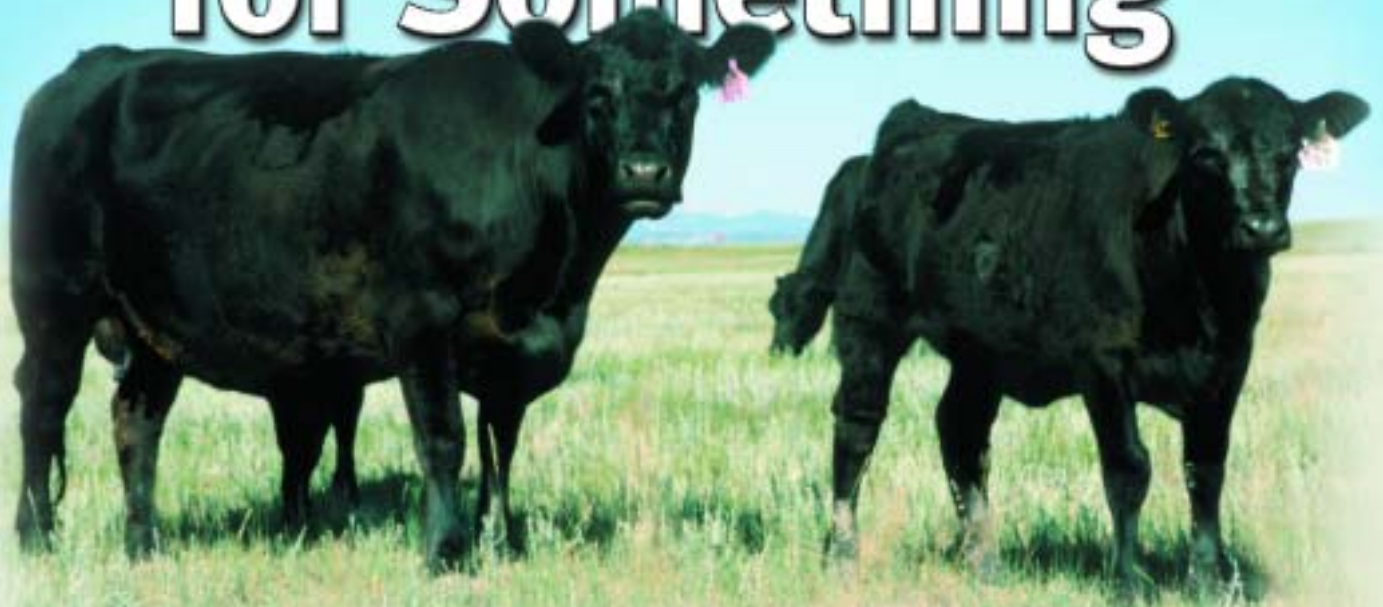


Her Name Stands for Something



Cow families serve as the foundation for many Angus herds.

Story & photos by **Corinne Patterson**

Throughout the years, cow names have found different roles in herds across the world. Naming cows to recognize the cow family is a marketing tool, a tie to history, a tracking system and, in many instances, an identity for individual breeding programs.

"It's something that has not lost its value," John Van Dyke says of naming cows according to cow family. "It was not a fad that came and went. It's now the basis of a lot of herds. Even in the commercial end where cattle are raised strictly for beef consumption, it's also proved true." Van Dyke is herd consultant for Circle Oak Farm near Hanover, Penn., and has been breeding Angus seedstock for nearly 30 years.

"Cow families are what the breeder is left to utilize on the ranch," Van Dyke points out. "It's what you see every day. It's what you feed every day, and it has become very evident that certain cow families have consistently passed on certain traits to their offspring."

It doesn't matter how big or small or from what part of the country you hail, says Arvin Arthun, cow families are a good way to improve a cow herd.

"That's how you track the history of a cow," says Arthun, marketing representative for Sitz Angus Ranches of Harrison and Dillon, Mont. Whatever bull you breed a

cow to, you still have to track the cow family and see how the daughters perform. The good cows will surface to the top, and the less productive ones filter themselves out so a producer can constantly improve the genetic base.

Chris Earl, vice president of cattle and farming at Sunny Valley Farm near Yorkville, Ill., says cow families are extremely important for his program. He says he is not in "cow country" and is limited by the farm's location — only 40 miles west of Chicago. Cow families allow his program to be recognizable across the country.

"We felt that it was the best way to track lineage as it relates to consistency of product, as it relates to performance and as it relates to building your knowledge base from generation to generation," Earl says. "Being able to take that and reflect back on that cow family or that lineage [allows you] to evaluate if you are progressing or digressing."

Carrying a name

The American Angus Association *Breeder's Reference Guide* discusses cow families in the section offering advice for naming registered Angus cattle.

"One of the distinctive characteristics of registered Angus throughout the world is the

use of 'family' names. An Angus family name comes from the dam (and that dam got it from her dam). This system has two basic advantages," the guide explains. "First, it is possible to call attention to a strain of females that are noted for their productivity within a herd.

"There are famous herds in the world in which all the cows trace to only a few foundation matrons. This was true in the earliest days of the breed, too. Some families then became known by the herd designation, which was a part of the name in a much more significant way than the family name. The Blackcap (family) cows of McHenry (herd), for instance, became known as the McHenry Blackcaps because they were widely recognized for their high level of productivity within the McHenry herd."

While not every herd uses them in a naming system, cow families represent a piece of Angus history that the next generation can identify. Cow families in the Angus herdbook can be traced back to the early 1900s and, even before that, to the cow families that were imported from Scotland in the late 1800s.

"The family names are very important, and we've always encouraged breeders to use

CONTINUED ON PAGE 123

the exact family name,” Van Dyke says, adding that breeders can correlate cow family names with the traits the family is known for passing on to their progeny. “It’s important that you keep them intact and not change them, because otherwise it can be very confusing, especially to new breeders.”

More than a name

Earl, Arthun and Van Dyke all say the cow families that have become popular throughout the years have done so because they are survivors. Economic traits such as fertility, milking ability, udder quality and fleshing ability are all reasons they survived and reasons they are the foundation for many herds.

“They’ve distinguished themselves separate from the others. They are survivors to this point,” Earl says. “They are a cow line that has been able to put six or eight of these traits together and do it on a consistent basis.”

For a breeder looking to build a foundation on certain cow families, Van Dyke offers some advice.

“First of all, he should identify the

characteristics that he as a new breeder wants intact in his herd. Once he’s identified those characteristics, then [he should] search out cow families that consistently supply those economic traits. That might take some time. That might take some travel,” he says. “Another thing I would encourage a new breeder to do is to always visually inspect any female that he’s starting out with. First, look at the pedigree. Then go and see if the animal lives up to her pedigree and her family name.”

“The nice thing about a cow family is that a guy in New York can pick up the *Angus Journal* or another publication, look at a pedigree and be familiar with that pedigree and be able to track that lineage back in his own herd. In a herd that he has visited, it gives him a knowledge base — a limited knowledge base — of the program, and that’s just based on cow families,” Earl says, adding that using cow families “opened our market



► Cow family names have a rich history. Many names can be traced to Angus ancestors in Scotland.

really from shore to shore, border to border.”

While breeders use cow families differently across the country, Van Dyke says, “I do know that breeding cattle this way works. It’s the easiest way to get consistency in your cow herd.”

