



The LaFranchi brothers—Henry, Nick and Al—have been in the cattle business all their lives. Cattle, and cattle alone, have supported them. Cattle have enabled them to add to the family's northern California ranch. And cattle are now putting the next generation (Henry's son Eric and daughter Cheryl) through college.

Although the LaFranchis have lived on Oak Ridge Ranch near Calistoga since 1912 and although cattle always have been their only means of support, there has been one major change during the last decade. For 40 years the cattle the family tended were Ayrshires; in the 70s the switch was made to Angus.

Henry's, Al's and Nick's father stocked the original ranch with dairy cattle; an FFA project begun in 1935 introduced the purebred Ayrshires.

Henry, who was in charge of the show cattle, was on the road with those Ayrshires every year for 40 years (with the exception of two years during World War II). He generally left in July and returned in November, bringing with him a good share of wins. And over the years the LaFranchi herd attained national prominence; it was considered by many, in fact, to be the top Ayrshire herd in the country. Two sales dispersed the herd—

LaFranchis' Oak Ridge Angus

The business at hand is strictly cattle—just like it's been for 70 years.

by Ann Gooding

one in the fall of 1975, the other the following spring. Their averages set breed records as did the price for an individual, a cow used as model for the breed association's stationery. Of the 203 mature cows sold, 196 went out of state.

From Milk to Meat

Although they were extremely successful with their dairy herd, LaFranchis had several reasons for wanting to change. One was the land. Their ranch was in hill country—not the best location for a dairy but ideal for raising beef. Another was the nature of dairying. "It

was a good business for the family but," says Henry, "I wouldn't go into it again at this stage of the game for anything. It's a different life. You are tied down. You have that twice a-day job that someone has to do and if you don't do it right and on schedule, you've wasted your time entirely."

So the decision was made. And by the time the Ayrshires were gone, LaFranchis were well on their way to building a beef herd. It was to be Angus.

The family had started buying a few beef cows in the mid-60s. At first breed didn't matter, but that changed with time and ex-



Left to right:
Nick, Cheryl,
Eric, Henry, Al

perience, like when LaFranchis calved out five Hereford heifers: Four of the calves had to be pulled and when it was all over, four heifers and three calves had survived.

About that same time LaFranchis bought 15 Angus females at a local auction. They weren't in the best of shape; obviously they'd not seen a lot of feed. But, says Henry, "We turned those little half-starved skinny cows out in the fall and by the next spring you wouldn't have recognized them. They really gained and firmed up and did well. We hauled them back to the auction and sold them and made good money." Although Henry is quick to point out that isolated incidents don't speak for an entire breed, fact is LaFranchis went Angus.

As In Dairy, So it Goes in Beef

Their goal was to raise Angus as important to the Angus business as their Ayrshires had been to the Ayrshire business. And their buying decisions were based at least partially on dairy experience. "Mainly," says Henry, "we were interested in cattle that had pretty good size to them because we always had extremely large cattle in our dairy herd."

As in the dairy herd, emphasis was placed both on performance and show ring appeal. "It seemed like we found in the dairy

business that you certainly have to have outstanding type if you're ever going to get into the elite of the breed. You pretty much have to have cattle that have performance production-wise and also have eye appeal enough to compete in the show ring. Over the years it seemed like our better show cattle were definitely in the better end of our producing cattle and I think that's very true in beef cattle."

Introduction to Emulous

At first, like any new breeders, LaFranchis had a lot to learn about bloodlines. On top of that, they found few records existed on beef cattle as compared to those on dairy cattle. They knew the kind of cattle they wanted, though, and one of their first herd bulls set the stage.

Ralph Clark, then secretary-manager of the Western States Angus Assn., recommended considering bulls available at the 1968 Cattleman's Expo being held in Las Vegas. LaFranchis could not attend so Bill Roche, American Angus Assn. regional manager, selected Sun Up Emulous 167, a bull from David Miller's Sun Up Farms, Smithville, Mo. He was LaFranchis' introduction to the Emulous line and to Miller's longtime performance-backed herd. The bull gave his

calves-out of a variety of cows collected from a variety of sales-uniformity. And his daughters met LaFranchis' specifications.

"We thought as we researched more and more into the thing," Henry says, "the Emulous cattle seemed to combine both performance and show ring appeal as well as any line we could see in the breed." They were on their way.

LaFranchis' next bull, Tehama Emulous K428, topped the Cal Polysale. He, too, had been raised in a performance herd, that of Bill Borror at Gerber. According to Henry the bull was outstanding, but sired fewer calves than LaFranchis would have liked before a virus put an abrupt end to his career.

A.I. Enters the Picture

With their dairy background LaFranchis were no strangers to artificial insemination, so when the American Angus Assn. liberalized its A.I. rules the brothers were ready to take advantage of the situation. "That," says Henry, "opened up a way for us to really get in the mainstream, to use some nationally-known sires."

A.I. bulls were and still are chosen on the basis of popularity and performance. Sayre Patriot, General JJ Patton, Ken Caryl Mr. Angus 8017, PS Power Play and Skarship

Educator, among others, have been used along with LaFranchis' own bulls, like senior herd sire Mon Reposa Star, the calf that topped the 1978 Mon Reposa sale at Jerome, Idaho. He's a son of Mon Reposa King 904 out of an Emulous 71 daughter, breeding that's especially popular in the West. And Star's progeny, says Henry, compare very well with that of the bulls used artificially.

The Ideal Cow

Henry's ideal cow would probably weigh around 1,400 lb. (no less than 1,200 lb. with a calf on her, he says) and would measure in the 51-54 inch range. She would need some elevation, but not tremendous depth of body. "That will come," Henry says, "as a cow gets older. And," he adds, "I really like cows that are feminine."

With that ideal in mind, LaFranchi stocked brood cows. And after some early purchases the brothers decided they had to pay a little more for higher quality. "Probably," Henry says, "a lot of people starting out figure they can't spend the money to get the top end but when you're in it a few years you find if you're going to improve you have to get some really top females." Some of those top-enders in the Oak Ridge herd came from Sun Up, others from leading consignment sales. Then, when part of the Ankony operation located in California, a number of cows were purchased there.

Now the LaFranchi herd (at around 200 brood cows) is pretty much complete. An occasional female is purchased but says Henry, "From here on it will be more selection out of our own families. We have three or four females that are just turning out really good cattle and I think five or six years down the road much more of our herd will be members of those really good families." A couple of them trace to Sun Up cows like Sun Up pudge 704 or Sun Up Heatherbloom B13 who has five daughters in the herd. And there's Mon Reposa Fawn from the Hilger herd at Middletown, a Mon Reposa King 904 daughter. Several others, Henry is confident, will surface from among the more recently acquired Ankony cows as culling continues.

Culling and Cow Sense

The herds on AHIR and culling is based loosely on weights but the three brothers know their cattle and according to Henry, "I think when you work with them as close as we do, you know the cows that turn out the better calves. You just keep those and take the ones that don't do the job for you and move them out."

Still, some emphasis is placed on weaning weights, mainly because that weight is taken on every calf. Yearling weights don't tell them much because, explains Henry, when the time rolls around to weigh yearlings, some calves already will have been sold. Others will have joined the ranks of commercial steers.

LaFranchis, by the way, also run steers on about 3,000 acres of nearby rented pasture. Their culled bull calves (subsequently castrated) join purchased steers to go on grass

late each fall; in a normal year each will have gained about 250 lb. by June.

Everyone, Every Day

As dairymen LaFranchis had to be (and were) topnotch managers. And that's not changed. As with the dairy all three brothers are involved every day. Everyone can do and does whatever needs done. And everyone is in on things like breeding decisions. There is, however, some division of labor. Nick does most of the A.I. work. Al handles the finances. Henry, now with the help of Eric and Cheryl, is in charge of the show cattle.

Both Eric and Cheryl, by the way, are college students. She's at Fresno State and he's at San Francisco State University. She's studying economics and finance and is on the livestock judging team; he's in music and interested in computers. Both have been actively involved in the ranch and with the cattle and both return home for vacations and some weekends. And although both intend to spend a few years after college away from the ranch, both intend to return.

Lush Winters, Dry Summers

Everything on the 1,600 acres is geared to cattle. All crops-hay and feed-are for cow herd consumption.

This northern California piece of real estate, no more than 25 miles from the Pacific Ocean, is most productive from about the first of February until the first of June. Summer is extremely dry, so to have cows in good condition for fall calving supplemental feeding is necessary from the first part of August until rains bring grass about five months later.

About 80% of the Oak Ridge cows calve in September and October. Most of the rest are spring calvers-many of which were bought out of the Midwest where they had been bred to calve that way to begin with.

Angus, LaFranchis have found, are a fertile breed, especially when they are as well managed as they are at Oak Ridge. "You sure have to be careful," Henry says, "with these cows that have calved if you've got a bull running with them. In the spring when they are in such good feed, they cycle right back in a matter of three weeks or so and get right back in calf. That's one of the real good features of the Angus breed. If you feed them and handle them right you won't have breeding problems."

Success Means Selling

"One thing you find out in the beef business," Henry says, "is once you get your herd built you are going to have a lot of cattle to merchandise, because if you don't they'll bury you."

"We've always felt that the commercial end of the business is still pretty much the real bread and butter of the industry. So we've always been pretty receptive to the range men in trying to breed cattle that would fill their needs. A big part of our market goes to the commercial man with Hereford cattle."

Customers bought private treaty or at consignment sales until September of 1980

when the family hosted its first annual production sale. All went well with 44 bulls averaging \$ 1,628; 58 females bringing \$ 1,294 each.

There's been a strong market and Henry explains why. "The bulls are turning out calves that will get big enough. We had a man come to our sale a year ago and he bought four of the top bulls. In his previous calf crop-all by those Oak Ridge bulls-he sold 199 head of calves that went to market with an average weight of 678 lb. right after weaning. He was really satisfied with that, I think when you turn out bulls that can do that you're going to be in business awhile."

Of course LaFranchis haven't simply waited for buyers to find them; they have made it their business to bring their cattle to the attention of their market.

Here the show ring has played a major role. And although Eric and Cheryl did take some calves to Denver last January, most of Oak Ridge's extensive showing has been confined to the West. And the LaFranchis have done well. Last fall they had three division champions at the Cow Palace. They've had both a grand and a reserve grand champion at the Junior Grand National. They've shown several class winners and a division champion at the Western National Angus Futurity in Reno. And Cheryl's proved her worth as national class showman in 1979 when she placed fifth in the traditionally tough National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest.

More Exposure

Show ring exposure has been augmented with participation in all-breed bull sales. A bull from Oak Ridge was champion Angus and high-grading range bull over 500 others in the 1979 Stockton All-Breeds Bull Sale. The ranch's 1978 California State Fair grand champion bull went on to rank second high-seller at Red Bluff and that year's Red Bluff Angus champion also came from Oak Ridge.

Thanks to participation in breed association activities, the LaFranchi name is a familiar one in Angus circles. Henry (who was a board member and then vice president of the Ayrshire association) has been on the boards of both the California and the Western States Angus Assn.'s and he's now first vice president of the Western States group. He was instrumental in forming California Angus Days, a 2-day sale, seminar and fun event sponsored each December by the California Angus Assn.

Henry attends most breed events and this year he also went to the California Cattlemen's Assn. convention where he feels his time was well spent. "You certainly come in contact with a lot of commercial cattlemen who use a lot of black bulls. I think the more interest you show these people, the more you know what their problems are and the kind of setups they have the better you can serve them."

And that's what LaFranchi plan to do. To serve their customers. To breed top-quality beef cattle. And to raise Angus as important to the Angus breed as their Ayrshires were to the Ayrshire breed. A