

Angus in Another Life

Wyoming sheep herdsman turns to Angus cattle for profit.

Story & photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Fred Roberts takes the first seat to the left at the local diner and orders his regular the same way he shares his story.

“Coffee black, eggs over easy, third generation.”

Quick to the point, the Wyoming rancher seems most interested in moving on to the next.

“Will that be it, Fred?” the waitress asks.

That’s it. No fluff, only the facts, and several hundred cattle to see.

“There’ve always been cattle,” he reiterates, but lingering over all is this: The Robertses were sheep people — still are sheep people — and this herdsman sees no reason to hide the fact.

“Four years ago we had 8,000 ewes,” he says. “I miss the sheep a lot.”

It shows in his half smile, his reminiscent eyes. The cattle make sense, but the sheep made him happy.

It was a migratory range operation, he says of the venture his grandfather started.

Just south of the tri-territory marker where Utah, Idaho and Wyoming collide, it’s as if the land were made for lambing. Cokeville, Wyo., an elk-hunter’s oasis, is Roberts’ home — at least half of the time.

“You’d go to the forest in the summer, then everybody would go to the desert in the winter,” he explains.

That meant Fred and his sister grew up in two places — two homes, two schools.

“When the sheep came back, I’d come back,” and on and on the decades flew.

There was pride in supplying U.S. wool for military garments and domestic hosiery, satisfaction in the land utilization, but labor issues

In another life, he raises beef.

Angus was the answer

How that beef turned to Angus, Roberts isn’t shy to share.

It was his dad who started the cattle deal, grazing Herefords on land unoccupied by sheep.

“Dad wasn’t too bad with the idea of Angus,” though, so when the son graduated from the University of Colorado and suggested a switch, they began adding to the herd.

Health and marketability piqued his interest.

“I started checking and liked different attributes of the Angus cow better.” Gesturing to a group of 2- and 3-year-olds gathered off the mountain for a drink, he says, “It’s for the obvious reasons.”

That’s how he “got going with the blacks.” He stayed because they worked.

“You could do different things with them,” he says. “They had more potential.”

There was potential in the kind of calves they raise, the health they maintain, “then there’s the opportunities given what the Angus breed has done with *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®).”

The latter connected him with a friend’s college classmate.

“The thing about Fred is, he doesn’t just half-heartedly do anything,” says Gary Darnall, owner-manager of



Between the Sublette mountain range and Raymond canyon, Fred Roberts has seen Angus cattle work, watched them survive and multiply in an area that can be unrelenting.

became too much to bear.

“They wouldn’t relent,” Roberts says. Add an upswing in predation and his only son’s preference to stay put, and the decision was made: He’d sell, but he wouldn’t like it.

“Ok, load them,” said the voice on the other end of the line. Sight unseen, the flock marketed themselves.

“It was kind of a reputation deal,” he says. “Now I just buy feeder lambs in the fall and fill my shares in the lamb cooperative.”

Darnall Feedyard near Harrisburg, Neb. Today they're business partners and friends.

No matter the issue, Roberts will face it, Darnall says. He'll do what it takes to address a problem and prevent it from happening again.

"He wants to be better and do better," Darnall adds.

In the 12 years Darnall has fed cattle for Roberts, he's watched numbers climb.

From 2015 to 2017, cattle earning CAB or Prime premiums grew by more than 10 points to 40%. A recent group of 297 steers and heifers went 91% Choice and better.

"You spend a lot of money on genetics," Roberts says. Feeding calves out tells which ones are worth it. "That's the only way you're going to realize if you're improving or not."

You have to be committed to it, he says, acknowledging feeding and retained ownership isn't everyone's cup of tea. There are years you'll make money and others you won't, but the experience and the knowledge are worth the price.

"I have other reasons, too," Roberts adds. He likes weaning calves earlier than others. "That gives the cows a chance to rebound, and the following year they'll breed back better."

Darnall sees links between Roberts' outlook on life and cattle: "It's a business decision with Fred, No. 1. Whatever it is, he's always striving."

Much like his sheep, his cattle have gained a reputation with their feeder. Along with Darnall's veterinarian, the three will talk on

"It's a business decision with Fred, No. 1. Whatever it is, he's always striving."

— Gary Darnall

the phone, discuss bloodlines and compare notes before Roberts buys a bull.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) and Angus dollar value indexes (\$Values) enter in the equation. There's weaning weight and beef value (\$B) to consider when it comes to feeding; birth weight and maternal traits for those he plans to keep. In a cow he prefers femininity with good udder, conformation and disposition. A cow-family history of success stories can seal the deal.

"He looks for genetics to increase the maternal side of the cow, but he's also trying to improve the end

product," Darnall says. He puts those cattle at the top of their class.

A new challenge

Late July in western Wyoming has a way about it. Dry and desolate, vacancy is its charm. However, if cattle could communicate, the Roberts herd would certainly boast.

For the rancher, a drive through the pasture looks different now than it did before, with no sheep in sight.

"I suppose my cows are all right," he says softly. From the seat of his Ford pickup, a slight shrug exposes the understatement.

Between the Sublette mountain range and Raymond canyon, he's seen them work, watched them survive and multiply in an area that can be unrelenting.

"Let me put it this way," he says, "I've tried."

History shows he'll keep it up — be their corner man till the end.

With his son Kyle back from college and new dreams to fill together, Roberts seems to expect something new to pique his interest and satisfy consumers.

He's been there before but there's another species on the hill. **AJ**

Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

"There is potential in the calves Angus cows raise and the health they maintain," says Roberts. "Then there's the opportunities given what the Angus breed has done with Certified Angus Beef®."

