

# THE ERDMANN ERA

*It was a combination of things, LeRoy Erdmann says, that led to success at Erdmann Angus Ranch. "The time was right—five years earlier and people would not have been ready. And we got hooked up with people who were honest." And he says, "We stand behind our cattle."*

Fifteen years ago the average Angus breeder in New York or Missouri or California would have been hard put to point out Wetonka, S.D., on the map. But then 15 years ago the location of Wetonka wouldn't have been of much interest to the average Angus breeder.

Fifteen years ago Ora Erdmann marked his 25th year in the Angus business near Wetonka, 20 of them devoted to registered cattle.

The Erdmann cattle were big, not at all the right size by that day's purebred stand-

by Ann Gooding

ards. So most of the calves sold as feeders, although neighboring commercial breeders didn't mind taking extra bulls off Ora's hands. Commercial breeders had no objections to the extra pounds Erdmann bulls put on their calves.

But registered Angus breeders? Well, they didn't know the Erdmanns existed. And if they had known, they probably wouldn't have been particularly interested. Erdmann cattle 15 years ago were long, too long. And tall, too tall. And big.

## One Little Bull

Because he didn't think much of the short cattle that were the rage in the 1950s and early '60s, Ora stuck with his good-sized cows. "We did use one little bull," Ora admits, "but his calves weighed between

350 and 360 lb. at weaning, while our own weighed 500 lb. We were selling cattle by the pound and it didn't make much sense to breed those 'good' ones."

Some time in the early '60s, the Erdmanns trucked some steers to a show in nearby Aberdeen. They were, says LeRoy, an especially good set of steers. But they stood eighth out of 11 pens. As it turned out, the champion pen averaged 350 lb. and brought 31¢ and the Erdmann steers averaged 476 lb. and sold at 38¢. The feeder knew what he was after even if he had to disagree with the judge.

So the Erdmanns went on raising their cattle, running about 250 cows, using home-grown bulls. They were getting \$200, \$275, \$325 and occasionally as high as \$400—whatever the market allowed.

But that was due to change. A size revolution was rumbling in the distance.

## Performance Test Results

In the mid-'60s the Erdmanns began comparing the results of their own performance test with those published by a Montana test station. They couldn't help but notice that their entire group of bulls on test at home was doing as well as the top group at the test station. This prompted them to enter a few bulls in the test station, and in the spring of 1968 they took home a \$2,200 average which, LeRoy says, was \$1,600 more than they had ever received for a bull.

Incidentally, just prior to that sale, a representative from ANGUS JOURNAL by the name of Jim Baldrige sold the Erdmanns the first ad they'd ever placed beyond a local paper.

The next fall they put 18 bulls on test, 15 in two Montana stations and three in Iowa. Some of those bulls didn't do so well—a couple went for \$800, three didn't even sell.

But there's more to the story.

## Denver Champs

The two \$800 bulls ended up at the 1970 National Western, where they stood grand and reserve grand champion. Mr. Marshall Pride 507, shown jointly by Del's Angus Farm, Stoughton, Wis., and Mole's Hill Farm, Sharon, Conn., was reserve grand. And champion Black Revolution 628, owned by Aristocrat Angus (then at Long-



Alongside a barn at Erdmann Angus Ranch there's a lot and, as lots go, it's pretty ordinary. Its solid board fences are painted barn-red. It's fairly small and, in the spring, muddy. This lot has held a few bulls in its day, one would reckon, and that's what it was being used for early this past April. But this year there was something special about it. The three bulls it held (Erdmann-raised yearlings) have been valued in the neighborhood of \$1.5 million. There was Kazoo Jumbo 819, the \$1 million bull owned jointly with Bon View Farms, Canova, S.D., and Jim Baldrige, North Platte, Neb. The Alberta Jumbo GR 22D son weighed 1,280 lb. on his first birthday, stood 52 inches at the shoulder, 54 at the hip and measured 86 inches poll to pins. His first calf, due to hit the ground the first week in October, will be out of Columbus Adventure 310's dam. Nitro was also in the pen. He's Cracker Jack Baros 1119, the bull who topped last fall's production sale at \$110,000, then a breed auction record. Cottonwood Angus Farms, Pipestone, Minn.; Frey Angus Ranch, Granville, N.D.; and Kadence Angus Ranch, St. Ignatius, Mont., won that bid. The third bull in the pen was Cracker Jack Baros 2459, another Cracker Jack son, as yet without a nickname. Erdmanns are partnering with with three other breeders on him—Styles Plainview Farms, Brentford; Sydenstricker Angus Farms, Mexico, Mo.; and Darle Dawes & Family, Urbana, Ind.



LeRoy Erdmann

mont, Colo.), sold for what was then a National Western record. Schaefer Farms, Jackson, Tenn., paid \$105,000 for one-third interest.

Another bull out of that 1969 test group was Bob Sitz's Marshall of Wetonka 648, a bull who had made the second high yearling weight of the 450 bulls on test (a Charolais nosed him out by 2 lb.).

Marshall Pride 514, a bull who later proved his power in the Jim O'Neill herd at Logan, Iowa, was one of the bulls the Erdmanns hauled home.

And one of the bulls that didn't sell, Marshall Pride W528, was destined to be the Erdmanns' first high-dollar bull. After he returned to Wetonka from the test station, he sold for \$100,000 and then went on to win the 1970 futurity supreme championship.

#### The Bull and the Times

The futurity write-up in the September 1970 *ANGUS JOURNAL* tells a little bit about the bull and the times: "The trend toward longer, taller, leaner and heavier muscled cattle was very much in evidence

this year. The unprofitable practice of carrying show animals to a high degree of finish has practically disappeared if this 23rd futurity is an indication of the future. In its place are the requirements of structural soundness, growability and definite lack of wastiness—all more practical economic factors in the eyes of today's cattlemen.... The supreme champion of the show this year was the grand champion bull, Marshall Pride W528, owned and shown jointly by White Hall Farms, Charlottesville, Va., and the Erdmann Angus Ranch, Wetonka, S.D."

And that's not the only mention of an animal from Wetonka. The article continues, "The grand champion female of the show was also a jointly owned individual—Proud Lassie 649, shown by Walbridge Farms, Millbrook, N.Y., and Erdmann Angus Ranch, Wetonka, S.D."

Incidentally, Jim Baldrige earlier had offered to buy the Erdmanns' 1969 test station bulls. And LeRoy had met him in Wiertown to discuss the transaction. Although the Erdmanns had decided to ask \$1,000 a round, LeRoy was hesitant to ask

that much money; \$1,000 a head was pretty high. Baldrige didn't broach the subject; the whole conversation neatly side-stepped the bulls. Later, after the bulls had established their worth, LeRoy found out Baldrige had intended to offer \$1,000 apiece. That was as high as he could go, but he was afraid the price would insult the Erdmanns.

#### Another Episode

In yet another episode created by the size revolution, the Erdmanns took some bulls to a South Dakota production records sale in Highmore. One of them, the longest and tallest bull there, brought \$800—about \$2,200 less than the going rate that day on the compact models. Buyers weren't quite ready for size. In fact, some were adamantly against it. One man told LeRoy: "I wish I had \$800 to buy that bull...I'd take him home and castrate him." The bull was Marshall Pride 316, the "Legs" bull who later documented his worth in the Stark & Wetzel herd, Cloverdale, Ind.

But those tales belong to history.

Today Erdmanns don't have any problem finding buyers for their cattle. The size revolution has been settled, at least for the time being. Bigger makes more sense in the feedlot; practical cattlemen have won out. And the Erdmanns are practical cattlemen.

Needless to say, then, by 1970 Angus breeders were looking to Wetonka. They needed to get their cattle up off the ground. They needed to give them length and trimness and size. And the Erdmanns have been breeding those traits into their cattle since the '40s. Length and trimness and size were nothing new to them.

#### Proves the Point

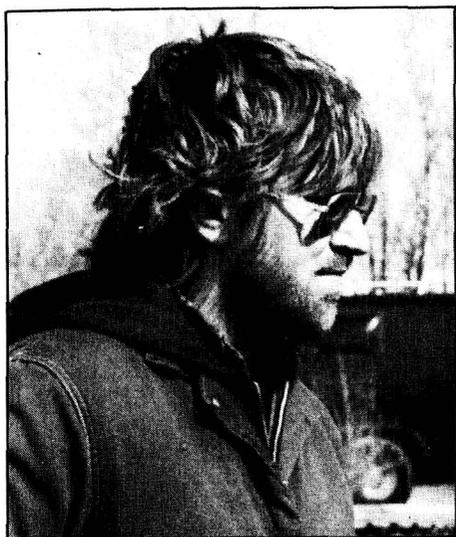
The 1979 Western National supreme champion probably proves that point as well as anything. The Western National is a strong show where an old-fashioned animal wouldn't stand a chance of being pulled to the top of the line. And the female that made it to the supreme champion spot could hardly have been described as old-fashioned. But Queen Blackbird 2396, the Erdmann-bred heifer co-owned with Reznicek Farms, Inc., Hettick, Ill., was out of a 20-year-old cow and by a 14-year-old bull.

Thanks to growing demand for their cattle and persuasion from Baldrige, the Erdmanns decided to hold a production sale. Their first, scheduled for Oct. 27, 1970, was to be Baldrige's second sale in his new role as sale manager. (His first was W.J. Harrer's Green Meadow Ranch dispersion at Helena, Mont.) Baldrige estimated the 125 sale bulls would average around \$1,000. But with the last rap of the gavel, they'd averaged better than twice that.

"People called that first sale a fluke," LeRoy remembers. In fact, the success of the second sale still didn't convince the skeptics. It took several increasingly good sales to establish the Erdmann reputation.

#### An Event to Attend

Now the annual production sale ranks as



Ron Erdmann

an event to attend; many Angus breeders automatically plan to be in Wetonka the third Tuesday in October. Last year, in fact, more than 500 people attended the now traditional pre-sale banquet hosted by the Erdmann family—Ora and Geneva, LeRoy and Gail, Albert and Ron, and their families. And estimates peg the 1979 sale attendance at 700-800, a number of those buyers.

So far, each year's sale has been better than the last. "The cattle have done well for people, made money for most," LeRoy says. "That's why we can increase our gross every year."

And the Erdmanns enjoy a good trade in addition to the production sale. They still test about 100 bulls every year, then sell most of them as yearlings. About 80% of those go to commercial breeders, both repeat and new customers. These cattle pretty much advertise themselves, LeRoy says.

One breeder will come and buy a few bulls, his neighbors see them, like what they see and follow suit.

The Erdmanns do not sell out of their cow herd. Females sell primarily through the production sale.

And even though Erdmann cattle have a certain reputation for bringing top prices, the Erdmanns do have cattle for all pocket-books.

**Started With 12 Heifers**

The Erdmanns don't buy many females. In fact, of the 600 head they run now, 95% trace to the original 12 heifers purchased in the '40s from an area breeder, John Porter.

Until 1968 they used their own bulls. They've bought some out-cross bulls since then, many of whose names have become household words in the Angus industry—Happyvale Stud, Cracker Jack, Skyhigh, Mighty Marshal, Alberta Jumbo.

LeRoy selects the bulls. And there's probably no secret to his selection techniques. The trick, though, is knowing cattle and being able to recognize what they need. And LeRoy believes that takes longer than the 7-year life span of an average Angus herd.

A bull, he advises, has to be out of a superior cow, one who is fertile and has plenty of milk. In fact, he believes the cow is really more important than the bull himself.

"We are buying the biggest we can find that are made the way we can live with and out of a good cow. And breeder reputation is important. Price does not determine what we buy."

**Alberta Jumbo GR 22D**

LeRoy picked Alberta Jumbo GR 22D, bred in the Tom Meerheim herd, Mayerthorpe, Alta., using that criteria, paying \$3,000 at a sale that averaged more than that. He thought the bull would work pretty well on the Revolution line. He has done that and more. His cross on a Columbus

Adventure 310-bred cow produced Kazoo, the breed's first \$1 million bull.

LeRoy also selects replacement heifers. There, too, he claims size cannot be the only selection criteria. For one thing, he stays away from a female that could become bad-uddered. For another, he selects away from the tendency to stifle.

"We've been accused of not being performance breeders any more. We are more than most," LeRoy says, "but we also want eye appeal. We want them to keep growing. We want tight udders. When we tell our banker we have a young bull that weighs 1,300 lb., he says, 'That's nice.' But if we tell him we sold a bull for \$25,000, he says, 'That's performance'."

**Genetic Progress**

It's been said that embryo transplant may be the fastest way to genetic improvement, but at this point the Erdmanns aren't keen on transplanting. LeRoy says he doesn't know anyone in the Angus business who's made it pay yet. "You've got to raise a good one just to pay for the transplant. And there are enough good cattle around that if you raise (from an embryo transplant) the best you've ever raised, someone else is going to raise seven more that are better."

LeRoy admits he will be interested when embryo freezing has been perfected. He would like to get some extra calves out of superior older cows, the ones with a score of years and lots of good calves to their credit.

Anyway, LeRoy believes there's a better way to genetic progress than embryo transplant. It takes numbers, he admits, but his formula starts with 100 females. The best you can find. When you breed them, he says, you'll get some good ones. And you take it from there. One hundred happens to be the number of replacement heifers at Erdmann Angus Ranch.

*A few years back, with several successful sales behind them, the younger Erdmanns publicly expressed appreciation to their folks, honoring them prior to the ranch's production sale. It was a thank you, LeRoy says, for laying the foundation.*

Ora Erdmann

Geneva Erdmann



### Baby Calves Tend to be Light

About two-thirds of the Erdmann calf crop arrives in March and April. Last year the birth weights averaged 70 lb. on heifers, 74 lb. on bulls.

There have been some complaints, LeRoy says, that Erdmann calves are too small at birth. But those calves have a way of growing and gaining.

Although many of their cattle have garnered cups and ribbons and banners in major shows all over the country, the Erdmanns do not field a show string. They just aren't set up for it. Theirs is not a show-oriented operation.

When you get to the bottom line, beef is still the Erdmanns' main order of business. The hamburger market looms large on that front, LeRoy thinks. And he believes, too, that cattlemen are going to have to raise cattle with built-in flexibility.

About seven or eight years ago, they sent a group of steers back east to be finished. Some were killed at 1,100 lb., some at 1,400 lb., some at 1,600 lb.—all with yield grades less than two. "They kept on growing and held their yield grade," LeRoy says. "So it's possible to raise cattle that will do that." And he feels that's the kind of critter cattlemen must raise to stay in the beef business.

### What's Changed?

How have fame and fortune changed the Erdmanns?

"Well," LeRoy says, "it's made us busier. But the way we live hasn't changed." The families live in comfortable homes. And LeRoy admits indoor plumbing is a nice convenience. He recalls a visit from some prominent eastern breeders early on when his home didn't happen to have plumbing. He was a little embarrassed, he says, but that's the way things were.

LeRoy admits one thing—success has made it a lot easier to do the things they want to do—to breed better cattle.

But basically the ranch is run just like it was 20 years ago. The Erdmann ranch wasn't a showplace then and it isn't a showplace now. The same fences surround the same type of cattle. The Marshall Pride and Black Revolution lines the Erdmanns developed and the Eileenmere line they maintained still appear on the pedigrees. The same lots and the same barns still house bulls, many of them Erdmann-bred, although a few from other herds have joined them. There is a sale barn, something that wasn't there 15 years ago, and there might be a new shed or two. And there's a comfortable rig suited to showing visitors around the ranch, something that wouldn't have been necessary a few years back.

But the Erdmanns feel no compulsion to create a showplace image. Erdmann Angus Ranch always has been and will continue to be a purely practical cow ranch geared toward production. One would be hard put to find anything fancy—it is a solid working ranch and the cattle it produces are solid working cattle.

### But There's More to Do

Although not all good Angus cattle originated at this ranch near Wetonka, a fair share of them did. And one would suspect, after a herd visit, that the Erdmanns are nowhere near done producing top Angus.

One might be inclined to think the Erdmanns would be tempted to rest on their laurels. But that's a far cry from the truth. LeRoy is not content where he is, says one close associate. He is determined to progress.

That, in fact, is what the family likes about all this—the challenge—the challenge, they say, and the people. ♪



Gail and LeRoy Erdmann

*Those of you who have been to Erdmann Angus Ranch may recall the old barn at the home place that's off to the left on the way to the sale barn.*

*When LeRoy was a kid, he and a hired man were in that barn checking a cow and her triplets. LeRoy had been looking over the *ANGUS JOURNAL*, reading about the thousands and thousands of dollars some breeders were getting for their cattle. He remarked to the hired man that maybe someday Erdmann cattle would sell that well. The man looked at him and said, "You're dreamin'."*

*And a few years later LeRoy moved into what had been a skunk-infested house, remodeled just enough to be livable. LeRoy thought then that it would be nice to be able to build a new home.*

*The dreams came true.*



*Wetonka, S.D., once a thriving prairie town with two banks and several grain elevators, is pretty quiet these days. The school is boarded up, the streets fairly well deserted. Commerce has moved to Aberdeen (population 31,000) about 25 miles east and south across the plains. An Indian word, Wetonka means "Land of the Rising Sun." Ora Erdmann was raised about 4 miles south of this little town. His kids went to school there. Perhaps the most notable thing about Wetonka these days (at least from the viewpoint of cattlemen) is the herd of Erdmann-raised Angus scattered on 10,000 acres in the neighborhood.*