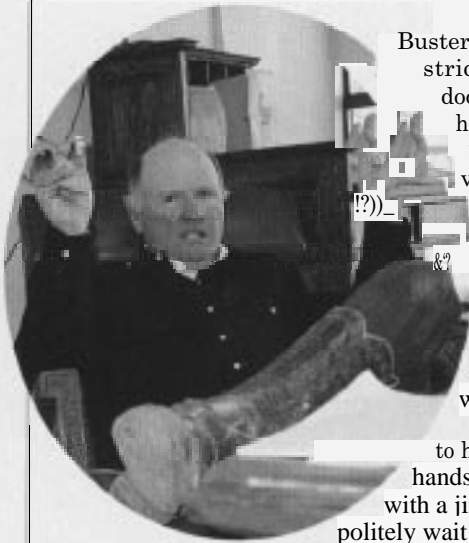


A Cattleman W

Story & photos by Janet Mayer



Buster Welch purposefully strides out through the door of his ranch office, hand extended in greeting. It is evident by the

very strong handshake and rugged attire of worn stove-pipe boots, spurs, jeans and neck bandanna, that this tall, slender man is no stranger to everyday work on his ranch.

He opens the door to his office and five ranch hands jump to their feet with a jingling of spurs. They

politely wait to be introduced. Several of the men are wearing chaps. After introductions, they don dusty hats completing outfits that confirm that a lot of work at this ranch is done on horseback.

Welch explains they have just finished eating lunch. He and his men are going over their afternoon work schedule. As the men depart through a door in the rear of the office, the mouth-watering smell of good food becomes obvious. A kitchen containing a long pine table with benches is visible through the doorway.

Their cook has some real good leftovers if anyone is hungry. The offer and the smell of the food make the fast-food burger eaten enroute from the airport much regretted.

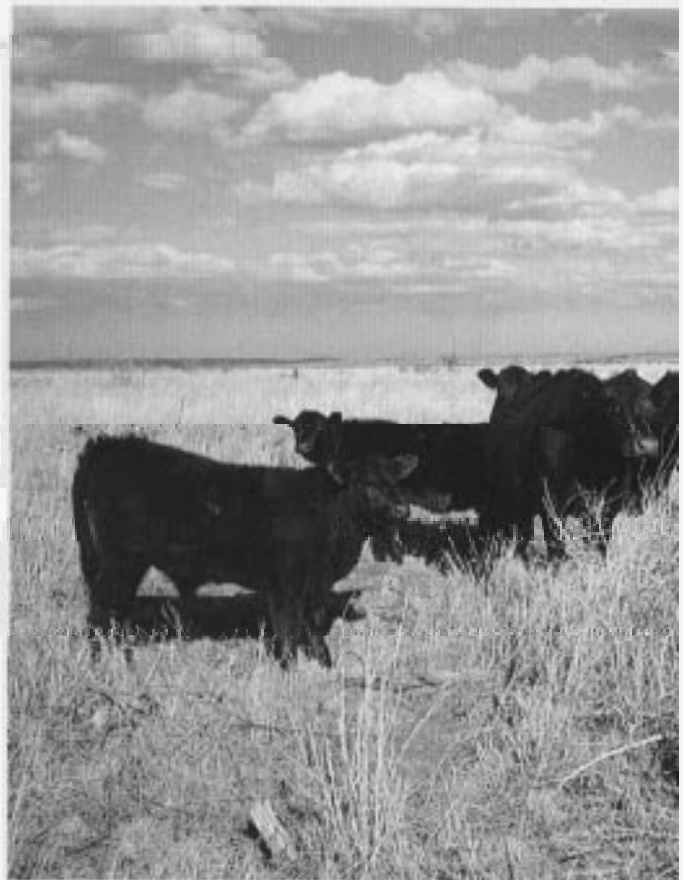
Welch settles himself behind a large, ornate wooden desk. His work-worn white Stetson hat lies brim-up on the floor nearby. An old saddle sits on a rack in a corner of the room; above it hanging on the wall is an equally old-looking pair of chaps. Several western paintings hang on another wall. Numerous rolls of bedding occupy a large area of floor space near the doorway to the kitchen.

In later conversation, Welch relates that the old saddle is special because it is made of leather tanned by Ulysses S. Grant's grandfather.

Welch perches a pair of tinted glasses on his nose and smiles. "I guess you noticed everybody is real busy today?" he says. "Did you see the chuckwagon outside and the bedrolls over there? Well, that's because we're getting ready to go out and roundup the fall calves for branding the day after tomorrow. I really love getting out and working the cattle on horseback; I like to be among the cattle and with nature."

This cattleman believes the old ways are still the best way for working cattle.

"I feel I can't ranch as efficiently from an air-conditioned



(middle) Ranching on the Brazos River Valley of Texas is never easy. Drought conditions in north Texas last winter and early spring forced Buster Welch to feed extra grain cubes to his Angus cow herd.

office or through the windshield of a pickup truck as I can using horses," he says in his soft west Texas drawl.

The Welch's Ranch is located along a fork of the Brazos River, near Rotan, Texas. The operation does not use modern day techniques when working their cattle. In fact, their methods would probably be more comparable to a cattle ranch in the mid-1800s.

Welch and his wife, Sheila, take great pride that the traditional ranching methods they practice are keeping the heritage of the Old West alive. All stock work at the ranch is done on horseback. In the winter, horses and wagons are used to take feed to the cattle.

"They've never improved on a horse for handling cattle," Welch says. "Our methods tend to keep the cattle more gentle and easy to work with. Ranching the old, traditional way is also cheaper and easier."

During the roundup, the ranch crew stays out on the

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range until they have completed their work. To accommodate the crew, a camp, complete with a chuckwagon, is set up nearby.

"I like the chuckwagon camped right where we are working," he says. "If we run into trouble or need to put in longer hours with the cattle, we can keep on working until the job is finished."

The authentic old chuckwagon is usually the focal point of a camp. It's a barbershop, cafeteria and social center. To cover the 76,000-acre ranch, the camp will relocate six or seven times on one drive.

Another reason Welch likes this method of working cattle is that the animals are less stressed. During a roundup, strays are first cut from the herd, followed by bulls and cows that haven't calved. Calves are then roped, hot branded and vaccinated. He says the calves are not stressed by this method because they are away from their mothers only about one or two minutes.

To know Welch's past is to understand his fascination with the old ways of ranching. He was born 62 years ago in Texas. From the time he was a small boy, his purpose in life was to be a rancher.

His mother died three weeks after he was born. He was brought up by his grandparents on a modest stock farm north of Sterling City. His grandfather, a retired sheriff, is still remembered with respect in west Texas.

Growing up in the area of Texas that seemed to be strangely isolated from modern times resulted in Welch's uncanny knowledge of cowboys, horses, cattle and the glorious past of the Old West.

While Welch was still young, his father remarried and moved him, his new wife, and her two children to Midland. Being separated from his grandparents turned Welch into a truant from school and a runaway. Finally, at the age of 13, he ran away from home for good.

"I only went as far as the sixth grade in school. So I guess you might say I left home with an uncluttered mind," Welch says with a laugh.

During his early years on his own, he worked for such famous cattle operations as the Proctors, Four Sixes, the Matador and the Pitchfork. Starting as a youthful bronc buster, he eventually gained what amounted to a full-fledged graduate education in coyboying. Some years later, he tried rodeoing to earn money to buy a ranch. But he quickly found that wasn't the answer to his problem because the possibility of injury far outweighed any money he might win.

About that time, the cutting horse began to gain popularity as a contest animal. Welch cashed in on his horse training talents to set himself up in the ranching business. By the 1950s, Welch was pretty well established in cattle ranching and was running 800 cows on leased land.

Then a drought wiped him out.

Not being a person who looks back, he again



Cowboys prepare their camp during a cattle roundup. To accommodate the crew and cattle herds on this 76,000-acre ranch, it will be relocated six or seven times.

went to training and competing with cutting horses.

Welch thinks of himself primarily as a rancher. People involved with cutting horses, however, know him otherwise. Many know him as an excellent trainer and keen competitor who can be a major obstacle on their road to fame and fortune in the world of cutting horse competition. He has won the National Cutting Horse Futurity five times. He and Sheila, a highly skilled horsewoman in her own right, still enter numerous cutting horse contests each year.

Although Welch admittedly loves horses, ranching and his herd of Angus and Limousin cattle are his main interest.

"Although I feed cattle and run yearlings, I am mainly a cow-calf man. That's my first love and the segment of the industry I relate to most," he says.

This cattleman hasn't always raised the Angus and Limousin cross. His first cows were Herefords. But he had so much trouble with their eyes and udders that he decided to try another breed. He liked the Angus breed, but at that time they had the reputation in Texas for being hard to breed back.

"When I was a kid I remember hearing about how you couldn't get an Angus cow to rebreed," Welch says. "I think the breed got this reputation when a bunch of investors bought a lot of land north of Midland. The investors went up to Iowa and bought about 6,000 Angus cows. They brought them down and turned them out on the dry desert land. The first year they had about a 60 percent calving rate; the next year about 30 percent. At the time, most of the ranchers were raising Herefords or Hereford crosses, so not too many people were interested in trying to breed Angus."

For a long time, the only people who bred Angus in Texas were either small farmers or people who raised cattle as a hobby. By the time Welch was considering the Angus breed, however, several producers in west Texas were already successfully breeding them.

"Roy Spire was one of the ranchers who was doing good with the breed, so I bought 650 Angus cows from him," Welch says. "I have been raising Angus ever since. That was 32 years ago."

The Angus cow is really the base of his 1,400-cow commercial operation. "They are an outstanding, thrifty, smooth, meaty kind of a cow, which consistently give me good calves. They're also real easy to care for," he says.

A larger-framed beef breed just wouldn't do as well in the dry country where his ranch is located. The Angus and Limousin breeds seem well suited to the rough terrain. He has found the Angus cows can get in poor shape during a drought, but will keep giving milk. If it rains, they will come up on their milk before they start to get fat. He also likes the fact that the Angus cows rebreed easily, even during a dry year.

"I don't want the biggest or the best kind of anything. I just want the optimum — a cow that can go back out there, cross two or three canyons, go up on the top of the mesa and bring me a calf back next year."

"The Angus breeders kind of have me worried now," he says. "The cattle seem to be getting too big. I don't want the biggest or the best kind of anything. I just want the optimum — a cow that can go back out there, cross two or three canyons, go up on the top of the mesa and bring me a calf back next year."

Welch likes his cows to weigh between 900 and 1,000 pounds with their working clothes on. When they get much heavier than that, it takes a lot of grass and protein to get them to rebreed.

Crossbreeding is done because it gives the calves hybrid vigor and extra weight. Welch chose to cross with the Limousin breed because it is very similar in type to Angus. Other cattlemen believe that a three-way cross is best. He says he hasn't found a third breed, however, that would enhance his crossbreeding program.

Most of Welch's cattle are marketed by private treaty to feedlots. He has found the Angus/Limousin cross is very popular with the feeders because it produces calves weighing about 50 pounds extra when weaned. Average weaning weight for fall steer calves is about 650 pounds; spring steer calves wean at about 565 pounds. The average slaughter weights are between 1,150 to 1,175 pounds.

He has found if the cross gets too far toward the Limousin, and the calves get too much size, the feedlots won't pay as much.

Welch feels there is a problem today with cattle producers being pulled in too many directions by outside forces. Their own production records and pocketbook tell them they should wean calves that are as heavy as possible. The feeder wants a fast-gaining calf; the packer wants an animal that grades low Choice with yield grade 2.

"I think the cowman himself needs to remember that the first thing he has to do is get a calf from each cow every year," he says. "Furthermore, he needs to do that as efficiently and cheaply as he can. You don't necessarily have to have the heaviest calves to put the most dollars in your pocket. Producing for maximum efficiency and profit is a lot different from producing for maximum output."

The present calving rate at the Welch Ranch is 97 percent, proving that Welch pays close attention to breeding and calving consistency. The cows must spread out over a vast expanse of the ranch to utilize the forage available; therefore, most births are unassisted and the newborn calves are not weighed nor tagged in any way.

Employees don't make regular rounds watching for births. If a cow is observed in trouble, however, assistance is given. The main calving seasons at the ranch are October through December, and February through April. About 650 cows calve in each time period.

Because of the rugged terrain of the ranch, many cows

may not be observed for as long as two or three months so the type of bulls Welch uses on his cows is very important. He uses five or six Limousin bulls in each pasture.

Past experiences has taught Welch to be very selective when buying bulls. He used to buy 30 or 40 bulls. But after they had grown for about four months, there would only be one-third of them he would like. He would then have to buy more and go through the sorting process again.

So a few years ago, Welch decided to buy a set of bulls that would meet his needs.

"I bought 150 close-bred Limousin bull calves and kept sorting and shaping them until I had 50 just alike," he says. "They weren't the 50 best bulls particularly, but 50 bulls with exact conformation. Then I sold the other 100. Now I have the best battery of uniform bulls ever."

Welch doesn't use EPDs to select his bulls. He thinks EPDs are good from the standpoint of giving the industry a way to evaluate the bull's performance and his ability to pass that on to his offspring, but they don't take into account structural correctness or conformation.

"I feel an animal that is pleasing to the eye of an experienced cowman is one that puts a lot of meat on the table. Also, I like to know and visit the man who sells me my bulls."

The ranch bulls are in use five or six months out of the year. Welch first uses bulls on fall-calving cows; then they are picked up about the first of March and well fed until they are turned out with the spring-calving cows the first of May.

He feels some of the cows are getting too far toward the Limousin breed, so there will be a need to add some straight-bred Angus bulls to the herd in the near future.

"I wish there was some way all of the steers could be crossbreds and the heifers born straight Angus. That would be just great," he says with a grin.

Selection of replacement heifers is also important to Welch. He likes to go out on horseback to select the heifers while they are still with their mothers. He likes a heifer that is narrow shouldered and feminine in appearance.

The heifers are usually bred ahead of the cows to calve at two years of age. Calves are left on the mothers until the cows wean their calves, which results in the heifers nursing a calf for nine or 10 months. If a heifer doesn't have enough milk to support a calf for that long, she is culled.

Most culling is done by what Welch sees on horseback. Culling also depends on whether a cow produces a good calf yearly, and if she does, what the selling weight of her calf will be. If he misses anything beforehand, he usually catches it when the cattle go through the chutes for their fall shots.

Records are kept on spray, vaccinations, weaning weights, average weight when sold, and price per pound. They are also kept for which pasture cows are in, length of stay, and dates of when bulls are turned out and picked up.

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Recordkeeping is kept to a minimum, but all of the Angus cows are numbered. The number and short history of each cow is entered into a computer.

"I don't feel records are as crucial to the operation as having a good eye," Welch says. "I think it's real important to know your country and to know what it can produce. That is really more important than the cattle."

It's obvious that Welch knows his ranch country well. His cattle receive minimal amounts of supplement feed, yet still maintain a respectable calving rate and weaning weights.

In the rougher sections of the ranch, protein blocks are used for the fall-calving cows in the top country, grain cubes are fed. Cows are fed every two or three days, allowing for three to four pounds of feed per cow, per day. No crops are raised at the ranch with the exception of a few fields of small grains. Wild range grasses and some wild rye are the main cattle feed. The cattle also eat mesquite beans, which doesn't make Welch too happy.

The ranch experienced drought conditions in 1989 and early 1990 that make feeding cattle more difficult. Welch has learned not to implant steer calves when drought conditions exist because it seems to hinder them instead of making them gain. Last year the implanted steers weighed less than the heifers who had not been implanted.

"I would have to say that droughts are probably one of the biggest worries of ranchers in this part of the country," he says. "My old granddaddy had a saying about droughts that kind of says it all: 'If it will rain, I don't care who is in the White House.'"

"Well, like him, I sure do hope for rain. You also have to watch what the government does, because a lot of it affects the cattleman."

Welch feels that tax-shelter ranching created the surplus cattle and low prices that existed until the laws were repealed. Now the cow business has experienced five years of reasonably profitable calf prices.

"Even though other factors have contributed to the better prices, the fact remains that people analyze whether or not to get in the cow business based on profitability, not on tax sheltering ability," he says.

Welch views the cattle business as being at a very exciting point in time.

"There have been great technology strides recently with computerized recordkeeping and better means of evaluating sires that help increase a cattleman's efficiency," he says. "The fact remains that the cow-calf business is as much an art as a science. You have to combine a feel for the land, the climate and the cow to develop a successful operation. Despite all our sophisticated advances, the best way to do that is to get out with those cows, know them, know your country and never quit learning."

