Texas Ranch Updates Legacy

Cattle have been raised since the early 1800s on the Bradley 3 Ranch (B3R) in Childress County, Texas. Billy Jack and Minnie Lou Bradley, owners, began their tenure of the family legacy in 1955. Five years ago, however, the management philosophy of the ranch began a metamorphosis. Today, Minnie Lou describes the B3R operation as a food business.

"When you're out here in West Texas in the dirt and the sand and you're trying to find one ol' cow in the brush, you tend to forget you're in the food business," says Minnie Lou. "Every cowman is in the food business, and I think it's important that we remember we have to satisfy the consumer. It doesn't matter what you paid for your bull, he's not going to be worth anything if his calves don't go out there and satisfy that consumer."

The backbone of the B3R is a registered Angus cow herd that is complemented by a custom feedlot and a meat plant, B3R Country Meats. Through their feedlot and meat plant, B3R takes advantage of retained ownership to realize a premium for their cattle.

B3R Country Meats had its origin in selling locker beef off the ranch. It grew into a boxed beef business, with five head killed at a time. The business stabilized and grew. Selling replacement females and bulls became a seasonal concern of the cattle operation.

About this time, expansion became a priority. The Bradleys decided it was more economical to build a meat plant than to buy another ranch and expand the cattle operation.

The goal was to have the meat plant be the outlet for the cattle coming out of the B3R feedlot. The next detail was to keep the feedlot full. The B3R program barters carcass data for cattle. B3R custom feeds cattle for seedstock and commercial breeders who want carcass data on the cattle they produce.

Cattle are penned in groups of 25 to 30 head and the producer receives feed and carcass data on each animal. Data include rate and cost of gain, feed conversion, dressing percentage, ribeye area (per 100 pounds of hot carcass weight) backfat, pelvic and kidney fat, yield and quality grades, ultrasound information and a summary for each breed or sire group.

Even though B3R kept performance records on all their cattle from birth to yearling, they never knew if the bulls they raised produced good carcasses or not. They didn't learn the value of carcass data until they built the meat plant. The void in keeping production and performance records, Minnie Lou points out, is that everyone stops gathering information at their own endpoint. The seedstock producer stops keeping records at yearling when they sell their heifers or bulls; the cow-calf producer stops keeping records at his endpoint. "We didn't worry about carcass when we were raising bulls," says Minnie Lou. "We thought if they're good-doing cattle, they'll be good hanging carcasses. That's a myth we grew up with.

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"We thought we were pretty good cattle people 'til we went in the meat and feedlot business," says Minnie Lou. "We found out we knew very little about, not only our cattle, but anybody elses. What's under the hide is not exactly what you see from the outside."

The Bradleys aren't as critical of meat packers as they used to be. Recalling she was brought up thinking the packer would cheat you if he had a chance, she now says that packers have a real problem with the cattle they have to work with.

The difference between two 1,100-pound steers—from the same herd, bred and raised alike, brought to the feedlot at the same time and fed in the same group—can easily be $300 to $500 when they leave the meat plant in a box, explains Minnie Lou.

The key to achieving carcass consistency, according to Minnie Lou, is identification. B3R traces back the good carcasses to their sire and dam. They individually tag every animal that goes through their feedlot and that identification follows the animal through to the meat counter. B3R has the information from 15,000 head of cattle in their data base, which they share with breed associations to develop Expected Progeny Difference (EPD) ratings. They have learned what kind of cattle they don't want to feed, and believe the cattle with balanced EPDs may offer the best overall package.

Another point Minnie Lou stresses is that no matter how good the carcass, or how well an animal does in the feedlot, if he's not the kind of calf that's efficient for the cow-calf breeder, then that animal won't work. "The cow-calf man has to produce these calves for us to feed and to hang. If he doesn't make it, then there's no future for any of us," she says.

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