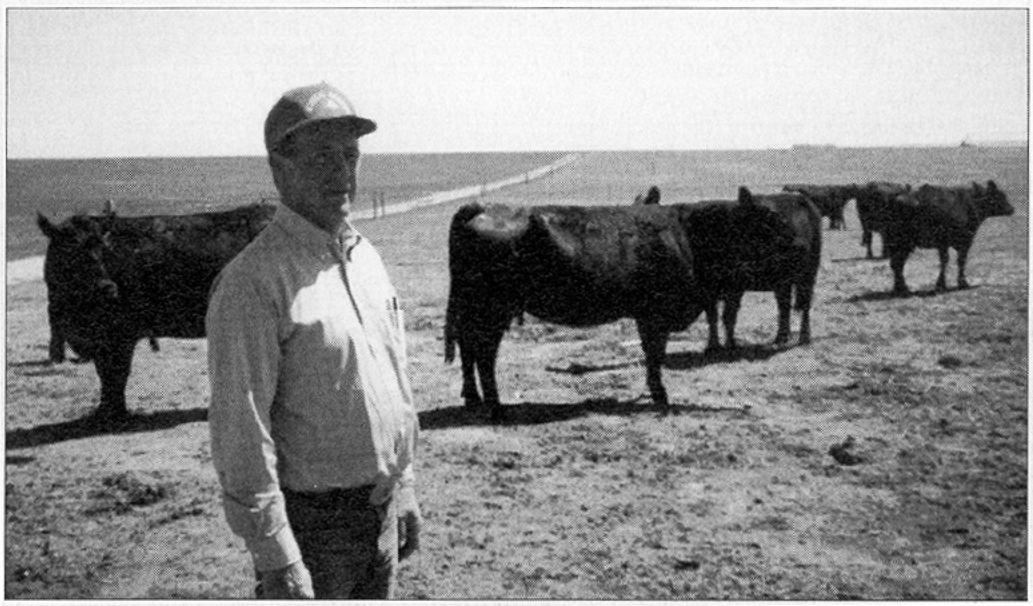
HOW DRY IS IT?

There's not a drop of rain or a mountain in sight. Welcome to raising cattle on the High Plains of Colorado.



Above: Five straight years of drought has Ken Amen examining many management practices on his northeastern Colorado ranch. "We've learned to be flexible on weaning dates – it's one of the easiest ways to save on feed. We haven't seen any lack of performance by weaning bulls 30 days earlier than normal and females shortly after that."

In some places 14 inches of annual rainfall would be called a drought. In the High Plains region of northeastern Colorado that much precipitation would be called normal.

"After five years of drought, you find the kind of cattle that can survive. Those deep ribbed Angus cows with a lot of capacity have come through tough years looking a lot better than most," reflects Ken Amen of his purebred Angus herd located on the rolling prairie near Iliff.

Amen Angus Farm is a family concern with the fourth generation now taking active roles. Ken and his wife Bonnie and their youngest daughter Heather, their two oldest daughters Wendy and Heidi, and their husbands Matt Lewis and Virgil Griffith, work alongside Ken's dad Walter and mother Nona to operate the Amen holdings. It's a big job consisting of 480 irrigated acres, including 160 acres of irrigated grass pasture, an additional 400 acres of native pasture, and two sections of leased grass.

Ken introduced Angus cattle to the Amen operation back in the early 1960s when he was in high school.

"I went to the bank and got a loan to buy 20 head of Angus heifers," Ken reminisces. "They gave me the money – without a co-signer. Imagine a high school kid today getting a loan for cattle on just his signature," Ken says with a chuckle.

Today, the Amen purebred herd has grown to 160 pairs and 60 bred heifers. And though the arid conditions haven't slowed down the herd, it's made some changes in management necessary.

In an area where each cow needs 16 acres of native grass just to get through a five-month grazing season in an average year, Amen has learned the importance of pasture management in the dry years.

"We really try to take care of our grass," says Ken. "One of the biggest things we do is not go to pasture till after May 20 and preferably June 1. We realize that's about three weeks behind the rest of the world, but there's two reasons for it. One, it gives the grass a chance to grow, and two, it gives us a little more time with our artificial insemination (AI) program."

While the cows with bull calves at side intensively graze the Amens' irrigated pasture during the summer, the remaining herd stays on both owned and leased native grass pasture. However, the majority of the bred heifers spend the grazing season on several leased grass pastures that reach up into southeastern Wyoming.

"We try to keep the cows within 15 miles of home," says Ken. "We have to let the heifers go further away. Lately it's tough to keep leased grass, but it's still the most economical way to go."

The Amen philosophy of pasture management is simple. "Dad always says 'start the summer assuming it will be dry,'" says Ken. "So we never over-graze. As we start our sixth season of drought with that in mind, it makes management a lot easier. If it does rain, it gives the pasture a chance to heal and grow.

"Last year we cross-fenced leased pasture and alternately grazed every 30 days. There was almost zero rain – but those cows made it through the season."

STORY & PHOTOS BY KATHLEEN BEE

It's In the Genes

Amens have developed the type of Angus cattle that can survive these tough conditions through an extensive AI program they started back in 1975.

"It's the way we've been able to improve the herd the quickest," says Ken.

All females, with the exception of first-calf heifers, are exposed to a 40-day AI program running from April 25 till June 1. The 40-day program gives females the chance to be bred twice before going to pasture with a bull. Seventy-one virgin heifers were synchronized this spring using MGA/Lutalyse. This is the third year Amens have used this method and it's proven to be the most successful for them, netting conception rates of 65 percent after one service.

Amens use AI calving ease sires for the heifers, preferring proven bulls such as Traveler 71, Gold Nugget, Traveler and Sleep Easy. Seven days after breeding, heifers are sent to pasture with a bull.

Contrary to the rest of the Amen breeding program, first-calf heifers are not exposed to AI.

"We find these heifers get more in tune with the other cows if we put them in with a bull instead of trying to heat detect them," explains Ken. "There are so many things happening in a first-calf heifer's life in the spring . . . coming into heat isn't one of them."

Ken does the matings for the cow herd with an eye toward balancing maternal traits with growth. "We used more of the growth bulls six to seven years ago than we do now," says Amen. "We're trying to balance maternal traits with acceptable growth and a frame size of five to seven."

"We're careful about accuracy. We look at the expected progeny differences (EPDs) and the pedigree and only use an unproven bull on a sample basis," Ken says.

Amens keep several of their best bulls each year for in-herd use and sell 70 yearling bulls annually through private treaty or at bull test sales in northeastern Colorado and western Nebraska.

Winter Forage Eases Concerns

Although drought conditions have made some changes necessary, it hasn't affected Amens' winter management drastically. Winter feed is usually abundant in the area and reasonably priced. The herd is wintered on cornstalks, wheat stubble, and the aftermath from alfalfa and irrigated pasture. Cornstalks are supplemented with protein. Hay is added three weeks prior to calving and then is fed through the breeding season. Seldom is snowfall heavy enough to cover forage for a long period of time, but when it does Amens supplement their herd with hay. Natural windbreaks, creek beds and draws provide shelter for the herd in even the worst conditions.

The two most critical times ranchers in the High Plains face are in early spring when feed supplies have dwindled but the pasture isn't ready, and in late fall when the grass is gone but winter feed isn't ready.

"Unless we have a rainy fall, there's about a 30-day time span when we'll have a high feed requirement. But because our winter feed supply is usually abundant, it allows us to catch up and compete with other areas of the country."

Getting Serious About Calving

Even in protected areas, winter temperatures in northeastern Colorado can turn dangerous when combined with high winds prevalent in the region. Blizzard conditions make early spring calving risky business. But the Amens are ready.

"The last really big snow was back in 1976," recalls Ken. "After that, Dad and I decided that if we were going to continue in the purebred Angus business we had to get serious. So we built the calving barn."

Located a stone's throw from his house, Ken's calving barn was designed to double as an AI facility. Four indoor calving pens allow cows to calve safely during the worst winter conditions. A large holding pen can keep those close to calving inside or be used to hold cows observed in heat until they can be inseminated. An alleyway with a breeding box completes the facility.

Calving is a family affair for the Amens – everyone gets their turn at checking for calves 24 hours a day during the intense calving season that runs February 1 through March 20.

Cattle Bred for Profit

Amen knows the value of cattle bred for profit, especially in years like he's weathered lately.

"We choose to spend more time with the cattle because we're in the purebred business," he says. "But if you were a commercial breeder, you'd sure want to think about adding an Angus based herd, especially from a maternal standpoint. You get better calves, better udders and easier calving. Angus cows are simply more efficient."

With cattle like that, who needs rain?

AJ