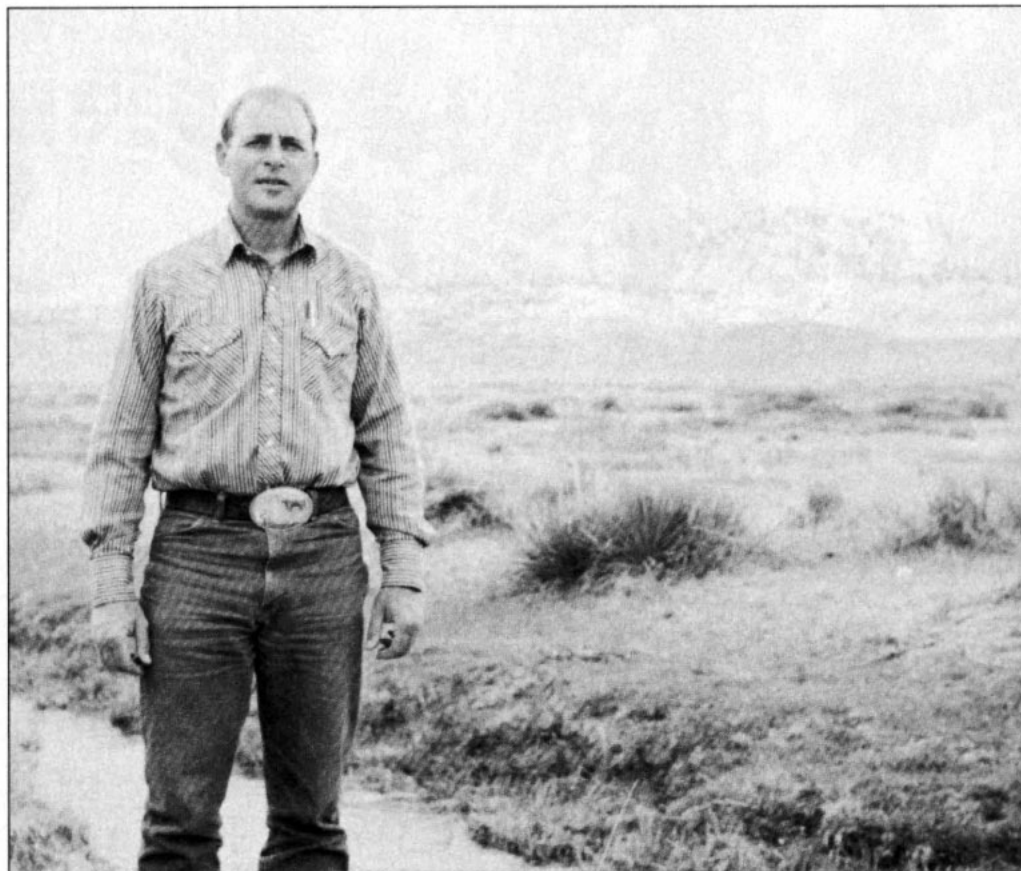


*Grateful to be doing  
just what he wants,  
Wyoming breeder  
Juan Reyes is*

# ON TOP OF THE WORLD



*Juan Reyes*

**W**hat is the true measure of a person's success? Society's yardstick seems to measure it by the size of one's paycheck. Unfortunately, as young upwardly mobile Americans scramble for a bigger piece of the pie, many find themselves still dissatisfied. Despite the big bucks, they aren't happy in their careers. So, maybe it isn't just the money.

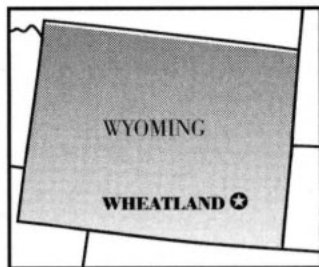
Another theory says a truly successful and fortunate person is one who can make a living doing what he or she most enjoys.

Juan Reyes subscribes to the latter philosophy. The Wyoming stockman makes a comfortable living from his diversified farming and ranching operation. But Reyes is not driven by greed. He simply loves what he does.

"Being big has never been a goal," says Reyes. "I'm not trying to get rich, but I hate to back away from the challenge of new opportunity. Agriculture offers so many opportunities and I love it. I don't know if other people enjoy their work this much but I feel like I'm on top of the world."

You could almost take that statement literally, since Reyes' cattle do graze high-mountain grass ranges located above 7,000 feet elevation. Headquarters, however, are located some 2,000 feet below, on the flats near Wheatland. From this base, Reyes oversees varied enterprises including a purebred Angus herd, a grass yearling and backgrounding operation, plus a replacement heifer development service. In addition, Reyes and his farm crew cultivate some 1,500 irrigated acres yielding alfalfa, corn, oats and pinto beans.

The Wheatland flats is a garden spot of eastern Wyoming, thanks to Wheatland Irrigation District which is the largest privately owned irrigation project in the country. Operated by Platte County farmers and ranchers, the district waters 55,000 acres of cropland with mountain run-off collected in large reservoirs and delivered through a system of canals. Reyes says irrigation, along with the high-altitude region's warm days and cool nights, has made this an area known for



STORY & PHOTOS BY TROY SMITH

production of high quality alfalfa. His own fields yield high protein hay as a cash crop as well as for use at home. In fact, Reyes annually markets nearly 3,000 tons of protein-rich alfalfa to dairies in the Denver area.

It's the diversity of this area and Wyoming in general that first attracted Juan Reyes. Born in Cuba, Reyes immigrated to the United States in 1962 at 12 years of age. Shortly after Fidel Castro's takeover of their homeland, Reyes and his two older sisters fled to the United States with little more than a bag of clothing. They spent a year in a Florida refugee camp before being transferred to a Catholic school in Washington. Reyes says they were fortunate to meet and receive help from some terrific people.

"It was an invitation from a friend that led me to visit Wyoming," Reyes says. "I loved it from the start."

Reyes attended the University of Wyoming and found summer work as a \$400-per-month cowboy and hunting guide. While attending college he met Joni, the girl he would soon marry, and another acquaintance that would have a profound effect upon his future.

A good friend, John Milnor, purchased a ranch near Tie Siding, Wyo., and Reyes expressed an interest in leasing it. That was the beginning of their business, MR Angus Ranch. Later, a farm near Wheatland was added and the headquarters shifted there. "We were in business with John for several years, until three years ago, when Joni and I bought him out," says Reyes.

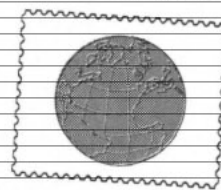
It was while Milnor was involved that the Angus seedstock operation started. Reyes admits his wife probably had as much to do with it as anybody. She owned a few registered cows when she and Juan were married and those cattle formed the nucleus of the MR Angus Ranch herd. Despite the buyout, the ranch name was retained and today's Angus herd includes 125 cows. Reyes says their herd represents what he calls middle-of-the-road kind of cattle.

"Our cattle aren't really big and they aren't too small," says Reyes. "What they have to be is productive. We cater to commercial cattlemen so we expect our cattle to perform in the same environment our customers' cattle do. We look at expected progeny differences (EPDs) when selecting replacements, but we look at the cattle harder. We stress quality rather than quantity."

Reyes markets about 60 bulls per year, holding a joint production sale with fellow

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Juan P. Reyes



Rocky Mountain Angus breeder Keith Russell. The annual March sale is held in Douglas, Wyo. Most of their customers seem to favor bulls of frame score 6 to 6.5, with a practical balance of performance and maternal traits. The bulls also have to be suited for work in the mountains; able to cover rough country where the semi-arid climate and sparse vegetation call for 25 to 30 acres per animal unit month. And bulls can't be susceptible to health problems associated with high altitudes.

Pulmonary hypertensive heart disease, more commonly known as brisket-disease, can be a concern for high-mountain ranchers. The disease is noninfectious but susceptibility is

An MR Angus Ranch cow is expected to perform on flatland pasture as well as high mountain ranges.

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inherited and affected animals kept at high altitudes die from congestive heart failure.

"Our cattle winter here on the flats, but spend the summer grazing season in high mountain pastures, just like our customers' cattle," says Reyes. "But just to be safe, we test our cattle for

pulmonary artery pressure to identify and eliminate any that might be susceptible."

Reyes also produces stocker cattle on a mountain place leased in partnership with Wheatland veterinarian Randy Hunter. Together, they will purchase 1,500 to 2,500 head of yearlings, buying them from within a 100-mile radius. The cattle are summered on mountain range, then sold in the fall.

The Reyes backgrounding enterprise involves up to 6,000 head annually. Several small feedlots located on owned and leased properties near Wheatland lie

close to headquarters and home-raised feed supplies. Development of replacement heifers for other ranchers is a growing segment of the Reyes operation. By providing a higher level of nutrition than might otherwise be available, Reyes strives for optimum growth and readies the heifers, for production, at a cost his clients find affordable.

Growing and feeding cattle provides experience he finds valuable as a breeder. He recommends the same experience for anyone in the business of marketing seedstock.

"I think every purebred breeder should have to feed cattle for somebody, or better yet, feed their own to see how well the cattle really perform," says Reyes. "Feeding cattle makes you realize the importance of good genetics and proper nutrition."

The most recent opportunity for expansion will involve the purebred segment of the operation. Along with E.G. McGhee and Randy Hunter, Reyes has leased the Two Bar Ranch located west of Wheatland. The picturesque ranch features a nice balance of range and flood-irrigated hay meadows. Nestled at the foot of the Laramie Mountains and offering protection from ample wooded areas, the ranch appears made to order for a cow-calf outfit.

Diversification is the key to whatever success Reyes has realized. And, it's probably the reason he finds his work to be so much fun.

"Responding to the opportunities is lots of fun. We do change things around a little. If pinto beans look really good, we'll plant more beans. If not, we'll go another direction. If it looks like buying some short-term commercial cows will work, we might do that. If taking in outside cattle looks better than buying our own, we can do that," Reyes says.

"Part of the reason I like what we've got going here is that my family is very involved with me," admits Reyes. "Joni is deeply involved as bookkeeper. Our 12-year-old daughter, Jennifer, and her 7-year-old brother, Jason, like to help out, especially with the cowboy work. That's something I really enjoy, too. Having them do it with me just makes it better."

The primary goal of MR Angus Ranch is production of functional cattle for commercial cattlemen. No amount of diversity in the Reyes operation has changed that. Facing the challenges of a many-faceted business and grateful to be doing just what he wants, Juan Reyes has his feet firmly on the ground, but is reaching for Wyoming's big sky.

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