

# *Life on the* RIO MIMBRES



*On the banks of  
the Mimbres River  
in southwest  
New Mexico lies  
an Angus ranch  
with a surging  
breeding and  
marketing  
program.*

New Mexico is affectionately called "The Land of Enchantment." Its earthen colors add to this enchantment. Painted on the expansive rangeland and sky are various shades of terra-cotta, sage green, purple and turquoise.

Lately, more and more of New Mexico's rangelands have been turning black. It's not the result of wild fires, but a hot breed of cattle Southwest cattle producers have become enchanted with — Angus.

The Rio Mimbres Ranch is helping put Angus on the New Mexico map. This registered Angus operation, owned by Hays and Patricia May and managed by Billy Collard, has become a major seedstock supplier.

Christened after the Mimbres River which flows through it, Rio Mimbres Ranch is a newcomer in an ancient land where the Mimbres Indian tribe once thrived and mysteriously vanished around 1150 AD.

For the past 120 years, cattle ranchers and silver miners have made their living from this land.

Ranching in this part of the world is not easy. It requires careful management of land, water and other natural resources. It also demands cattle that will adapt to a hot and dry environment, and seasonal movement from river bottomland improved pastures to 8,000-foot mountain range with sparse vegetation. At this elevation, winter can be harsh and the wind as wicked as on the High Plains. Summer's hot sun sends cattle and humans alike to shade.

The Angus breed has passed the environmental stress test for Rio Mimbres Ranch and their customers with flying colors.

Family-owned ranches going back four or five generations are the norm in southwest New Mexico. Seldom are these ranches sold to outsiders. So when a 640-acre ranch between Silver City and Deming, N.M., became available for pur-

STORY & PHOTOS BY JERILYN JOHNSON



*Rio Mimbres Ranch owners, Hays and Pat May, at their Red Barn Family Steakhouse.*

chase in 1983, May jumped at the chance. Finding a good place to raise Angus cattle was important to him. The ranch had a nice adobe house, barns and fertile land suitable for cattle and irrigated crops. The Mimbres River provided precious water supply.

start of a life-long enchantment with this black breed.

After he and his wife, Patricia, purchased a restaurant and motel business in Silver City in the 1970s, the time was right to buy a larger ranch to support their growing Angus business. Owning a restaurant and a cattle ranch has given the Mays insight into producing a better beef product for the consumer, not just the cattle industry. Their Red Barn Family Steakhouse in Silver City serves Certified Angus Beef™ product and draws vacationing tourists from throughout the country as well as many repeat local patrons.

**In 1985 a young but capable cow hand** named Billy Collard was hired by the Mays to serve as Rio Mimbres Ranch manager. Raised on a nearby ranch, Collard knew this land well and he knew cattle. He was

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*— Billy Collard*

Born in Arkansas and raised on a Texas ranch, May served in the Army during World War II. After the war he moved to Carlsbad, N.M., where he started a restaurant business. But his ranch roots soon surfaced and he began raising beef cattle in his spare time. In 1954 May established a small herd of registered Angus cattle. It was the

ready for a new challenge after cowboying at a couple of ranches. Still, it wasn't an easy transition.

“I went to tell my buddies who worked with me that I was going to go work for an Angus breeder,” he explains. “Well, they liked to have laughed me plumb out of the country. At that time most cattlemen in

this area thought Angus were squatty animals with little performance potential.

“They don't laugh any more,” Collard adds. “In fact, a lot of those same guys are buying bulls from us today. This March, when we held our first production sale, I saw a few gaping mouths in the crowd.”

Amazing but true, Rio Mimbres' bull sale offering averaged \$2,200. Customers from New Mexico, Arizona and Texas liked their cattle's combination of pedigree, performance and conditioning. Bull prices in this part of the country usually top out at \$1,200 or \$1,400. Back in 1985, Rio Mimbres Ranch was lucky to get \$800, even for a top quality bull.

Marketing seedstock in New Mexico can be as hard as the ground after a year-long drought. Rio Mimbres Ranch is proud of its steadily increasing market prices and the strong customer base it has built, a result of meeting the demands of the commercial cattle producer.

“We have witnessed renewed interest in Angus over the past five years,” Collard says. “Our customers still want a little frame, but are also demanding more thickness, low birth weight and overall balanced trait cattle, and that's what we're providing. Our bulls range in weight from 1,650 to 1,850 pounds. They are bred to go out on the range and work.”

**A modern breeding program** has been implemented at Rio Mimbres, using proven herd sires as well as artificial insemination (AI) and embryo

transfer to take advantage of top bloodlines.

“The days of being just a cowboy are gone,” Collard says. “You have to put some science into a breeding program to make it work.”

Rio Mimbres' senior herd sire is Ankonian Avalanche, a 1983 son of Lovana and out of a daughter of Emulation 31. This bull excels in calving ease and his calves always adapt well to Southwestern conditions, Collard says. Bulls currently



*Rio Mimbres Ranch manager Billy Collard and his wife, Debbie, and cowdog, Levi.*

used in their AI program include VDAR New Trend 315, O'Neill's Renovator, Rito 2100 GDAR and LA Magic. He also will purchase some Rancher's Choice semen this year.

Collard is just as proud of their female program. A large percentage of the 120-cow herd is Pine Drive Big Sky breeding. “We sure like how these cows perform,” Collard says. Collard is also trying new bloodlines for replacement heifers and says calves by the “315” bull look



*Angus cattle at Rio Mimbres have to perform in high desert range conditions.*

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promising. He evaluates and selects his cattle based on a combination of visual appraisal, performance data such as expected progeny differences (EPDs), and matching traits to the current bull breeding program.

The overall goal at Rio Mimbres is to breed seedstock that will produce a consistent, high quality beef animal. "I want to get in the middle of the road and stay there," Collard says. "Because the breeder in that position stays in business."

Collard realizes it's a slow process and that there is no perfect beef animal, but adds, "I want to do everything I can to make them as good as I can."

"Over the years many changes have taken place in the Angus business, and we have strived to keep up with the pace," May adds. "It helps when you have a good manager like Billy Collard. We have a lot of confidence in him."

**Forage and crop production** is another important part of Rio Mimbres Ranch management. Year-round grazing is possible with a combination of cool-season grasses, forage crops and range grazing. Collard also leases an additional 4,200 acres of range for grazing.

Fescue and orchardgrass grow on river bottomland and make good spring and fall grazing. Cattle graze grama grass and other native grasses on summer ranges. This year Collard planted sudangrass for short-term grazing later this summer.

Alfalfa and oats are grown for supplemental hay in the winter and for emergency feed in a drought period.

"My hired hand, Amado Olivis, and I have a lot of country and cows to take care of," Collard says. "In this part of the world, the country dictates what type of forage and type of cattle you raise. It's not a forgiving land. We have to do an extra good job with management."

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