

Together It's Working

“A dead calf has an extremely low rate of gain,” says Rob Thomas. “That is why survivability is a trait we stress in our breeding program.”

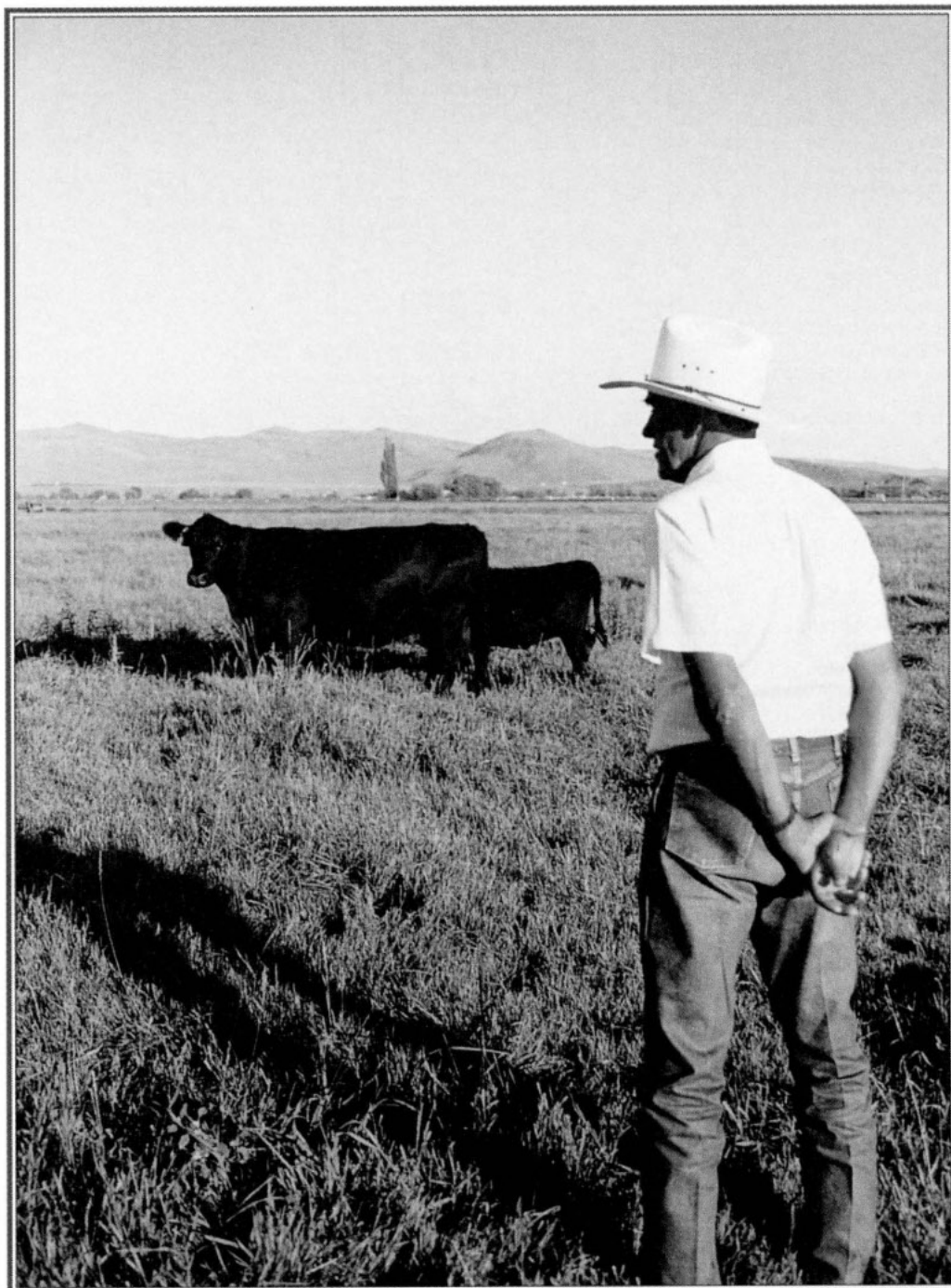
The majority of Thomas Angus Ranch customers run cattle in rugged country on public lands. Survivability is crucial to the subsistence of their herds. Meeting the needs of commercial cattle ranchers has become the No. 1 priority of the Thomas Family.

Bob and Gloria Thomas moved to Baker, Ore., in 1963. Their ranch is located at the foot of Elk Horn Range in the Blue Mountains. It consists of 2,000 acres of irrigated pastures, alfalfa hay and barley.

Their son Rob and his wife Lori, along with daughter Kristin Barr and her husband Andy, are partners in the ranch. Two other daughters, Beth Phillips and Sue Spurgeon, live close by but are not involved with the ranch.

Family members take an active part in all ranch activities. Kristin says their children are involved in school and sports, but they learn work ethics and honesty on the ranch. Bob and Gloria think a family outfit has a lot to offer. They can make a major decision without holding an executive committee meeting and they enjoy having the family close to home.

Bob and Gloria were successful on the show circuit for a number of years. The show



An open mind and bred cows keep Bob Thomas in the seedstock business.

STORY BY BARBARA LABARBARA

ring was a valuable tool at a time when performance records were lacking. However, as the size of show cattle increased, Thomases realized the cattle had lost their efficiency.

"We knew we had to change," Bob says. "We immediately focused on performance. It took about four years to get back to the basics."

Since 1947, when Bob first purchased cattle, his open mind and willingness to change has been beneficial to his success. Experience has given him an uncanny ability to predict needs of commercial breeders. He senses carcass evaluation is the wave of the future.

They have been performance testing for more than 40 years. With the help of expected progeny differences (EPDs), weaning weights have increased by 150 pounds, to an average of 650 pounds. Yearling weights have increased and milking ability has improved. AAR New Trend, one of the industry's highest milk bulls, left his influence on the herd through good uddered, beefy cows that milk heavily and remain in good flesh. Nearly every cow in their herd goes back to AAR New Trend.

Every Thomas cow is selected and mated on an individual basis considering her strengths and weaknesses. EPDs, visual analysis and calving history are important in the breeding process.

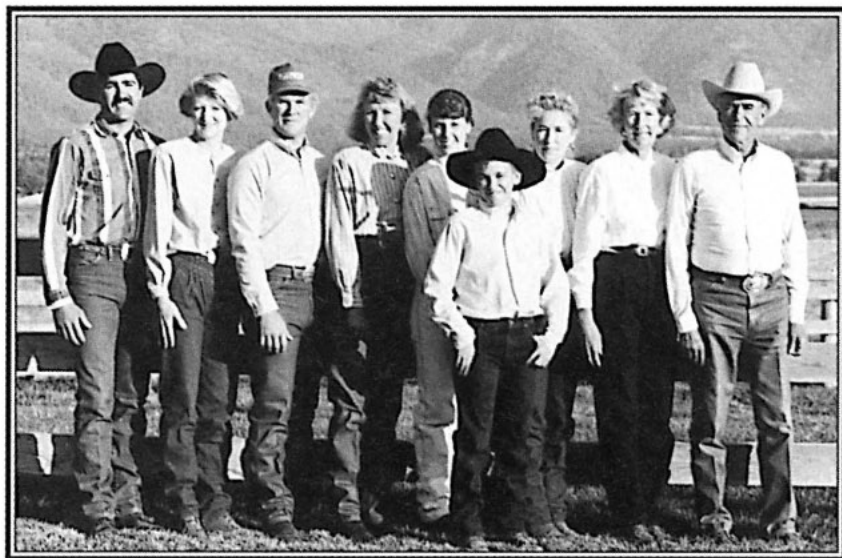
The Angus Herd Management Software Program helps the Thomases concentrate on the strengths of their 650 cows. The program is used to register calves, record weights, research breeding data and sort cows by projected calving dates. The computer is also used for preparing advertising, sale catalogs and mailing lists.

Each year 99 percent of their calves are from artificial insemination (AI). Rob and Andy do the breeding, but everyone on the ranch helps with heat detection. Last year they used only two clean-up bulls.

The cows and heifers are synchronized resulting in 80 percent of the cow herd calving in the first 25 days of a 60 day calving season. They calve from February through March. Eighty percent of the heifers calve in the first 15 days and finish within 30 days.

Thomases breed for moderate traits that will result in good, usable cattle for the commercial breeder. Essential attributes include low to moderate birth weights, survivability, carcass merit and early or rapid growth. They believe an animal should shut down shortly after a year of age so it is ready to slaughter or if it is a replacement heifer, go into the herd. They expect heifers to calve by two years of age and calve every year thereafter. Cows must have good teats and udders and fleshing ability. The cattle are expected to excel in all traits.

Because most of their customers calve on the



The Thomas Ranch outfit — (l to r) Rob and Lori Thomas, Andy, Kris, Kati, Drew and Heather Barr, Gloria and Bob Thomas.

range, mothering ability is important. A cow is expected to take care of a calf by herself. That and being disease resistant are components of survivability.

"We track our bulls to find out how their daughters are doing on the range," says Rob. "We can use numbers but if the progeny our bulls produce aren't working out in the country, it's not working for us."

They strive for efficiency in a moderate size, good milking cow. The average weight of their cows is 1,250 pounds. Most of their heifers are 15/16 sisters with nearly identical performance. Consequently, they do not purchase females.

Cows run on pasture and are fed hay. Heifers and bulls are fed silage; the bulls also receive barley and oats. A Harsh feed truck with a scale makes feeding easier and more exact.

With corrals on every ranch, handling cattle and vaccinating can be done quickly and safely. Low stress and a consistent, basic health program contribute to the herd's good health.

"Our biggest challenge is breeding and genetics," Rob says. "We always want to be better. We want our customers' calves to be as good as ours."

Thomases run two herds — a calving ease herd and a growth herd — although animals are not physically separated. Birth weights on the calving ease herd average 65 to 70 pounds while the growth herd averages 75 to 80 pounds. Deciding which herd a cow belongs in is a challenge.

"Having two different herds helps us meet the demands of our customers who come from many different areas and climates," says Bob.

About half of the bulls, 150 to 180 head, as well as cows and bred and open heifers are sold through their production sale in October. The remaining bulls are marketed privately in the spring. Nearly all their bulls are gone before they are yearlings.

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At the production sale, bulls are sold directly off the cow which allows buyers to inspect the mother cows. It gives the bulls the advantage of developing in their new environment. It is also more profitable for Thomases.

Bulls held over to spring are grouped and penned according to calving ease or growth. Similar EPD data animals are put together. Ear tags with sire, dam, tattoo, and dates make identification easy. A buyer can be taken to a specific pen to see the type of animal they want. Performance records on individual bulls are readily available. It is less confusing and saves the buyer valuable time.

Over the years Bob has appreciated meeting Angus breeders from all over the United States. Serving on the American Angus Association Board of Directors left him more open minded and with a better understanding of other breeders.

"The best award I ever received was a satisfied customer," he says. "Having top commercial breeders produce calves from our bulls that grade Choice at the packing house is awesome."

Thomases continue to strive for more uniformity while meeting their goal of producing bet-

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TO: *Northwest
Angus Breeders*

ter bulls in large numbers for the commercial breeder. Most importantly they want to make their cattle more efficient while producing a higher quality product. When value-based marketing comes, they will be ready.

The Thomas Family is living the American Dream. They are reaping the rewards of strong family values, hard work and self-reliance. A bright future looms on the horizon for them and their customers.



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