

# A Century of Angus

Through 100 years, five generations and two states, the Laflin family has worked to turn the West "black."

by Jennifer Hotchkiss

**A**fter five generations of commitment to Angus cattle and to each other, Laflin Ranch, Olsburg, Kan., will join an elite group of century-old Angus herds this year. For two of the group's newest members, Bob and Barb Laflin, raising Angus cattle has been more than a family tradition — it has been an honor and a privilege.

When Bob's grandfather, E.B. Laflin, purchased his first Angus cattle in 1900, he had no idea that his purchase would become a living legacy in not only the Angus business, but the beef

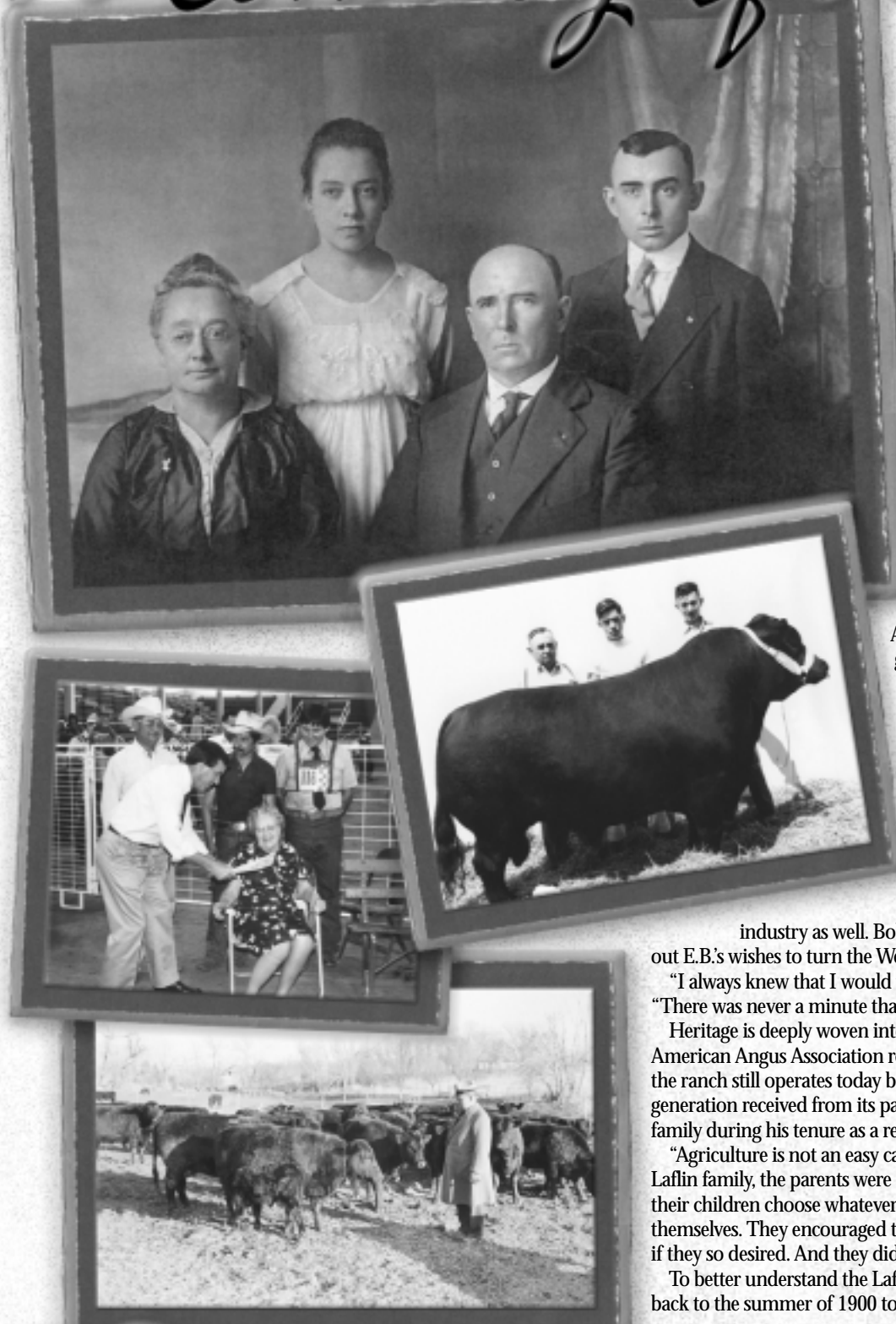
industry as well. Bob is the third generation to carry out E.B.'s wishes to turn the West "black."

"I always knew that I would take over the ranch," Bob says. "There was never a minute that I considered doing anything else."

Heritage is deeply woven into the Laflin family. Don Laughlin, American Angus Association regional manager, says he believes the ranch still operates today because of the encouragement each generation received from its parents. Laughlin worked with the family during his tenure as a regional manager in Kansas.

"Agriculture is not an easy career choice," Laughlin says. "In the Laflin family, the parents were always open-minded enough to let their children choose whatever future they wanted to make for themselves. They encouraged their kids to keep the ranch running if they so desired. And they did."

To better understand the Laflin tradition, it's important to go back to the summer of 1900 to see how the ranch started.



family generations

### The first generation: setting the foundation

During the late 1800s, L.H. Laflin and his wife, America Scott, operated a ranch with 500 Shorthorn cows in Crab Orchard, Neb. They also were successful in the horse and mule business. The military base at Fort Robinson, Neb., purchased many of the Laflins' horses and mules because they were the perfect size and quality for the military's needs.

In 1900, L.H. Laflin dispersed his Shorthorn herd, and his son, E.B., began an Angus herd. E.B. purchased his foundation stock from the Escher herd in Iowa and became one of the first breeders of Angus cattle in Nebraska.

As the herd increased in size, many Nebraska cattlemen realized the advantage of this then-controversial black breed.

At this time, E.B. began to study law on the encouragement of his half brother, Salmasius Harrington, a well-respected attorney in Beatrice, Neb. Even though E.B. became a practicing attorney, he never stopped working to improve his herd of Angus cattle.

E.B. did not show his cattle at competitions because he felt that he had enough demand for people to purchase his stock without exhibiting at shows. He did judge many Angus shows, including the American Royal and the National Western.

A great leader in the Angus breed, E.B. served as the second president of the Nebraska Angus Association, only to have his son, L.E., and his grandson, Lew, follow in his footsteps. E.B. was selected as the first man from Nebraska to serve on the American Angus Association Board of Directors.

After E.B.'s death in 1932, L.E. carried on the tradition.

### The second generation: persevering

The desire to raise Angus

cattle and to practice law was just as strong in L.E., who graduated from the University of Nebraska Law School in 1918. He returned to Crab Orchard after being discharged from the military to join his father in his 200-cow Angus enterprise.

When L.E. took over the ranch in 1932, times were tough, says his son Bob.

"I remember when we were dirt poor (when shoes were put away in the spring and brought back out to wear in the fall)," Bob says. "Dad gave \$500 to the Nebraska Angus Association because he believed so strongly in its future. My mother almost divorced him over it!"

Regardless of those tough years, L.E. continued to find ways to keep the ranch going strong. They eventually had to lease grass in the Flint Hills near Bigelow, Kan., because of the drought in Nebraska. The Flint Hills served the purpose well and became a yearly tradition for the Laflins.

Just like his father, L.E. was an active Association leader. He served on many committees and was elected to the Board of Directors in 1935. He judged state fairs and national shows across the country while encouraging the growth of the Angus breed.

### The third generation: improving the cattle

When L.E.'s sons, Bob and Lew, came home from the military to operate the ranch, they decided that one of them should move to Kansas to avoid leasing grass and moving back and forth.

Bob and his wife, Barb, decided to make the move in 1962 to Olsburg, Kan., where they continued with the registered operation with the help of their children, Sharee, R.D., Karen and Guy. Ten years after the Laflins moved to Kansas, Bob and Lew dissolved their partnership and divided



*Carlton Corbin (right) of Stoneybrook Ranch, shown with Barb Laflin, was more than a friend to Bob Laflin and Eldon Flinn — he was a role model and inspiration. "He encouraged Bob and I through [the tough] times," Flinn says. "We wouldn't be the same without him."*

the property to provide more opportunities for their children.

Once Bob and Barb took control of the herd, they decided to focus on improving the quality of the cattle.

"When we started off together, we were very focused on one thing — the cattle," Bob says. "My father's and grandfather's time was always divided between the cattle and their law practices. Barb and I, on the other hand, didn't work off the ranch. We spent all of our time, energy and thoughts on the cattle."

At the time the herd started, more emphasis was placed on the pedigree. One of the ways the Laflins improved their cattle was through performance testing.

"We were the first to introduce performance testing to Kansas," Bob says. "We hauled our bulls to Oklahoma and put them on test because we believed that it was important to improve performance traits."

To create the best animal possible, Bob used the

performance-test results in conjunction with expected progeny differences (EPDs) and visual appraisal. His efforts paid off when he owned the Beef Improvement Federation's (BIF) first certified meat sire in the state of Kansas.

"Bob has never allowed trends and fads to carry the herd away from what's really important — creating a quality product from every angle," Barb says. "One of his philosophies has been to not look at what people are doing now, but rather to look down the road to see what individuals will be doing and needing in the future."

To help educate his customers about carcass quality and EPDs, Bob hosted educational presentations and demonstrations by Kansas State University (K-State) professors and industry experts at some of their earlier cattle sales.

### A team effort

"We believe that there are two important things in this life,"

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## *A Century of Angus continued*



*Each of the Lafflin children competed in the National Junior Angus Showmanship Contest. Karen won the contest in 1978.*



*Judging cattle is another Lafflin family tradition. Each generation has judged cattle at the local, state or national level. Just recently, R.D. judged the open Angus show at the Houston Stock Show. Meanwhile, his nephew, Cody, was competing on Butler County Community College's livestock-judging team in the Houston Stock Show Junior College Livestock Judging Contest.*

Bob says, "No. 1 is our family, and No. 2 is our cattle. Without our kids, we couldn't have progressed like we did."

A ranching family from beginning to end, the Lafflins have approached every task together. In the summer, when the kids were out of school, they would get up at dawn to help their parents gather the cattle in the pastures.

Barb would take two kids, and Bob would take the other two and ride toward the cattle.

"I enjoyed sitting on a horse and watching the cattle," Karen says. "We definitely weren't afraid to work. That's probably what I appreciate most about my childhood."

Barb says ranching in the Flint Hills has served as a great environment to raise a family.

"Ranching has taught our kids responsibility," she says. "It's a pure way of life that lets you be really close to nature. The kids learned how to work and take care of the land."

Bob says he won't forget the time Karen returned from a missionary trip in the Orient and told him, "Thank you, thank you, thank you for teaching me how to work." He says this made him realize how important it was to instill a strong work ethic in his children.

Despite the fact that the first two generations of Lafflins didn't show cattle, Bob says he felt it has been important for his family to put their product in the public eye for others to see. Not only has it been a good way to measure the progress of their cattle, but it has created great opportunities for his children through the National Junior Angus Association (NJAA).

"Angus cattle are all we've ever known," Sharee says. "We didn't go anywhere when the trailer wasn't behind. Our summer vacations were Angus shows."

Karen adds that showing cattle gave them something to do and kept them out of trouble.



*The Lafflins have used the showing as a method to market their cattle since the late 1960s. Bob recalled the time he was trying to organize and "bear down" on his kids at the county fair to start getting their cattle ready for the show. "R.D. told me to go sit down in the bleachers because they could get the cattle ready by themselves," Bob says. "So I went up to the bleachers and sat down. I've been there ever since."*

"I am thankful our parents took us to shows," Karen says. "They instilled in us a desire to work toward being the best. You just don't work for mediocrity; you do everything to the best of your ability."

"I also enjoyed traveling to Louisville, Denver, Chicago and many other places. I grew up with kids who never left Olsburg. I'm glad that we were so fortunate."

The opportunity to travel and to meet new people was one of Guy's greatest memories, too. Guy served on the NJAA Board from 1982 to 1984 and says he met many interesting people who are now exerting tremendous influence over the beef industry.

Getting up at 5 a.m. before school to rinse and tie in show cattle never stopped the Lafflin kids from working toward their goals. "We knew if we didn't put in the time, Dad wouldn't take us to the shows," Sharee says. "That was a good lesson for us to learn."

### Keeping the tradition alive

Today Bob's children still are involved closely with the ranch.

"In so many families, the kids leave home and don't return to the family business," Barb says. "All four of our children are still active in our operation. I think that makes our family unique."

After graduating with a degree in agricultural journalism from K-State, Sharee married Chris Sankey. Together, Sharee and Chris operate 6-N Ranch near Council Grove, Kan. They show Angus and Brangus cattle with their children, Cody, 20, and Jeana, 16.

"Our family is proud to be involved in this business," Sharee says. "Cody and Jeana enjoy the NJAA. The NJAA has allowed them to travel all across the

country to shows and activities. They've learned responsibility and aren't afraid to get out and go new places."

R.D. works alongside Bob at the ranch and is involved with the daily operations, from breeding and fencing to clipping the cattle before the sales. He also operates his own hay business on the side.

"Keeping close to the Angus industry has enabled me to meet people I may never have met otherwise," R.D. says. "These are opportunities that you just can't measure."

Karen is a guidance counselor in the White City school district and resides a few miles down the road from Sharee. Karen still has cows of her own that she keeps at Sharee's ranch. Many of her cows have sired past show heifers and steers for Cody and Jeana.

Though Karen doesn't travel to as many shows as she used to, she says she doesn't want to sever her ties with the Angus Association.

"It is a classy organization," she says. "Angus people work

hard and try to be the best.

They're just good people. I don't want to lose those connections."

The Lafflins' youngest son, Guy, graduated from K-State with a bachelor's degree in animal science. He later started a livestock-transportation business and keeps some cows at the ranch.

"The Lafflins have been around for 100 years because they encourage each other," Laughlin adds. "Bob's mother was a steadfast, stable part of the family. She supported her sons in the Angus business. Now, Barb does the same thing. She's always been an active supporter of her kids and the ranch."

### Looking toward tomorrow

No one can be sure of what the future will bring, but Eldon Flinn of Red Tank Ranch, Fittstown, Okla., is convinced that the Lafflin tradition will be put into good hands after Bob and Barb retire.

"R.D. has followed his father's footsteps very closely," Flinn

says. "With the help of his brother Guy, I know they won't let the legacy die. They'll keep it moving forward because they are deeply devoted to the ranch and their heritage."

Understanding the true meaning of heritage is not possible until you have a family of your own, Guy says. Guy began to understand this concept more fully after his 11-year-old son, Clinton, brought home one of his school papers. In his paper about what he would be when he grew up, he said he wanted to run the ranch at Olsburg.

"I asked him why he wanted to run the ranch," Guy says. "Clinton says since he was the youngest grandson with the Lafflin name, he wanted to make sure Lafflin Ranch continues like it had been for the last 100 years."

"That really meant a lot to me," Guy says. "It made me realize how important heritage and family ties really are."

## Dedication and determination recognized

Bob Lafflin never lets the dust settle under his feet. When he's not working with his cattle, he can be found attending Angus sales and events from coast to coast.

"Bob is a true ambassador for Angus cattle," says Dean Hurlbut, former director of activities for the American Angus Association. "He goes to the conferences, he goes to the shows, he travels to new states to meet new customers, he spends his money on advertising to let people know what's going on at their ranch—he's simply a promoter at heart."

Promoting the Angus breed and Lafflin Ranch is a primary reason for the Lafflins' continued success. "We believe that we have to sell ourselves before we sell our cattle," says Barb Lafflin, Bob's wife, a retired Methodist preacher. "People need to feel they are doing business with a person of integrity. We get cattle sold because people trust our judgment. That's important to us."

The respect that other breeders have for the Lafflins became evident on May 10 when the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) recognized them with a lifetime achievement award during a luncheon in Kansas City.

"The Lafflin family was recommended to us by their peers as a result of their 100-year involvement in the Angus cattle industry," says Jim Baker, administrator of the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA) within USDA. "We were so pleased to honor the Lafflins with this award for their lifetime commitment to agriculture. Bob's just the kind of fellow you'd like to recognize for his dedication."

That dedication and determination to continue producing Angus cattle is what keeps the ranch going, Bob's son R.D. says. "If you like what you're doing, you're more likely to succeed. Dad's diligence and passion for Angus cattle have made the ranch progress despite the obstacles that he's had to face."