

FOR GENERATIONS

The Butler family of Spring Cove Ranch has been raising Angus cattle for more than 100 years.

Story and photos by Maggie Malson

Spring Cove Ranch, Bliss, Idaho, received the Century Award during the 2019 Angus Convention in Reno, Nev. The award recognizes herds and their owners and families who have been in continuous production of registered Angus cattle for 100 years or more. Art and Stacy Butler shared their thoughts on keeping a family operation going through the generations.

Please give a brief overview of your family generations and who is currently working on the ranch.

Spring Cove Ranch homesteaded and grubbed from the sagebrush along the Kelton Road branch of the Oregon Trail in the early 1900s by Art's grandfather and grandmother, Arthur and Effie Butler, who purchased their first registered Angus cattle in 1919.

Art's father and mother, Doran and Helen Butler, continued Spring Cove Ranch and raised their seven children here while helping each of their children earn college degrees.

Currently the ranch is owned and the cow herd is managed by Art and Stacy Butler with our son Josh and his wife, Denise, and their three boys; daughter, Sarah Helmick and our nephew, Dale Butler. Art's brother, Dan Butler, and his family manage the farmland. The fifth generation is working on the ranch today. This is the same cow herd raised on the



Art and Stacy Butler share a love of family and Angus cattle, which has them carrying the ranching tradition on into the fifth generation.

same homesteaded acres, by the same family, since 1919. Most of our current-day pedigrees can be traced back to cows born at Spring Cove Ranch in the 1920s.

What is your view of Angus longevity? Why has the Angus breed done so well?

The trouble-free, convenience traits and high-quality carcass traits of the Angus breed have kept the breed popular. The breed has easy-calving, good-uddered females who graze well in any environment and make steers who provide the consumer a flavorful, tender, marbled protein product.

How has the Angus breed contributed to your longevity as a ranching family?

The demand for Angus bulls has created a viable business to support our family for five generations. Our cattle are managed on the range, like our commercial customers'. When my granddad first selected the breed to raise, it was because they had done well grazing and foraging for food on the rocky landscape he managed them in. Our cows are more moderate in size and fit any environment.

What were some of the early challenges you experienced, and how did you overcome them?

The challenges in the early 1900s were disease outbreaks. During the past 100 years, vaccines have been developed. But in the early years of our herd, brucellosis, trichomoniasis, tuberculosis and blackleg all had economic impact and took improved management strategies to overcome.

Art's granddad bartered and traded many things to make ends meet — eggs, coyote pelts, pigs, Percheron stallion services and more. He also worked for the canal company and helped build the irrigation system in the area. We had a small dairy when we first got married and milked cows. Through the years, we've done what we could to help support the ranch.

What are some current challenges in the industry, and how are you working toward meeting them?

One of the challenges has been the

impact of genetic defect discoveries on our breed. Good cows who had defects were demoted to the recipient herd. We test for all defects and cull accordingly. Educating our customers about the new technologies and production data is also a challenge. Many customers have sat around the table with us as we help them understand how EPDs (expected progeny differences) and value indexes (\$Values) can help them find cattle to fit their programs.

How have your customers contributed to your longevity in ranching?

Their trust in our program has enabled us to develop and continue a successful production sale at the ranch.

How have you been able to keep the ranch going for multiple generations? How do the family dynamics work in your family?

We delegate managerial responsibilities, and try to stay out of each other's way. We appreciate and learn from the past. We created different family entities — the cow herd and farming, and both have to cash flow.

Our children also have found their own passions outside of the ranch, which they can take ownership of. Our family success has come from co-ownership paired with individual investment. Josh and Denise have a well-established club lamb business. Sarah was an FFA teacher and advisor before staying at home with her two young daughters.

While we don't have a lot of formal family meetings, many important conversations happen chuteside. We're making breeding decisions together, deciding which animals need culled or kept, based on criteria

we've set to reach our goals of raising range-ready cattle for our customers. We have also started delegating more of the production sale responsibility to Josh, Denise and Sarah. They handle the sale order and clerking and will be in charge of our online female sale this fall.

What advice would you give for breeders in the early or middle years of raising Angus cattle?

Use the tremendous database that the Angus Breed has, identify your market and produce cattle to fit that market. You have to make conscious financial decisions every day that align with your goals and priorities.

Where did you see yourself 50 years ago, and if it was different from where you are now, how so?

Not much different. Art always wanted to raise Angus cattle at Spring Cove Ranch. Stacy grew up on a commercial ranch in northern Nevada and loved the Western ranch lifestyle as well.

Based on what you've learned through the years, what would you do better, more efficiently?

We would have taken advantage of the opportunities we've had through the years to purchase more grazing land and expand our land base.

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When looking ahead, what worries you most for the next generation? What is most exciting?

Most exciting is the fact that we have a fabulous, energetic group of children and grandchildren to take over for us. Our concern for them is beef systems are changing, and they will need to compete with corporations and big business.

What do you want your legacy to be?

That the legacy of family ranching continues at Spring Cove Ranch with the Angus cows leading the way. When we asked our kids about this, they said the cow herd is what they love most.

What are some of the best decisions you've made through the years?

To breed bulls that meet the criteria and needs of our commercial customers and not follow breed fads. We didn't listen to the naysayers who said we wouldn't be able to sell calving-ease cattle. We ignored those who said EPDs wouldn't matter. We

bred for production traits, taking our weaning and yearling weights up, and collecting carcass data to see how our cattle performed.

We put semen into herds to get actual carcass data back on our herd sires prior to ultrasound. After using ultrasound for years, we moved to genomics and DNA. For the last five years, we've DNA-tested every animal. We have consecutive generations of genomic data built into the production. We're really seeing the impact of the breeding decisions made off that genomic data.

We started our production sale in 1992. Prior to that, the cattle had all been sold private treaty. Another important business decision for us was when we built the sale barn in order to bring our production sale home to the ranch in 1998. We wanted our customers to see our cow herd and the environment and feed resources that cattle were raised under.

In 2016 we also utilized a 1031 land exchange to get more grazing land near the homestead, which has been a great benefit.

What are some of the mistakes you made, and what did you learn from them?

There were some breeding decisions we made along the way, like breeding to an animal that just didn't produce the kind of cattle to fit our needs or environment, but you always learn from them.

What's one lesson you wanted your kids to take out of your home?

Treat others with respect and honor. Be honest and have integrity. Be polite, kind and courteous.

What goals do you have for the future of Spring Cove Ranch?

We want to develop more grazing land, continue to identify pedigrees that work under Western range feed conditions, tell the story of our 100-year Angus legacy, and turn it over to the next generation. **AJ**

Editor's note: Maggie Malson is a freelance writer from Parma, Idaho.

