



# The Point Rider

*With powerful leadership, insight and drive, Aristocrat Land and Cattle Company owner/manager Ben Houston breeds Angus cattle today that the beef industry will be searching for tomorrow.*

BY BARBARA LABARBARA

Ben Houston not only welcomes the challenges of being a seedstock producer in the evolving U.S. beef industry, he has been known to create a few changes.

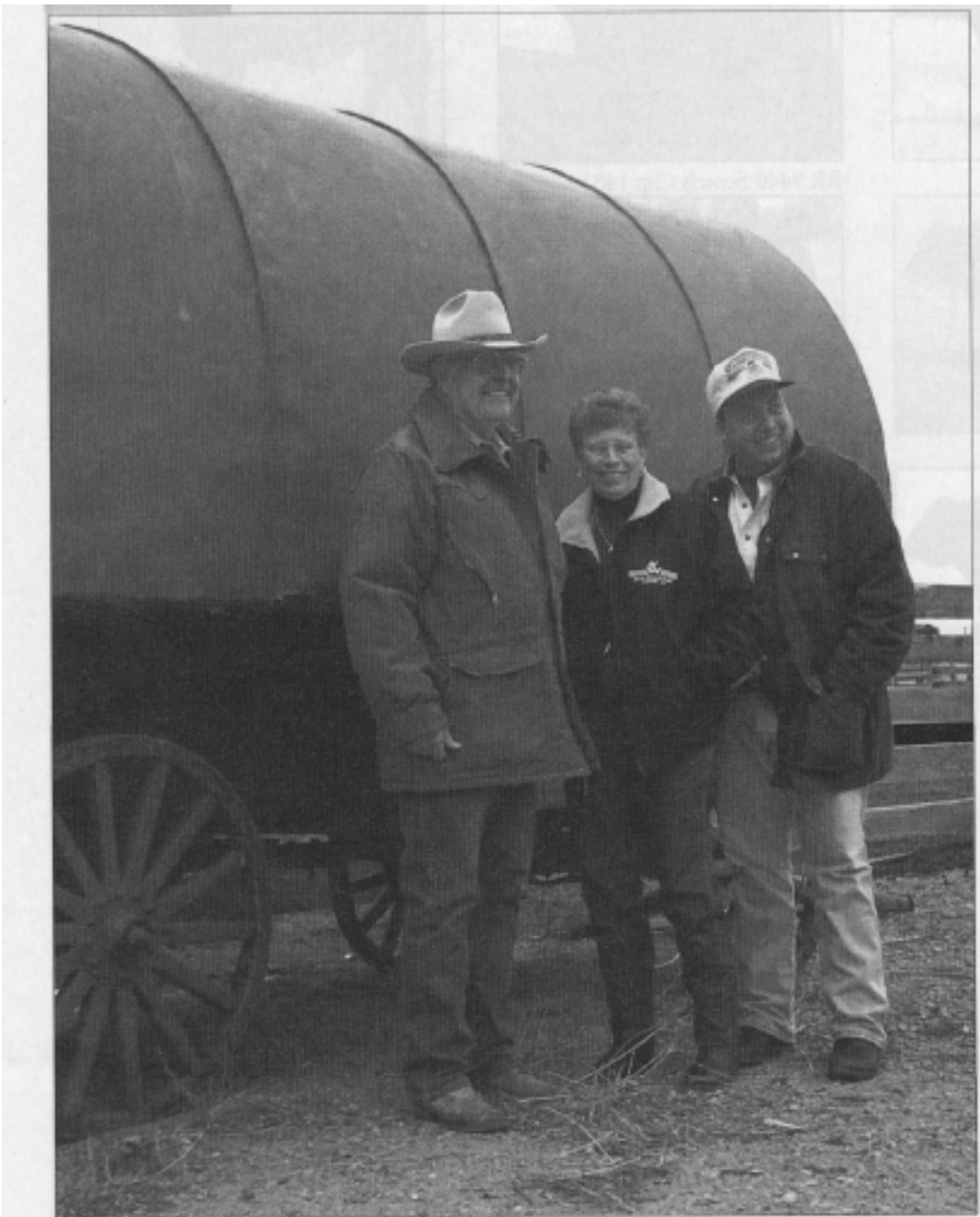
For more than 50 years Houston has been a contributing member of the American Angus Association and National Cattlemen's Beef Association. He has seen the peaks and valleys of this business, but has seldom been stuck on a plateau or in a rut for long.

It was 1938 when Houston first stepped into the arena at the National Western Stock Show. He was nine years old and showing his first calf. Today his association with the National Western and the U.S. cattle exporting is influential around the world.

Ben's father and mother, Walter and Minnie, homesteaded in Yuma County, Colo., and later moved to Buckingham, Colo. They were pioneer Angus breeders. When Ben joined the Air Force during the Korean War, his parents sold the herd and retired from ranching.

In 1950 Ben and Anita Lambert were married. Four years later, when he was discharged from USAF, they began their own cattle business pilgrimage. Ben gained experience by serving as herdsman for Norgren Polled Hereford Ranch, managing Hilltop Angus for Judge George Dole, joining the Austin Moody Sale Management organization and managing Haystack Angus Ranch.

Houstons established their own operation, Aristocrat Angus Ranch, in 1965 when they purchased land along the St. Vrian River near Platteville, Colo. They owned three registered Angus cows. The ranch was founded on a small investment and was an operation that had to make money.



*Working partners at Aristocrat Angus, Platteville, Colo., are (l to r): Ben, Nita and Skylar Houston.*

Ben and his new partner, Charles Alexander, had a plan for gradual improvement. In 1967 they purchased Nobleman 6,000,000 as an eight-month-old calf for \$2,600. The next year they exhibited him at the International Livestock Show in Chicago where he was named International grand champion bull. His value skyrocketed. Nobleman was the first bull in history to win the Angus competition at the International from a herd headquartered west of the Mississippi.

Previous to the International, this bull was grand champion at Midland Empire State Fair at Billings, Mont., Colorado State Fair, New Mexico State Fair and the Grand National at San Francisco's Cow Palace where Nobleman was awarded registration number 6,000,000 by the American Angus Association.

Two more triumphs quickly followed for Aristocrat — Black Revolution was grand champion bull at the National Western in 1971 and Ankonian Catalyst in 1973.

**The foundation cow herd** was selected individually for quality, productivity and longevity. Houston and Alexander realized the importance of quality to the success of their fledgling operation. Their motto was "modern cattle of today and the type of animals that the industry will be searching for tomorrow."

After 10 years, as they had originally agreed, Alexander and Houston dissolved their partnership — each going their own way in the beef industry. Later, Houston and Keith Russell, who had worked with Ben for years, joined in the Three Bar partnership under the umbrella of Aristocrat. Russell now manages his own KMR Angus operation in Colorado.



*The Rocky Mountains serve as an inspiring backdrop for the Aristocrat Angus ranch feedlot it was established 30 years ago and has a capacity for 2,500 head.*

Ben's constant partner has been "Nita." Together they have raised four children — Diane Houston Hergert, Pam Houston Miller, Scott and Skylar. It has been said that Ben rode point, but Nita provided the stability that kept Aristocrat on course. All of the children are involved in the operation, but son Skylar is the one with hands-on, day-to-day management responsibilities.

Aristocrat has always had registered Angus as well as a commercial herd. They raise their own replacement females and breed them as yearlings. Calving season is January through March. If any commercial cows are open at the end of breeding season, they go to market. Open registered cows are individually analyzed before being sold.

Extensive research is done before selecting a breeding bull. Reproduction, fertility and feed conversion are high on the priority list of selection traits.

"We put our specifications into the computer through the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program," says

Skylar. "It matches our particular needs to bulls that meet those requirements. In 1997 only three bulls showed up with those specs."

Breeding and performance records have been an important part of the operation since the beginning. Houstons use AHIR expected progeny differences (EPDs) and collect carcass data. They use every recordkeeping system available through the American Angus Association. Carcass data is collected on their pens of steers and tied to their sires. Before cattle are shipped, visual inspection along with ultrasound are used for carcass, pregnancy checking, sexing and back fat evaluation.

"Anybody in this business today has to keep good cattle records as well as accurate financial records," says Houston. "We feel the Angus breed is further ahead than other breeds because we have more historical data available to us."

All those records and carcass data have paid off. For five consecutive years, Aristocrat exhibited the grand or reserve

grand champion carcasses in the National Western Fed Beef Contest. In 1994 at the Great Western Beef Expo, Aristocrat's pen of five steers was supreme champion over 50 sire groups representing 19 breeds from nine states.

Having their own feedlot for more than 30 years has helped Houstons follow their bulls' performance through their commercial cattle. The feedlot has a 2,500-head capacity. The numbers vary because yearling heifers are penned there during breeding season and private treaty sale bulls remain there until delivery.

Aristocrat has developed a working relationship with Colorado State University (CSU) in Fort Collins which has kept them attuned to industry needs. The judging team, other agricultural students and CSU staff frequently visit the ranch to apply and observe applications of modern genetic technology in the field.

"There are new technologies and new processes being

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developed continually," says Houston. "Staying in touch with CSU gives us the opportunity to see new technologies and veterinary practices put into practice."

Aristocrat built its own state-of-the-art embryo transfer (ET) facility on the ranch in 1981. They employ a full-time veterinary/embryologist, Dr. Pat Hemming, who manages the facility and is in charge of the ranch's reproduction activities including ET work and artificial insemination (AI).

Embryo extraction allows Houstons extensive channels in marketing their product. Thousands of embryos can be shipped for the cost of transporting one bull.

In 1992 Houston, working with CSU and Colorado Genetics Inc., shipped 600 head of cattle and 2,000 embryos to the Ukraine. Eighty-five head of breeding stock were shipped by air from Denver's Stapleton Airport. The 95,000-pound Angus package traveled in style with special flooring, pens and supplemental air conditioning. Skylar and Sam Woody traveled with the herd and spent six weeks in the Kiev area exhibiting them at the Kiev World Expo. The balance of the cattle was shipped by semi-trucks and waterways.

Because of government regulations, it took two years to put the deal together. There are no private feedlots or breeding operations in the Ukraine; the government is the buyer. Skylar says the paperwork required to complete such a transaction is tremendous. He has visited Ukraine four times, although it's difficult to enter the country for business or tourist purposes.

"Even though Ukraine cattle operations are about where we were in the 1930s their thinking is not behind ours. They simply haven't had the opportunities we have had," says Houston. "Their technology and facilities are expanding rapidly. We had a

program here where we trained two of their veterinarians for a six-week period on a rotational oasis. They learned ET, AI and other veterinary practices."

The Houstons look at this not only as a business venture but as a humanitarian effort. They enjoy seeing people in foreign markets advance. Besides shipments of breeding stock, frozen semen and embryos to Ukraine, they have exported cattle to Mexico, Canada, Australia, Japan, Argentina and Costa Rica. Skylar recently assisted in opening a feedlot operation in China and they are exploring export possibilities in Turkey.

Locally, Houstons market their breeding stock and sell semen at private treaty with the majority routinely going to repeat customers including many successful commercial operations. Their customer's needs are considered when making breeding decisions.

Skylar noted that over the years most of their business has been with large operations, but today they are receiving more and more calls from people wanting just a few head. He attributes that market demand to small acreages popping up around developing municipalities.

Their fed cattle are marketed through Monfort and Farmland Alliance. Both are licensed Certified Angus Beef Program processors. In their last shipment to Farmland National Beef, Liberal, Kan., 44 percent made *Certified Angus Beef™* product, with progeny from their sire, Car Don Precision B274 attaining 66 percent.

Over the years the Houstons have fought market variations, cattle trends, floods, blizzards and the day-to-day problems ranching and life bring. Still, Ben says the Angus business has been good to them. The many awards and accolades the family has received over the years are



**Ben and Nita Houston's Angus steer entries earned champion carcass honors for five consecutive years at the National Western Fed Beef Contest in Denver. This photograph was taken in 1979.**

testimony to the fact that they have been good to the beef industry, too.

Besides being a member of the American Angus Association for more than 50 years, Ben served as president of the Colorado Cattle Feeders and is a lifetime honorary member. He was a director of the National Cattlemen's Association, Roundup Riders of the Rockies and the Colorado National Bank.

He has made many contributions to Weld County 4-H projects, Future Farmers of America and served on the Weld County Fair Board. He has also been an ardent supporter of Colorado State University and served on the CSU Advisory Board, Development Board and Research Foundation. He was honored with the CSU Leadership in Agriculture Award. U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Richard Lyng appointed Ben to the Beef Promotion and Research Board.

In 1976 he was elected to the executive committee of the National Western Stock Show and served as president in 1985. As president he faced the disaster of having the Denver

fire marshal shut down the visitor gates at the 1988 show because of overcrowding. Immediately after that show, Houston began his quest for long-range capital improvements to the facility. One of the major hurdles he overcame was getting a \$30 million Denver bond issue passed in 1989. On opening day 1991, phase one of the construction project had been completed.

The National Western named Houston "1995 Citizen of the West." He was recognized as a pioneer in the cattle industry, for his contributions to Colorado State University and for his support of the National Western Scholarship program he helped found in 1983. The awards range from \$2,000 to \$3,000 annually to 14 CSU and five University of Wyoming students in agriculture-related fields.

Houston attributes everything he has accomplished to family, loyal employees and associates, and customers who keep coming back "Every individual is controlled by their own ambitions and visions, but no one person does it alone."