



# The Lessons of Experience

BY COLETTE KNUTSON GJERMUNDSON

*If the world is our classroom and our subject one of passion, our experiences can provide the necessary knowledge.*

*Above: Charles Rankin, his wife, Dee, and their sons, Ramon and Curtis, live and work on a ranch southwest of Upton, Wyo., where Charles was born and raised. "My Dad homesteaded this in 1912," Rankin says proudly.*

Amidst the rolling prairies and pine-topped hills of northeastern Wyoming, Charles Rankin has spent seven decades as a student of the cattle industry. He views it through the eyes of a cow-calf producer, a stocker, a feeder and an order buyer. In these uncertain times, his viewpoint may well provide insight the industry needs.

## ■ Yearling opportunities

The heart of Rankin Ranch is yearlings, which they've been running for years. They buy calves each fall and currently have 1,870 on hand. Of those, just 162 are steers and a handful are home-raised replacement heifers. "This year we bought heifers because of the price spread between steers and heifers," says Rankin.

"If I had my druthers, they would all have black hides," he adds. "But we have to compete with people who want to buy heifers for breeding cattle, and the price gets to where we have to back away from them and buy some of other breeds."

Rankin purchases calves out of the tri-state area of Wyoming, South Dakota and Montana.

"The cattle we've got on hand now were purchased at auction barns in the tri-state area, which offer calves that are as good as the best," he says. "The year before, we bought most of them out of the country. You have to be flexible. What will work this year may not work next year — the opportunity may not be there."

Rankin prefers calves that are about 450-475 pounds (lb.) Nov. 1. "Calves that will satisfy us for quality and weight are becoming harder to find," he adds.

Most of Rankin's yearlings are wintered in custom lots near the auction barns in South Dakota. "We don't have the facilities nor the feed supply to winter that many calves here at home," he explains. "We haven't made much money up to grass turn-out time, but we've got the numbers together and the health in order to follow through with our program."

The cattle come out of the wintering lots and go to grass around May 10. The yearlings are pastured on leased grass within a 100-mile radius of the Rankin Ranch. Getting enough grass is one of the main concerns.

### ■ Intensive grazing

"We've done quite a little moving around, but that's how we run cattle in excess of our carrying capacity," says Rankin. "We've done a lot of sweating at times, but it seems like some grass always shows up."

"We're firm believers in early intensive grazing," Rankin says. If a pasture will run 100 head for five months, he explains, multiply 100 head times five months to equal 500 yearling months. Divide that by three months to run 166 head for three months.

"Trials have indicated that a yearling puts on 75 percent of its summer gain in the first half of a grazing season," says Rankin. "You'll sell more pounds of beef per acre with three months of early intensive grazing than you could in five months, and you'll eliminate problems that come along later in the season."

"These cattle are no different to us than a combine is to a wheat farmer," he continues. "We compare a three-month grazing period to a 14-foot swath while comparing a five-month grazing period to



a 7-foot mower. It's obvious which one will harvest the crop in the least time with the least exposure to the elements."

Charles and his sons, Ramon and Curtis, spend some long summer days riding herd on the yearlings.

"We pretty well insist on doing our own riding, looking after the cattle and doctoring them in the pasture," says Charles.

### ■ Finishing touches

The yearlings are ready for the finishing lot around Aug. 1. They're fed about 120 days.

"Normally speaking, if you go to the feedlot the first of August, you'll miss the crowd as far as cattle coming out; you're 30 days in front of most of the northern fat cattle," he explains. "We try to hit a market window of late November to the first of December."

The Rankins own their yearlings through slaughter. "If everything works good, you get to sell two crops of the same cattle: one as grass yearlings and a second

as fat cattle with the gain from the feedlot. If you're raising high-producing cattle and selling them to someone else, you may not be realizing their full potential."

The Rankins have twice fed out their yearlings at Supreme Feeders, Liberal, Kan., and participate in the Farmland Supreme Beef Alliance. Cattle are sold on carcass merit with the base price being the highest price paid that week for steers in western Kansas.

"Those that exceed the carcass

requirements receive a premium, and if they don't, the owner still gets the base price," he says. "It's a good deal." A majority of the Rankins' cattle brought a \$3/hundredweight (cwt.) premium in 1996.

### ■ Cows balance out operation

"The cow herd is a means of marketing our hay crop here on the ranch," says Rankin, noting a cow can utilize lower-quality hay and that they have (unfenced) nonirrigated hayfields within pastures that can't be utilized early in the season.

"Running cows just balances out the operation," he says. "There are three of us

COVERED BY SCOT NEAR

## The Lessons of Experience

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 131

here, and we need to be employed 12 months out of the year.”

The cows are black-hided. The Rankins are even replacing their black-baldy cows with straight blacks.

“The steer calves off of these cows are sold to feeders,” he says, noting their calves weigh about 600 lb. at 215 days — too big to fit their yearling program. The steers averaged 618 lb. this past year and 635 lb. the year before.

### ■ Cattle on order

“Buying cattle in the country has been an experience and education in itself,” says Rankin, who served the industry as an order buyer from the 1950s to the 1970s. He still buys some.

“It’s always a challenge to drive into a rancher’s yard and try to put a deal together,” says Rankin. “The first and most important thing is you hope he has quality cattle you can merchandise. From there on, it’s a matter of trying to negotiate a deal and do it right.”

### ■ Angus fill the need

Whether it’s yearlings, cow-calf pairs or order buying, Rankin wants Angus-based cattle, calling them “a breed for all reasons.” He explains, “Angus cattle are well-known for their carcass and mothering ability. If she’s a good Angus cow, you can’t find a better mother cow in any other breed. From the maternal standpoint, she’s not as apt to have suborned udders, pinkeys, prolapse and, besides that, she’ll have a calf that’s got a will to live.”

He also likes Angus for “the fact that somebody else wants to buy them.”

### ■ Time for serious improvement

“I’m appalled that you see so many mediocre cattle in the country,” says Rankin. “They’re pulling the market down for the good cattle. I’ve been to seminars where a packer presents a chart indicating the ideal animal, but there is no differentiation for price.”

“Feeding in Kansas, you see a lot of southern-origin cattle but they’ll stand right alongside of good northern cattle,

and the good ones won’t bring any more,” he observes. “Are we ever going to change this so the price reflects the quality of the cattle?”

The lesser quality stems from having too many cattle multipliers and not enough cattle breeders in the industry, believes Rankin.

“You can’t find very many ranchers who really have a breeding program,” he explains. “Too many producers know very little about what goes on in the industry after their calves get on the truck. I’ve often thought that each cow-calf man should go to the feedlot with his production at least once to get exposed to what really goes on. It’s an education in itself.”

Rankin says he recently read two of three eating-out experiences are a disappointment. “I don’t think we can increase the demand for beef with Selects. The word I get,” he says, “is that these big restaurant chains can’t obtain enough real Choice meats for their trade. Things we could do in the cattle business to produce

a more acceptable and uniform product are unlimited. We as producers could and should do better.” He suggests:

### **1. Quality assurance begins at home.**

While quality starts with genetics, management also affects it. Rankin says he once heard 30% of growth implants are ineffective because they become infected due to unsanitary procedures.

“We’ve got lots and lots of cleaning up to do in this industry,” he comments.

One of Rankin’s pet peeves is vitamin A shots injected in the top of the hip. “It’s the worst thing you can do, because if you get any infection, it’s right in the round,” he says. “We did it wrong for years, not knowing that we weren’t doing a good job. Now all shots at our ranch go in the neck.”

### **2. Plan your program.**

“We don’t take the time to educate ourselves,” Rankin observes. “As producers, we leave a lot to chance that maybe tomorrow will be better.”

Rather than leaving destiny to chance, Rankin says, “Get a program in mind, and set some goals for improvement.”

First on that list should be a good, sound culling program, he says. “Get rid of the tail-enders and, from then on, buy good Angus bulls. Select bulls with good milk, marbling and yearling EPDs (expected progeny differences). Producers need to learn about EPDs, so when they go to a bull sale they’ve got some way of judging a bull’s merits.”

### **3. Process calves at home.**

Dehorn, castrate and precondition calves before weaning, advises Rankin. Give shots soon enough (prior to weaning) to allow adequate time for calves to build immunity. “I firmly believe it will cost \$4 to \$5 per hundredweight to dehorn a calf at weaning due to shrink and loss of gain.”

### **4. Develop heifers correctly.**

Further heifer development could be accomplished through good genetics and nutrition. “More effort should be made to get a heifer big enough before she calves so she has a bigger pelvis,” he says. His replacement heifers will go to grass weighing 800 lb. By the time they calve, they’ll weigh 1,000-1,100 lb.

*CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE*

## The Lessons of Experience

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 133

"That doesn't mean they'll grow up to be 1,400-pound cows," he says. "It just means they'll get to their mature weight sooner."

### 5. Get involved in beef marketing.

Once the cattle go to the packing plant, he says, "we leave everything up to someone else. Others are marketing our product, and they're doing it to their advantage."

"I think this is where producer-owned packing plants, alliances and branded beef fit into the picture. We're seeing quite a bit of branded product, and I'm a full supporter of it. It's one way we producers stand a chance of getting what our cattle are worth. Otherwise, the packers have this thing sewed up pretty hard."

While "Choice" doesn't mean much to the average shopper, Rankin says if a consumer purchases brand "XYZ beef" and likes it, she'll look for it again next week. Branded products, he believes, are good advertising for the beef industry.

### 6. Take advantage of information.

"We've made a lot of moves, but we've got a lot more moves to make," says the Wyoming cattleman. "We producers should strive to do a better job than we're doing, and we need to educate ourselves about facets of the industry."

The Rankins try to keep in step with the market by utilizing a DTN (Data Transmission Network) screen. "We read that every day," he says. "It's just like a daily newspaper, only better. As big as the industry is, we producers have just got to keep up on the happenings a lot better than we are."

### • Sharing knowledge

Rankin attributes his beef industry knowledge to age. "And there's quite a lot of that," he quips. "I try to pass on the knowledge that I've gained through the years, especially to younger producers."

It's obvious that cattle are Charles Rankin's passion. He's spent a lifetime working in the cattle business and has taken every opportunity to further educate himself. The knowledge he's gained benefits himself, his family, his ranch, his acquaintances and his industry. In these uncertain times, he might well be a teacher the industry

needs.

