

WHEN THE DUST SETTLES

An Angus icon showcases a lifetime of love for the breed.

by Megan Silveira, assistant editor

The crisp September air signified the start of a new season, making the weather a perfect complement to Randy Kessler's first 4-H meeting in 1962. When it was the 9-year-old's turn to tell the leader what project he was interested in, there was no hesitation.

"I said I wanted an Angus heifer," the now 70-year-old remembers. "I wanted to breed Angus bulls — to be here forever, raising Angus bulls in this area."

The dream seemed a bit far-fetched to everyone at the time, but his parents bought him his first heifer. Though Herefords were "hot at the time," Kessler says he was unexplainably drawn to the polled, black-hided cattle.

Every memory Kessler has of those early years is marked by words of encouragement and support from his family, despite "Lassie" being a far cry from the row crops his father was used to. The beef industry was all about small cattle then. Still, he rode the waves of change with foresight and consistency — it's his resilient attitude that Kessler believes has allowed him to accomplish his original dream.





DIPPING HIS TOES IN

Milton-Freewater, Ore., always has been, and always will be, home to Kessler.

“I’ve moved seven times in my life, all within three miles,” he says.

The small farming community is the perfect place for Kessler’s ever-growing Angus herd. What started as that one “small” female has grown to 350 head.

He’s always had an eye for balanced cattle, selecting for animals between a 5 and 6 in terms of frame size, even when that wasn’t considered industry standard. Kessler’s priorities lie with durability and moderation. He likes his cows to look pretty in a pasture but wean a calf that’s competitive in pounds and solid on their feet.

Three years after Lassie joined the family, Kessler sold his first bull. Kessler’s \$410 profit fell below the \$610 sale average, but the experience lit his competitive spirit on fire.

“Nobody knew me — just a 4-H kid,” he explains. “And you have to build a reputation.”

Kessler’s original plans of becoming a reputable cattleman didn’t include a lot of specifics.

“I got to where I just wanted enough cows to produce good bulls, to have enough bulls to have a

bull sale,” he says. “I wanted good cows, but only the ones that I could afford.”

Each year at weaning, he kept the best females to grow the herd. All other replacements were sold, with each dollar made going back into the ranch.

In the show ring, he could showcase his efforts developing quality Angus bloodlines. To start building his brand with future potential customers, Kessler attended 10 state or county fairs each year. His first event was the Walla Walla Fair in 1962 with Lassie — a show he hasn’t missed competing in since.

During those early years, Kessler’s days were spent working at other ranches and his weekends and evenings in his own pastures. Support now came from his wife, Dawn, who stood by her husband even when things got worse than they had ever been.

Shortly before their marriage, Kessler hosted a female sale at his ranch. The grandstands were predominantly unoccupied, and nearly half the offering left the sale ring without a bid. The few cows he did sell didn’t bring enough money to pay the bills.

He started making phone calls, and Kessler is still grateful today for the grace offered to him. Many

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people allowed him to pay what he could, when he could, until each dime was returned.

Cattle had to be fed on a ration as he recovered financially. It took two people to feed, he says, one to get the gate and one to fight the cows off as they swarmed for feed. Even the household refrigerator suffered.

“I used to love Pepsi®, and back then it was 35 cents. We couldn’t afford Pepsi. I love ketchup. We couldn’t afford ketchup,” he recalls. “It was tough times.”

Selling bulls private treaty and through consignment sales provided relief to the couple. The cattle he offered spoke for themselves, but the service Kessler brought to customers kept commercial buyers returning to Milton-Freewater each year.

Flyers went out in November as bulls were weaned, then his phone rang until July. People wanted to pick his brain on the selection, set up appointments to come view cattle in person and just talk industry with the Kesslers.

Building a name for himself took time, but Kessler says he has always focused on customer service. In his mind, integrity is the key to success in the cattle business.

“When the dust settles, your word is all you’ve got,” he says. Smiling softly, he adds, “And I think I have a pretty good reputation for that.”

Kessler’s big break came in the form of a bull he named Rainman.

As he ate the sandwich Dawn brought him for lunch one day, they walked the pasture to check calves and spotted a new addition.

He assured Dawn this was their moment.

“We knew he was good, but we didn’t know he was \$20,000 good,” Kessler chuckles.

When the gavel fell at the Hermiston Consignment Sale, Kessler knew he could finally create the life he had always pined for.

“We call this the Rainman house,” he says, as he gestures to his home of several decades, “because he made the down payment.”

The following years were marked with other standout animals who sold for more money than Kessler had ever hoped for, but he says one of his defining decisions is credited to Dawn.

Despite the lingering disappointment of those original female sales, his wife convinced him to host their first annual bull sale in 2007.

“Marrying Dawn was the best thing I ever did,” he admits. “She was a great person, smarter than me.”

Though she passed away in 2011, Kessler still upholds the same level of service they offered as a team at that first auction. Sale day morning is accompanied by hot coffee and fresh donuts. After viewing cattle early, customers can enjoy lunch before watching every bull in the sale run through the ring.

To Kessler, there’s nothing better than a packed house, and he’s happy to make his customers feel welcome when they fill the stands.

“It’s hospitality,” he says. “We’re appreciative that they showed up.”





Those darker memories of tough times pale in comparison to the feeling of success Kessler experiences now.

“It was my dream from the time I was 9 years old to have this and do this. I’m not a quitter,” Kessler adds. “When the going gets tough, the tough get going. Bottom line, if you’re really into it then you just buck up and make it work.”

BOOTS MADE FOR WALKING

Nowadays, ketchup is served with most meals, and though he admits the work isn’t quite as easy for him as it used to be, Kessler’s favorite place is still out in the pasture.

“I’m 70, and I don’t have any hobbies,” he laughs. “I love what I do.”

When he’s not with the cattle, Kessler spends his days with daughter Tierra Duke. She and her two siblings, Cheyenne and Cody, all grew up loving the ranch life, but when Duke left for Oregon State University in 2011, she didn’t have any intentions of coming back home.

After the family lost Dawn, Duke took over recordkeeping. That work, coupled with involvement in an agriculture club on campus, inspired Duke to come back to her roots.

Switching to Oklahoma State University, Duke found her place in the livestock marketing sector following graduation. Her heart, however, was still restless.

“Every time I would come home, I just loved being here,” Duke says. “I was doing marketing for other people, and I just kind of wanted to be home selling my own bulls.”

Six years ago, she transitioned to life on the ranch full-time. She still manages records and marketing but now also helps her father make breeding decisions, select new genetics to bring home and further develop business relationships.

“I’ve learned a lot about taking care of people [from him],” Duke says. “Our [sale book] warranty says we do this, but we do go above and beyond for everybody. I think that’s something that’s hard to wrap your mind around at first, but then you realize that’s part of the reputation and why people keep coming back.”

The desire to return to Kessler Angus isn’t one shared by customers alone. Cheyenne is an ICU nurse in California, but she always comes home for the annual bull sale at the ranch and calving season. Cody balances his time working part-time on the ranch with his passion for the equine industry.

There are no regrets in Duke’s mind about coming home, even though she says the transition back to full-time cattlemoan wasn’t easy.

“I had so much fun growing up here on the ranch ... and I want that for my future family,” Duke says, resting her hand on her round stomach. The newest generation of Kessler Angus is soon to join the world.

For Kessler, there’s no better partner he could have in the business. He says Duke has the same focus on customer service that he does, and can study cattle with the best of them. Though their preferences vary, he thinks their opinions on good livestock pair together nicely.

As the two sit around a wooden dining table in the “Rainman house,” looking at records of their favorite cattle and flipping through photos capturing some of their most treasured memories, Kessler can’t wipe the smile off his face.

The word “retirement” might not be in his vocabulary, but when the dust settles, he knows Kessler Angus will always be in good hands.

“She’s like my wife was. She’s really smart — way smarter than me,” he says, looking at Duke. “She’s going to be the future.” 