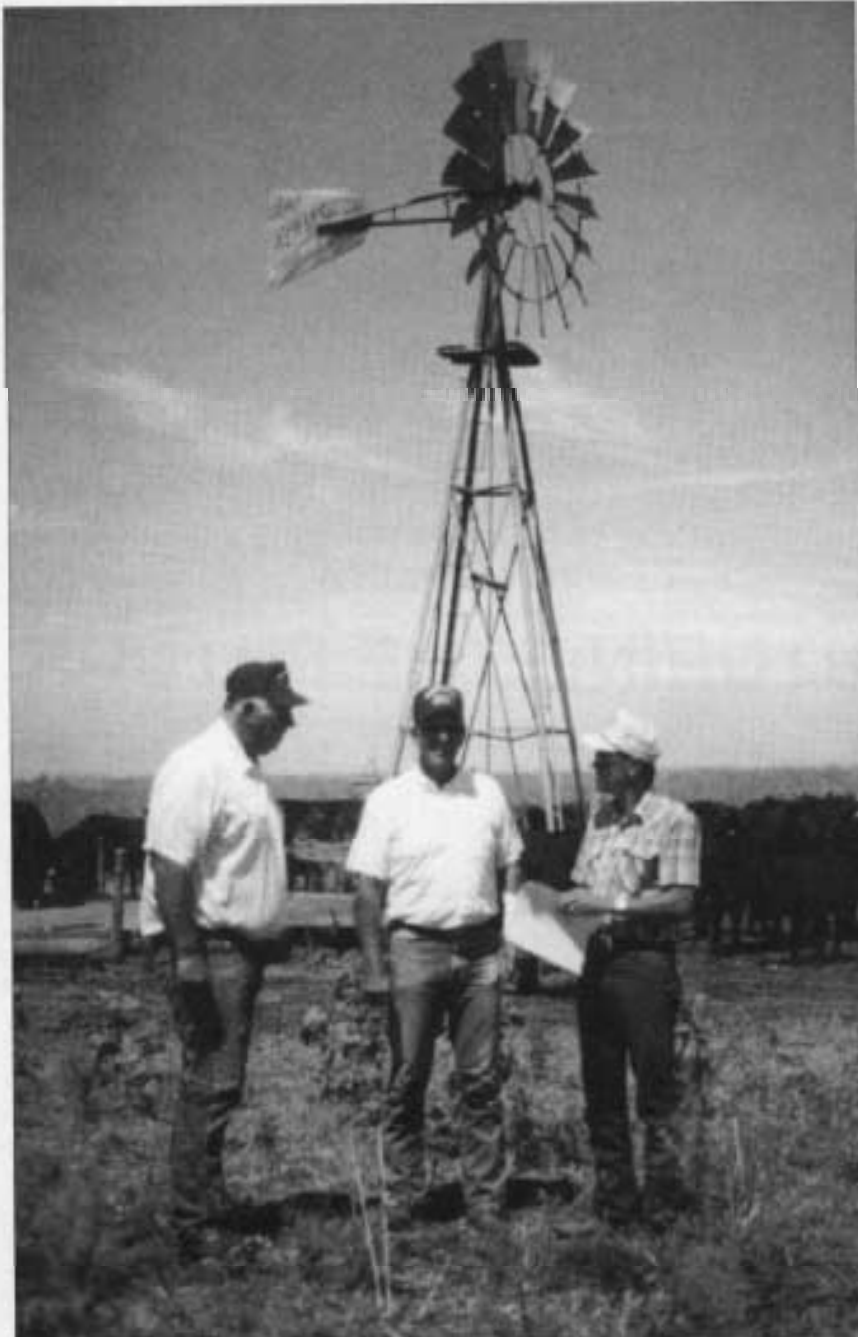


Wagonhammer Ranch Demands Marketable Cattle All the Way Through



Wagonhammer Ranch is managemeny team (l to r), Dennis Suhr Lamoine Hall and Myron Benes Help to maintain a profitable program.

Good cows and good people are both assets that add to the Wagonhammer Ranch cattle operation located in Albion, Neb.

"We feel what sets us apart from other breeders or gives us an edge is our cow herd," says Myron Benes, breeding program coordinator and director of sales and promotion. "Two things Wagonhammer Ranch really has going for them is their cows and they have some really good people working for them."

Located in Wheeler County, Wagonhammer Ranch runs approximately 1,400 commercial cows which are primarily of Angus base. Along with the commercial operation, Wagonhammer Ranch has purebred herds of Angus, Charolais and Simmental cows.

Wagonhammer Ranch was established in 1910 by two German immigrants, Julius and Max Wolf, who settled in eastern Nebraska.

They began in business as importers of draft horses. After World War II they got out of the draft horse trade and became cattle traders. Julius traveled the western United States sending steers by rail to Albion which started a feedlot. In the 1930s they began to pasture steers and Wagonhammer Ranch unfolded. The ranch is named after the inch pin that hooked up the Conestoga wagon and today symbolizes the Wagonhammer Ranch brand.

Julius' son Jim joined the ranch after WW II and converted from steers to a cow-calf operation. In 1984 Jay Wolf, Jim's son, joined the operation. He is now general manager of the ranch enterprise that sits on 37,000 acres of rolling ground.

Wagonhammer Ranch has found that Angus influence cows are an important ingredient in their beef program. "Angus is a must in a commercial operation," Benes says. "The ingredients Angus cattle contribute are significant." Benes explains the black color is real important in their program and the easiest way to get that is through the Angus breed.

In a commercial set-up like the Wag-

STORY BY TANIA MICHELS

Angus Cows Offer Diversity to commercial Producers

Wagonhammer Ranch, Angus cattle contribute many things. Benes says the Angus breed has an advantage over some of the other exotic breeds when it comes to maternal characteristics. For example, the Angus cows' quality of udder, longevity and fleshing ability.

"Angus cattle just have a lot of things to offer the commercial end. That is part of the reason Angus bull sales have been so good the last few years nationwide," Benes says.

Wagonhammer Ranch has an annual bull sale that markets predominantly Angus bulls and some Charolais bulls every March. Each year the sale offers approximately 125 bulls and 15 females. This sale is the only part of the business that sells cattle at auction except the Triple Crown Feeder Calf Show and Sale held in Grand Island. This event has been a tradition for Wagonhammer Ranch for the last 16 years. All other selling is done through private treaty.

Quality cows allow Wagonhammer Ranch to be diversified within the cattle industry. Each fall their operation sells a select group of club calves as steer projects. Club calves are sold private treaty after Labor Day to interested buyers.

Wagonhammer Ranch bred steers have gone on to win several state fairs.

"Selling club calves allows us to be diversified within the cattle business," Benes says. Whether they are breeding for seedstock, club calves or feedlot steers, Wagonhammer Ranch strives for total performance cattle. "Angus fits the total performance mold," Benes says.

"We want cattle that perform all the way through," he adds. "Cattle that don't get sold as breeding stock or club calves are put in the feedlot, therefore they better be workable all the way through."

Benes credits Angus influence replacement females and calving ease Angus bulls for Wagonhammer Ranch's functional kind of cattle. "We feel the reliability of the Angus expected progeny differences (EPDs) are much higher than other breeds," Benes says.

"There are so many good Angus bloodlines around you can breed for the type you need in your herd." Benes explains they breed for a certain type in the purebred end and EPDs and pedigrees are analyzed before breeding.

The breeding program at Wagonhammer Ranch is broken down into different phases. The registered cattle are artificially inseminated (AI) along with a select group of commercial cows. Most of the vir-

Angus females profitable traits are well known in purebred operations. These traits carry through and make them functional for the commercial cattelman, as well.

"From a commercial standpoint there are several things Angus females offer the commercial cattelman," says Don Boggs, Extension beef specialist South Dakota State University "The good Angus traits at the baseline are hard to dilute out of a herd once they are in, but are also hard to put back in once they are out," t

Angus females carry characteristics that make the breed adaptable in the commercial operation. Boggs credits Angus cattle as being problem free. "A commercial Cattelman is busy, especially if it's part of a multi-enterprise farming operation and they don't have time for problems," says Boggs, "The ability of the Angus cow to stay problem free is one reason they have become so popular."

Angus cattle are again given credit in the seedstock business, however genetically they work well in both commercial feedlots and breeding programs.

"Angus cows nick well with lots of breeds," says Boggs "The breed works well to compliment some of the other breeds that don't have the ability to work well within its breed."

Angus cattle are really the maternal breed: how one puts those blends together for that crossbred product really is the key. "The 50/50 cross of half Continental and half British make such a nice cross for the feedlot or the show ring," says Boggs.

Expected progeny differences (EPDs) aid in making commercial decisions for the rancher's program "EPDs are a tool. Just like any other tool they can help evaluate traits in Angus cattle," says Boggs. "Not using them at all would be a mistake, but using them as the only selection tool might be a mistake too." He recommends using EPDs as a risk management tool.

It's the cattelman's goal to use Angus cattle from every angle including the feedlot and show stock. "If producers are breeding for the show ring or breeding stock, cattle need to be produced that will have value out of the show ring," says Boggs. "If you can't make money on them don't expect whoever you sell them to to make money either."

Boggs adds that although the Angus cow always has value, analyze her to be sure she works in your operation. "As breeders we need to stay committed and make sure only the very best get saved. Calves that need to be steered get steered and the cows one doesn't need get culled."

Another key in a commercial operation is the marketing ability Angus influence cattle give to the feedlot. "Cattlemen have emphasized marbling to where they have maintained it, although don't know if we always need to add marbling to that average Angus cow or bull," says Boggs "However, sometimes the below average cow needs changing."

Angus females have held their own as being the maternal breed and have carried through as a carcass leader. Together with these characteristics Angus females and commercial cattlemen are better able to produce functional cattle,

gin heifers are also AI bred. Wagonhammer bulls that are used in their breeding program are also leased to AI studs.

Different groups of females calve in separate intervals. Registered heifers start calving around the 15th of February, registered cows and commercial heifers start the 10th of March, and commercial cows begin calving the 24th of March. Wagonhammer Ranch also has a group of fall calving cows.

"These cows break up the work load and serve the southern market as well as making the operation more diversified," Benes says.

Approximately 8,000 to 9,000 head of Wagonhammer cattle are fed out each year in the feedlot. "It gives us an idea of what is working and what is not when we feed out our own cattle," Benes says.

He adds Angus cattle possess substantial marbling that allows Wagonhammer Ranch to use Angus influence cattle in the feedlot. "Our commercial cow herd is Angus influence because we know Angus do well in the feedlot," Benes says. "Our cattle need to be marketable all the way through."

Irrigated corn acres supply the feedlot with feed and the cow herd is wintered on corn stubble after the corn is harvested. Cattle stay on cornstalks until the first of March, provided the winter is open. They are then brought home for calving. The cows are fed native prairie hay from the time they return from the stalks until green grass is available, some time in early May. The pasture season runs from early May until mid-October.

With an operation of its size and nature, Wagonhammer Ranch requires a great deal of quality key employees. The ranch employs around 12 individuals, as well as three managers that average 18 years of service to the ranch. The ranch is more labor intensive than a straight commercial ranch due to the requirements of the registered operation.

"You can have all kinds of good programs, but if you don't have a good group of people to carry it out it's not going to work," Benes says. "We believe it's the cows that make the difference along with the individuals."