



# LANDMARK ANGUS

## *Where the Todd Family Thrives on Diversity*

by Troy Smith

**C**haracteristic of northeastern

Nebraska are the shelter belts that rim the northern edge of many farm fields. They offer testimony to the planning, time and labor, invested some 60 years ago, in an attempt to slow the wind. For the wind always blows here, or so it seems to Jack Todd of Landmark Angus, Brunswick.

"Maybe the wind doesn't blow more than in other places? he admits,"but it gets a better shot at us here."

This rancher speaks with some awe of the determination and perseverance required of the early settlers of Antelope Country. It had to be discouraging for those who came to a then treeless plain hoping to cultivate the sandy soil so prone to shift with the ceaseless wind. For a long time the land resisted man's struggle to tame it.

"Most would have called this poor country," says Jack, "It is harsh enough, I guess. We get about 22 inches of rain a year and the soil is pretty sandy. The tree belts planted in the 1930s helped stop the erosion and operators learned to strip-farm alternating strips of rye and vetch with corn."

Farmers were diversified, varying crops in rotation and keeping a variety of livestock. Then, development of commercial fertilizers and eventual tapping of plentiful underground aquifers through central-pivot irrigation brought changes to the area's farms.

"It turned into pretty good country," Jack says. "Though it seems like the neighbors always report better yields than we get, 140 to 160 bushel-per-acre corn is common. We're seeing more and more soybeans grown here, too. Corn and beans are the main crops. It used to be that almost everyone had some livestock; cattle, hogs or both. Now there's more specialization. A lot of farms around here are devoted exclusively to row crops."

*Above left: Jack Todd, owner of Landmark Angus, Brunswick, Neb.*

While diversity waned on many area farms, it remained important to the Todd Family. In fact, Jack and Gregg Todd even custom-hire some of their crop work so they can give timely attention to their livestock interests. They have a few hogs, but cattle take center stage. Included are a registered Angus herd, the development and marketing of commercial bred heifers, plus a backgrounding and finishing enterprise.

Jack Todd must like this part of Nebraska because he chose to be here. He grew up 30 miles south of Omaha near the little town of Murray. Hardly more than a stone's throw from the Missouri River, the Todd family farm was blessed with fertile clay soil and ample rainfall. Jack operated with his father for several years, but good as it was, the Todd farm's earning power was limited. Jack and his bride, MaryJo, sought a place of their own, but being so close to Omaha, land prices were prohibitive.

Through Angus connections they learned about the place near Brunswick. Starting out on a shoestring, they set out to build a herd of their own.

"It wasn't hard to move," says Jack. "We had hardly any furniture. And with four children at that time, we had more kids than cows."

Jack's father had been a cattle feeder, but in 1941 he acquired a little bunch of bred Angus heifers. They sparked the formation of L.B. Todd & Sons seedstock business. When Jack and MaryJo went on their own, they left with 15 bull calves and three registered cows that would be the nucleus of Landmark Angus.

"We started accumulating cows as fast as we could," remembers Jack. "We picked up little packages from around Nebraska, in Colorado, and all around. Our first production sale was held in 1968. We had sales for about five years, but it didn't fit the banker well."

The Todd brood had increased to six children, so to meet their needs and satisfy the lender, Jack branched out into stocker-feeder cattle. He marketed some as backgrounded feeders and started feeding some to finish. It was hard to finance any expansion of the cow herd for several years, but it was maintained and seedstock was marketed for private treaty.

"Then in 1972 we were able to buy some more land. We bought it right and inflation helped us build some equity, and we could get financing easy," says Jack. "That only worked until the mid-'80s, but it was long

enough to help us increase our cow numbers as well as the stocker operation."

It was during that same period of time that Jack started buying and developing commercial heifers for resale. Twenty years in the business of selling bred heifers has served the Todd Family well. It complements his registered bull business and the feeding enterprise as well.

"We buy back black-baldy heifer calves weighing 500 pounds or so," explains Jack

with anything considered too big or too small sent to the feedlot. Heifers that make the grade are synchronized and bred by artificial insemination (AI). Then they go to grass where they are exposed to clean-up bulls for 40 days. During recent years, the October pregnancy check reveals 90 percent bred with 65 to 68 percent called safe to AI sires. Jack says the heifers are available any time after the preg-check and are sorted into packages to suit the buyers.



Quality, performance-bred cow-calf pairs take center stage at Landmark Angus.

"Most are purchased during October and November when we are looking for feeder calves too. We look for medium-framed cattle — not too tall, but with length and a lot of rib."

Many of the heifer calves come from Landmark bull customers. Some years they have bred as many as 500 head, but more often settle for 250 to 300 head. Of course, twice as many were bought to end up with 300 heifers worthy of breeding.

"In February we work the heifers, take pelvic measurements and make the first cull," Jack explains. "Then we send them back to the cornstalks with a little supplemental feed. We want them to continue growing so we shoot for two pounds of gain per day."

The heifers are sorted again before April,

Averaging 1,050 pounds, the heifers are delivered in what Jack calls the "right condition" to calve with minimum assistance and to breed back easily, if the buyer gives them any care at all.

"They're guaranteed to deliver within the calving season with no Cesarean-sections or we pay the vet bill," promises Jack.

Hopeful buyers start calling long before October. In fact, Jack takes some orders several months in advance. After 20 years in the business, the best advertisement is a list of satisfied customers. Jack's list includes one buyer who has purchased heifers during 11 of the last 13 years.

As mentioned before, culled heifers go to the feedlot to join others purchased for feeding. Some steers are fed but not many.

Jack says heifers can usually be bought right; they feed almost as efficiently as steers and there isn't much price difference when it is time to sell.

The feedlot has capacity for up to 1,000 head and most cattle leave it slaughter ready. However, 800-pound feeders are sometimes sold.

"It used to be the banker who influenced that decision most," says Jack. "Now it depends on margins, our feed supply and demand for our labor."

Supplying plenty of labor and sharing more of the management is Jack's son, Gregg. The only Todd sibling to make a career of production agriculture, Gregg and his young family live nearby. He owns part of the farm ground and part of the cattle, but Gregg and Jack work collectively.

Jack admits experiencing some inner struggle associated with the process of transferring more responsibility to Gregg. It's hard, but Jack believes struggle is worthwhile.

Together, father and son are wrestling with the idea of building an on-farm sale facility. Landmark Angus resumed a production sale marketing plan several years ago, first offering 20 to 30 bulls at the auction market in nearby Creighton. Those were grass-time sales held in late April.

As numbers and quality increased, sales were held earlier in the spring and moved farther west. Selling 50 and eventually 75 head through the sale barn in O'Neill drew interest from the Nebraska Sandhills, including customers who could use more bulls. Many were willing to pay more for the kind of bulls they wanted, too.

Today, the collective Landmark Angus herd numbers close to 300 cows and the Todds consider that plenty. It means the annual bull offerings now crowds 100 head and there's plenty of pencil-pushing going on as Jack and Gregg try to decide if it's time to hold their sale at home. If so, they are confident buyers would come.

"We've tried to sell our customers more than just a bull. We've tried to sell a program," Jack adds. "There is more competition than ever and we're grateful for the loyalty our buyers have shown."

Jack believes the industry can appreciate some variation in frame size, but he advocates eliminating the extremes from both ends. The concept of optimum size differs among producers, but he thinks most will find what they need within the



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range of frame five, six or seven. It depends on the environment and the resources available.

"Calving ease is important to most of our customers," says Jack. "And a lot of them don't want maximum growth. They've seen their cow size go up and maintenance costs increased accordingly. So most want moderation. A few do make growth a priority and we maintain some cows that we breed to raise bulls for that market. Most of those would be considered terminal sires. Throughout our cattle, we're trying to increase carcass desirability. We don't use any sires in our own herd unless they have some carcass information."

Jack believes the trend toward size standardization and uniform quality will continue as the beef industry embraces a system of value-added marketing. So far, he says, there hasn't been much incentive for the producers.

"It's still hard for the producer to get paid for the increased quality and uniformity he's breeding into his cattle," Jack adds, "but it's coming. I still believe Angus cattle have the best genetic base for profiting from a value-added system."

