



Bob Petty Jr. manages RR Ranch near Nolan, Texas.

If the Petty Family Can't Do It, It's Not Worth Doing

by Wade Lewis

Longevity. It's a trait we admire in Angus cattle. It's also an admirable trait among veteran Angus breeders.

These cattlemen have experienced the ups and downs of the cattle cycle, dealt with the adversities Mother Nature tends to hand out, and continued to raise and produce Angus cattle. They are the builders which have lent their initial information for all others to utilize, creating the largest performance database of any beef breed association.

One such operation is RR Ranch of Nolan, Texas, 20 miles south of Sweetwater.

For nearly 30 years the Petty Family has bred and raised Angus cattle. Begun by the late Robert R. Petty Sr. in 1933, when he moved to Nolan to become the vocational-ag teacher in the Divide Rural High School, the tradition is continued by his son Robert R. "Bob" Petty Jr., wife Nadene and sons Russ, Ron, Randy and Rolan.

Mr. Petty, as he was known in the community, began buying and leasing farm and ranch land in the area in 1938. Like most of the other area ranchers, he had a herd of commercial Herefords and Rambouillet sheep. Tired of fighting cancer-

eye and pinkeye, common problems among the Hereford breed, in 1950 he bought 50 commercial Angus females out of Missouri. The drought of 1954 forced Mr. Petty to sell out, but not before he and Bob vowed to rebuild with Angus. In the short time they had owned the blacks, the cattle created much local interest because of their adaptability and trouble-free traits.

In 1956 they kept that vow by purchasing 12 registered females and a "big, ugly, long-bodied bull." These cattle and their progeny would be sold in the fall of '59 when Mr. Petty retired and Bob headed to college at

Petty Family

Texas A&M University,

"These cattle were purchased by an early Texas Angus breeder, C.W. Chandler of Ringold," Bob recalls. "Mr. Chandler disliked the bull but loved his calves. He sold some of these through his production sale. Some ended up in the Carlton Corbin and Grady Brewster herds in Oklahoma."

Bob returned to Nolan in 1966 after completing undergraduate work, two years of graduate studies in animal breeding and a two year stint in the armed services as an officer.

He and his father then began rebuilding the Petty Angus herd which today numbers more than 300 registered females, who all (save one) carry the RRR prefix.

An initial acquisition of six Angus bulls from pioneer performance herds in New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Maryland (Wye-bred) were first progeny tested in the Petty commercial herd. Registered females were then acquired from those operations whose bulls proved most successful. From these groups, two bulls and 20 females were retained to form the base for the present RR Ranch herd. The only other meaningful addition was six cows with heifer calves purchased in the Ralph Jackson Dispersion, Kauffman, Texas.

The Petty Family always believed in the value of records and performance testing. Bob remembers with a smile that a new scale was waiting for the first progeny test calves weaned in 1967 and first registered calves in 1968. When Angus Herd Improvement Records (AIHR) program was started in 1973, the 1968 records both (weaning and yearling for bulls and heifers) were waiting to go on the computer at St. Joseph, Mo. Later when birth weights and heights (weaning and yearling) were added, RR Ranch data was again waiting in St. Joe.

"In the late '60s we did carry on work on some of our own bulls for the Performance Registry International's (PRI) Certified Meat Sire Program," Bob explains. "In the early '70s we did some of the original progeny testing for the American Angus Association. Using our commercial females, we artificially bred them to reference sires as well as some of our own bulls. We did this for other breeders on a custom contract basis, as well."

Sweetwater had a local feedyard and processing facility, which had a federal grader. When the cattle were killed, Bob, working with the grader, collected the data and submitted the information to the Association.

Several of the Petty bulls held the title of Certified and Golden Certified Meat Sire. Their pictures, along with many other trophies, plaques and ribbons, now share a spot in a storage room, put away, but not

forgotten.

And while they may have lost their shine, what they represent is a foundation for a program which has built its success around cattle who have proven, predictable performance.

"In 1973-74," Bob says, "we had the champion and reserve champion bulls in the Texas Angus Association's performance bull test and sale. Those bulls brought \$5,025 and \$4,025 respectively. And they provided us with most of the money to build the barn we now use as our sale facility."

About 1980, artificial insemination (AI) became an integral part of the RR Ranch program. First used on commercial cows, the Association's progeny testing program, it was expanded to the entire registered herd when PS Power Play semen became available.

"Power Play and expected progeny differences (EPDs) combined with AI really improved our product and acceptability," says Bob.

Still, the Petties weren't doing too badly. The AI had increased the RR Ranch Meat Sire recognition, solid local trade (150-mile radius) and Texas Angus Association bull test and sale success spurred the Petties on through the '80s past the exotic bull popularity and the drought of 1984.

"The '84 drought was not as widespread as what we are experiencing today," says Bob. "But it was more devastating for this immediate area. That year grass did not green up until September. We sold all the commercial cows and half the registered herd. We were lucky that prices were fairly good and we were able to market the females as commercial breeding cattle."

Proven then on the surviving cows were culled and bred based on EPDs to the best AI bulls available, with emphasis on improving milk and thickness. Each year the Petties' top young bulls, hot off gain test, are used as clean up before being sold in the annual sale.

The reputation for producing useful, range-ready bulls with the pedigree and performance to consistently sire high quality feeder cattle has propelled the RR Ranch program into the '90s.

Today, with the 1996 Spring Sale Summary digested, RR Ranch has proceeded on an almost uncompromising AI sire selection program. "We know EPDs on proven bulls move slightly from report to report, but we will not consider using a proven bull whose scrotal circumference, marbling and ribeye EPDs are not positive and whose weaning weight is not 40 pounds," Bob says.

"Birth weights will be 6.5 pounds or less for cows and milk greater than 7 pounds. Our heifer bulls must be 1.5 pounds or

lighter on birth, have a weaning weight of 30 pounds or greater and positive interim marbling and ribeye EPDs will be accepted," he continues. "In recent years we've begun selling what we call 'Low Risk' calving bulls, which are low birth on low birth. This has increased our customer base, giving us bulls for all segments of the market."

Petty is particularly pleased to see the addition of the yearling height EPD. "The trend has been to downsize our cattle and rightfully so," he says, "but some popular bulls have taken it too far. We can get them too small. This EPD now lets us know what to expect."

Within these specific sire parameters, Bob mates each female based on her shortcomings and strengths to achieve optimum, uniform calves.

While the Petty Family farms nearly 4,000 acres of cotton, wheat, grain sorghum and hybrid sudan for hay and grazing, their operation includes more than 8,000 acres of rough, rocky country. Cattle who thrive in this environment are bred for tough endurance.

Bob points out that many of their customers run cattle in similar, if not rougher terrain, which is why their bulls appeal to his buyers.

"After bulls come off gain test, they are turned out to harden up. They run on the range, fight, and do all those things bulls do. Our cattle may not be pretty, but they're tough," he says.

Selling bulls to the commercial segment has always been the bread and butter of the Petty Angus program. Even in the early years, when numbers were low, a private treaty approach to selling created problems, because every buyer wanted first pick. It became apparent a more organized type of sale format was necessary. Hence, a sale date was announced, data provided, along with starting price and sale order and an informal auction was conducted by Bob among interested parties. This was the beginning of what is today, one of the premier bull sales in Texas.

"I believe most sales are set up to the seller's advantage and buyer's disadvantage," says Bob. "This is why we created the Buyers Advantage Bull Sale to give people what we would want if we were the buyer."

"It's an event as down to earth and low key as any sale you'll ever attend. And folks will hardly believe it can happen until they attend themselves."

Each November, on the first Tuesday after opening weekend of deer season, Nolan, Texas, plays host to the Annual RR Ranch Bull and Female Sales (females were added in '95). The '96 bull sale will be number 27, marking nearly three decades of annual sales.

But unique to the event is not the fact that each fall about 60 head (numbers have slowly increased every year) of Angus bulls are sold through an auction ring, it's the way in which they are sold.

Waymon Ashley, retired Angus Association representative, remembers the very first event. "It was a cold windy day," he says, "and I think there were about 10 of us huddled under a tin lean-to, looking out at the bulls, which were offered for sale. Bob had them all pre-priced. We would start with each bull and he would ask if anyone was interested at that price and if more than one person wanted the bull then we had a one-on-one auction of sorts. Everyone knew who was bidding, what was going on and you were given every opportunity to buy a bull if you were willing to pay the price."

This style of selling bulls has changed little over the years. After the 1974 Texas Angus Test, a dual sale/equipment barn was built to keep buyers out of the weather. A professional cattle auctioneer was hired for a time, then Bob reassumed the duties for a year or two before a local auctioneer, who sells farm equipment was hired. Bulls are

still prepriced with an opening bid and published sale order. The pace is still slow, so buyers have the opportunity to bid and Bob still makes the comments from the block

All bulls sold are 18 to 23 months of age, have been gain tested on-farm, have a current set of EPDs and contemporary data, have been measured for scrotal circumference and fertility tested. Free delivery is offered on purchases of \$4,000 or more and to repeat customers. Nearly 75 percent of the bulls usually sell to a previous buyer.

Dub Sims, Ft. Worth a former Nolan County Extension Agent, now employed as a bank trust manager and long-time bull buyer, truly believes the RRR Ranch bulls can take rough range country better and hold up longer than others and still produce superior feeder calves.

While Sims appreciates the bulls for their usefulness, he is especially thankful for the Petty Family's practical approach to handling the sale.

If the family can't do it, it's not worth doing. From modification of the Angus Herd Management Program to produce 15 additional reports including a sale catalog,

sale cattle preparation, sale order and lunch, to the AI and palpation of the cows, production of home grown whole cottonseed which is fed to the cow herd and grain sorghum which is used for testing and developing the bulls, this is strictly a RR Ranch show.

With each passing year this no-frills operation adds another layer of information to an already impressive set of statistics. Whether Petty bull buyers purchase their cattle because they perform, because they are produced in a similar environment to their own, are representative of an honest, forthright program or a combination of all these things, the longevity of this program has gone unmatched in the Southwest.

Texas is an immense place, but if you run across Angus cattle with the RRR prefix you can be certain of one thing, those cattle earned the right to carry the name. They are the evolutionary result of nearly 30 years of intense selection by man and Mother Nature to achieve the ultimate goal, "total proven performance."

"We've never made the perfect one. . . we just keep trying," says Bob.

