

Christens

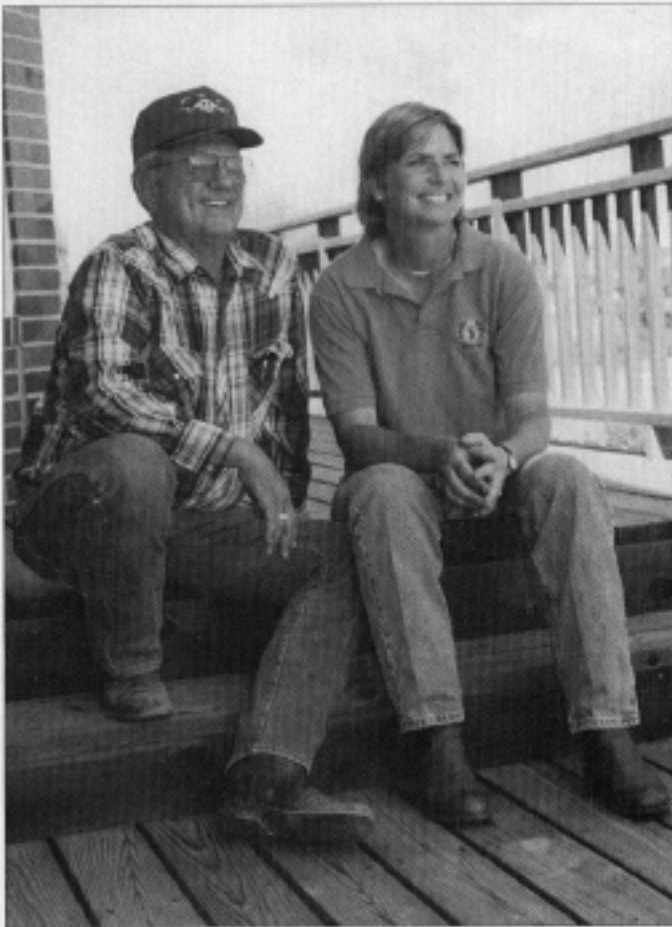
BY TROY SMITH

Through the ample windows of their eastern Nebraska home, Dean and Bonnie Christensen have a panoramic view. To the south and west stretch gently rolling hills, green with cool-season grass and punctuated with clusters of protective cedars and shading cottonwoods. Beyond the pasture fence reach irrigated fields of growing corn. And to the east lies the well-kept pens and alleys of Sandy Ridge Cattle Inc., where thousands of cattle transform the area's rich resources into quality beef on the hoof. The parts and parcel of the beef business are offered in one sweeping vista, along with a glimpse of the Christensen family's integrated operation.

By their own admission, the Christensens are rooted in the

cattle feeding business. Dean's father farmed and started feeding cattle near Central City in 1934. Dean took over the homeplace, building Christensen Cattle Company feedlot to its 12,000-head capacity and adding a grass-yearling enterprise. He also started a livestock trucking line and a concrete feedbunk manufacturing business. Feedlot expansion came in the form of a second facility, dubbed Sandy Ridge Cattle Inc., located about 10 miles north, near Fullerton. The Sandy Ridge feedlot now has the capacity for 20,000 head.

Some might think Dean and Bonnie make an unlikely couple, considering her professional background. Dean jokes that the surest way to tell if a packer-buyer is lying is to look and see if his lips are moving, or if her lips are moving. The quip earns Dean a jab in the ribs because Bonnie was associated with Monfort's



The husband-wife team own and manage an integrated operation that includes cattle feeding and a commercial cow herd as well as farming and trucking enterprises.



Dean & Bonnie Christensen, Fullerton, Neb have an appreciation for any animal that exhibits efficient feed conversion and a quality carcass but they say Angus and Angus crosses offer the most predictable performance and quality

Christensens Aim for Quality

cattle-buying department for seven years.

But Bonnie's dad, Don Perkins, was a cattle feeder too. His passion for the business rubbed off, along with an interest in cattle marketing. Bonnie worked for her hometown auction market, in Norfolk, learning every aspect of that business and even attended auctioneer school. With her chant honed and ready, she was trying to figure a way into that traditionally male domain of livestock marketing when the opportunity to work for Monfort presented itself. Bonnie says the experience was priceless.

"I saw lots of cattle and was able to follow them through the packing plant. I watched the grading line and saw what kind of cattle produced the high-quality carcasses," Bonnie explains. "My dad used to show carloads of Angus steers in Denver and Chicago, so I was kind of an Angus person. And during all that time I spent in the coolers, I saw where the most Prime and Choice carcasses came from. There were lots of exotics coming through too, but the greatest consistency for quality came from cattle with English influence, and particularly the Angus and Angus crosses."

From years of buying, finishing and merchandising thousands of cattle, Dean came to understand what kind it took to produce a quality product and still realize efficient feed conversions.

"In a feedlot the name of the game is conversion," adds Dean. "From October through April, we try to buy 750-pound feeders from within a 300-mile radius, and the kind we prefer are Angus and Angus crosses. That's what we like, but they aren't always available or demand makes them hard to afford.

They're consistent for gain and conversion. Their carcasses grade and are consistent for yield."

feeder cattle Dean bought in western Nebraska. All of the females had an English base, but they were not all Angus. They

efficient cow that produces a feeder calf that works in the feedlot."



Soon after entering the cow-calf business the Christensens identified Angus females as being most practical for their operation. Their efficient commercial cows produce quality replacement heifers and feeder calves offer feedlot performance and packer-pleasing

That's important because Christensens sell everything "in the meat," for a base price, with premiums received for U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Choice quality carcasses, and now, some additional premiums are received for those meeting *Certified Angus Beef*[™] qualifications.

Until 10 years ago, Dean and Bonnie shared a combined wealth of experience in every phase of the beef industry, except the cow-calf segment. That changed when the couple decided to utilize their pasture through a commercial breeding herd instead of yearlings. Their goal was to raise feeder cattle that were most like the kind they liked to buy.

They started with 100 heifers, adding another 300 head the next year, sorting the best prospects from drafts of

culled hard and continued to build numbers by purchasing heifers during the next two years. Christensens experimented a little, even trying some Salers bulls, but soon settled on Angus sires exclusively. After four years, they began keeping only home-raised replacement heifers, building their herd to its current 600 head.

"We tagged everything and kept individual cow records from the start," Bonnie says. "And we found that what we'd heard about Angus cows making good mothers was right. Still, we culled pretty hard for maternal qualities, watching the udders really close, plus disposition and performance. As cattle feeders, we see a place for other (European) breeds, but as terminal crosses. And those are probably best used on Angus. For a cow herd, Angus offers us the best balance — a maternal,

The Christensens put a lot of effort into selecting bulls and Dean says he learned quickly that you don't buy bulls the same way you buy feeder cattle. You can't go by looks alone and the breeding decisions you make have long-lasting effects. That fact was driven home when he and Bonnie started saving their own replacement females.

"You've got to have a complete package, so we won't buy a bull until we've seen his mother and his grandmother if possible, to check the udders and teat size as well as their production records," Dean says.

The Christensen formula for sire selection boils down to avoiding extremes. They like to see respectable growth expected progeny differences (EPDs) but criteria for birth weight, milk and mature size are defined by a narrow range. They consider

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frame scores of 6.5 to 7 as moderate and acceptable. They look for birth weight EPDs ranging between 2 and 5, while milk EPD values should fall between 15 and 25. Carcass EPDs are considered, but Bonnie and Dean remain cautious about putting too much faith in numbers based on limited amounts of carcass data.

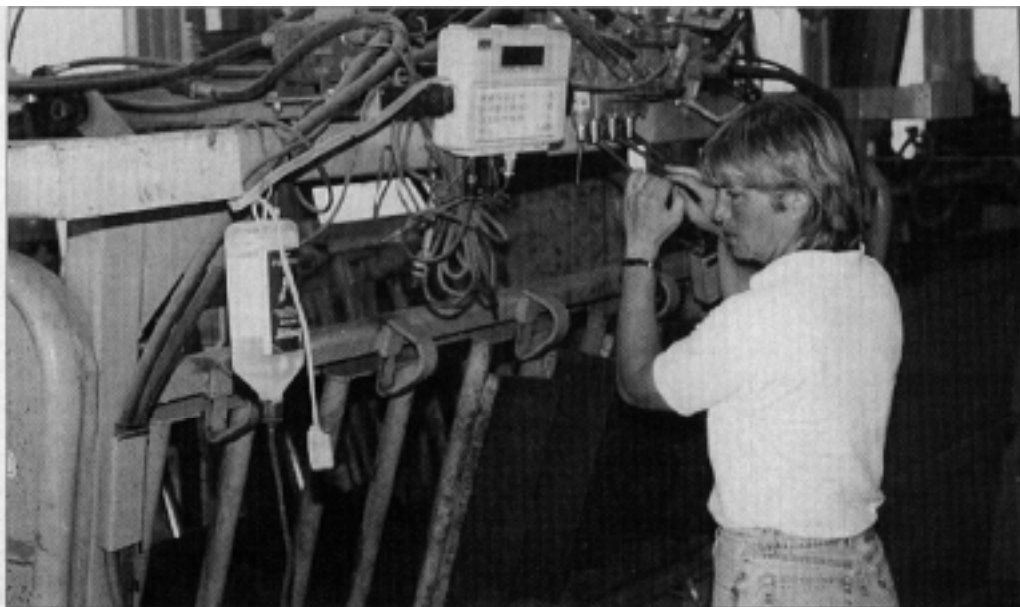
They like to use proven sires for natural service and artificial insemination (AI). They implemented AI about six years ago with Bonnie as the one and only technician breeding about 200 cows. They now buy very little semen, preferring to collect their own bulls. And those bulls represent proven genetics from notable purebred Angus herds. Among them is a bull called "Heartland 576" who is co-owned with Sonderup Angus, from near Fullerton. That sire attracted the attention of American Breeders Service which now, through a lease agreement, offers his semen.

When Christensens find a bull that fits their needs, they do their best to buy him. Although theirs is a commercial herd, the Christensens don't back away when the bidding gets tough, even when the contending bidders are purebred breeders accustomed to paying more for herd sire quality.

"When it comes to buying bulls," claims Dean, "you can't cut corners and expect to do yourself any good."

To get the most good out of their bull-buying dollars they have split their calving season, putting 100 head into a fall-calving herd. Bulls pull double duty and fall-born calves are ready for the feedlot at a time when top-quality feeders can be harder to find.

Dean and Bonnie admit in the beginning their feedlot background probably led them to push their replacement



Involved in all facets of the operation, Bonnie assists with cattle processing and serves as the insemination technician, inseminating about 200 females each spring.

heifers a little too hard. They experienced some calving problems with heifers and cows that were too fleshy. The problems faded after adjustments were made to the nutrition program.

Breeding cattle now winter on cornstalks, with little supplementation. Replacement heifers do receive a little more prairie hay than the cows and all benefit from a year-round mineral program. To avoid nutritional ups and downs as cattle glean corn and residue from stalk fields, Christensens check fields in advance to gauge how much corn is available. They regulate intake by adjusting numbers of cattle, or by dividing fields with a hot-wire fence. With ample corn ground available, rotation through fields is pursued until just prior to calving when heavies are moved to calving pastures adjacent to the Christensen home. They don't stay long, but are paired out and away within 12 to 24 hours of calving.

The majority of the Christensen's summer range lies some 20 miles northwest of the headquarters, with most included within a string of 14 quarter-section pastures. A new water system involving several miles of pipeline has been

installed to facilitate crossfencing. More and smaller pastures allow better forage utilization through rotational grazing, while maintaining the single-sire groups the Christensen planned mating scheme requires.

Dean is a firm believer in preconditioning calves 30 days prior to weaning. Then he favors taking 30 to 45 days to get the bawl out and have them bunk broke before going to the feedlot. He has bought plenty of cattle handled that way over the years, and quite a few that weren't. Experience with putting both kinds on feed dictated how Christensen calves are prepared to go on feed.

"We're trying to raise calves that are as good as the kind we'd most like to feed. And have them ready to perform," adds Dean. "Genetically, that means a calf that will convert feed to muscle and finish at 12 to 14 months of age, weighing 1,250 pounds. Eighty-five percent of them ought to grade Choice and 30 percent ought to qualify for *Certified Angus Beef*TM

Dean and Bonnie are vocal advocates of the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program, calling it the best program going to encourage the production and marketing of consistently good-

quality beef. Dean says the CAB Program strives for the predictability and consistency toward which every segment of the beef industry should be striving.

"We ask if *Certified Angus Beef* product is available whenever we eat at a restaurant, and some of them still haven't heard about it," Dean says. "We organized a Christmas gathering at a local place last year and we asked them to serve *Certified Angus Beef* steaks. They didn't know what we were talking about, but we lined it up and everybody just raved about how good the meat was. *Certified Angus Beef* steaks are the same every time. I've never had a bad one."

Dean and Bonnie lament the fact that today's consumers don't always get a satisfactory experience from every beef purchase. They are doing their best to expose more people to top-quality product. The local golf course barbecue has proven to be a good place to show others what a *Certified Angus Beef*-quality steak tastes like.

"We're aiming at that high-quality market," adds Dean. "*Certified Angus Beef* specs are stiff and they should be. Not as many of our cattle qualify as we would like, but we're not finished yet."