



Receiving Value Where Value's Due

Jack Shelton's Bravo Cattle Company lives up to a Texas ranch family legacy and new beef industry challenges.

STORY & PHOTOS BY JERILYN JOHNSON

He comes from good stock carrying on a family ranching tradition started in 1915. Fellow Texans say he's as steady as the wind blowing across the Southern Plains. Packer buyers say he raises cattle with value. Economically produced, quality beef is his ultimate objective.

Jack Shelton is the cattleman and Angus is his breed.

This respected cattleman gained his respect for Angus after witnessing their performance in his cow herd and feedlots. Plans are now underway to change his northwest Texas commercial cow-calf operation, named Bravo Cattle Company, to straightbred Angus. Two feedyards, owned in partnership, near Dumas, Texas, are already being stocked with black cattle straight off the ranch.

"Performance and ease of operation are important in producing beef cattle these days," Shelton says. "The one-breed concept is advantageous to us. We need Angus and their efficient, all-around performance and carcass quality."

The Angus breed is no stranger to Bravo Cattle Company. In fact, Jack likes to think his family has come full circle.

John M. Shelton, Jack's grandfather, raised a few Angus in his day. He came to west Texas in the early 1900s and operated a ranch in the eastern panhandle country. Restless and seeking better opportunities, he and his wife ventured west to the XIT Ranch, where he was able to convince the owners to lease him enough land to run a cattle herd.

At 3 million acres, XIT Ranch was the largest ranch in the United States at that time. A few years later, it was divided into eight divisions and then sold off. John Shelton was in the right place at the right time. He was able to purchase the smallest division, approximately 225,000 acres, in 1915-16. The ranch was located in open, semi-arid range country northwest of Amarillo and near the New Mexico border. A house and a few outbuildings had been built there for a campsite. To Shelton, it was a place of challenge and promise.

After his death in the 1920s, John M. Shelton's two sons and daughter each inherited a third of the ranch. They carried on their fathers' wish to raise beef cattle and make needed improvements over the years.

Jack's father started an Angus cow herd on his ranch in the early 1950s. After attending college at the University of Texas and serving in the army during

World War II, Jack joined his father in managing the cattle operation. He and his wife, Joan, raised two sons and two daughters. The two sons, Malcolm and Jim, carry on the tradition and are partners in the ranch business today.

Jack used Angus breeding in his cow herd until the late 1960s, when he found the herd's small frame size and average performance could not compete with newly introduced and larger-framed exotic cattle breeds. After a short stint in the steer business, Bravo Cattle Company built a new cow herd and began a crossbreeding program. They experimented with several exotic breeds over the years until ranch and beef industry economics convinced them to go back to the basics and go back to Angus.

Modern Angus genetics,

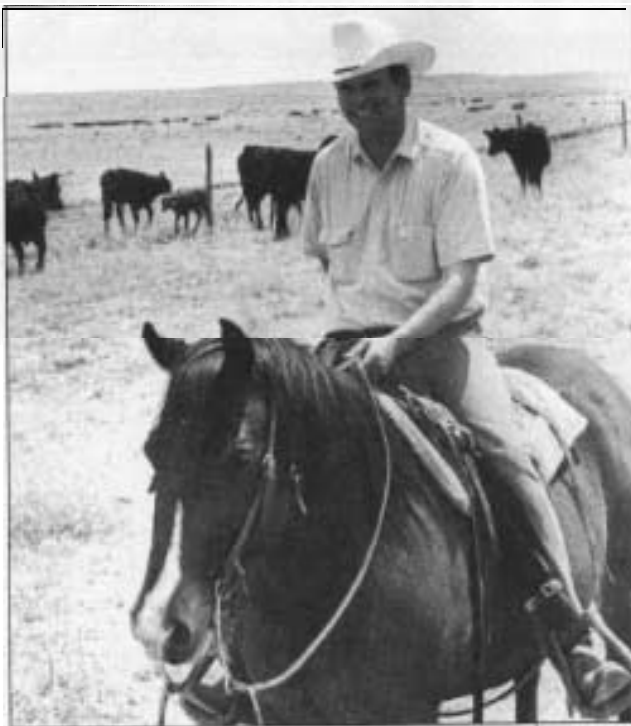
the American Angus Association's breed improvement programs, and the Certified Angus Beef Program were enough to convince the Sheltons to try Angus again.

"We have to raise and feed cattle that will grade Choice and do it at 1,150 pounds with minimum fat cover," Jack says. "Modern Angus can do it, and do it better than any other breed. We have found they can compete with anything in the feedlot."

Bravo Cattle Company has employed modern genetics by buying quality, performance-proven Angus bulls from Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan.; Summitcrest Ranch, Broken Bow, Neb.; and the Tucumcari, N.M., bull test station. Bloodlines used recently include Traveler 5204, Tehama Bando, Hoff Hi Spade, Hyline Nickel, Premier Independence KN and Scotch Cap.

With the help of the Angus sire evaluation report and tools such as expected progeny differences (EPDs), the Sheltons have been able to select the right kind of sires for their breeding program. Yearling weight EPDs are emphasized over weaning weight EPDs because of Bravo Cattle Company's end goal — feedlot performance.

The Sheltons also select bulls that will adapt well to their semi-arid range environment and that don't require any extra pampering. Most bulls are



Malcolm Shelton, cow herd manager for Bravo Cattle Company. The fourth generation to make his living on this Texas ranch, he says a straightbred Angus herd fits their goals and ranch economics.

purchased at 18 to 24 months of age.

Bravo Cattle Company's cow herd manager is Malcolm Shelton, who has a degree in range management from Texas Christian University. Malcolm likes to follow a 65-day breeding season, using a 1:15 or 1:20 bull to cow ratio. The herd averages a 50 percent conception rate in the first 30 days of the breeding season.

Artificial insemination (AI) is not yet economical, due to the size and range conditions of this Texas ranch. However, this past spring a group of yearling Angus heifers were purchased from Summitcrest. These heifers were synchronized and AI bred on an experimental basis. If it works, Malcolm says they will try it with their own ranch-raised replacement heifers next year.

Approximately 90 percent of their Angus bred heifers are kept for replacements at this time. Heifers are bred to calve at two years of age. After calving, they are culled hard, based on performance and fertility. Moderate size, easy-fleshing cows fit the bill, both environmentally and economically, at Bravo Cattle Company. They prefer a balance of traits, including muscling,

fertility, soundness and disposition. Cows have to adapt well to range conditions and year round grazing on native grasses. No supplemental hay is fed.

Another enterprise fulfilling Bravo Cattle Company's goal for quality beef production is a backgrounding program for stocker cattle. Weaned steer calves from their ranch as well as additional purchased stocker steers are used. After backgrounding, all cattle are then shipped to their feedlots.

Jim Shelton is in charge of this stocker operation and has fine-tuned a pivot irrigation, rotational grazing system, utilizing forages such as old world bluestem and wheatgrass. Jim has been able to stock up to 1,400 head of steers, or approximately four head per acre, on this system. His goal is a 2-pound average daily gain (ADG). So far, he has achieved a 1.65-pound ADG.

Managing the numbers has been the hardest part, Jim says. He has made a few adjustments to the stocking rate this past spring, however, and is learning fast.

Jim hopes to introduce cool-season perennial grass called Matua, in the near future. This grass from New Zealand will allow them to graze from November to March and reduce the cost of drilling annual grasses.

Nothing has convinced Jack Shelton that Angus is the right breed more than the Certified Angus Beef Program. "They (American Angus Association) are on to something," he says. "It's the only beef product that provides what the consumer wants — consistent quality and taste."

Shelton has had several pens of Angus qualify for the CAB Program. One pen went to EXCEL in Dodge City. Malcolm and Jim traveled there to see the cattle on the rail. They liked what they saw and were impressed with how EXCEL handled the product. The cooperation of the EXCEL and CAB Program staff who helped was also appreciated.

"Packer buyers will give value where value's due," Jack says.

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