**Moderate-sized, fertile Angus females with adequate milk thrive during the dry summers and cold winters on the Leadore Angus Ranch.**

# SWANSON BREEDS THE COWMAN'S KIND OF CATTLE

*Easy-fleshing fertile and moderate milking females get the job done at the Leadore Angus Ranch.*

by Heather Smith Thomas

**In meadows and foothills** nestled below a backdrop of rugged mountains near Leadore Idaho, (population less than 200) you'll find sleek black cattle. These are working cows, raising good calves on meadow grass or steep mountain range. They are cattle well adapted to a harsh mountain climate with dry summers and cold winters.

The Leadore Angus Ranch has long been known for dependable cattle, breeding outstanding quality animals since 1941. The man who built this herd, Bob Adams, was planning to retire and had made arrangements to sell the brood cow herd to Rodger "Rod" Swanson (with Rod to take possession in the fall of 1995). Adams was killed that spring in a tragic accident, but his good breeding program continues on, now in the capable hands of Swanson, who has been ranching in the Lemhi Valley for more than 20 years on his family's place.

Rod is continuing the tradition of quality that Bob Adams started, and brings to this task a knowledge of genetics and a wealth of experience gained from developing one of Lemhi County best herds of crossbred cattle.

The Swansons have ranched on their place between Leadore and Salmon, Idaho, since 1916. Rod's grandfather, Gus Swanson, came to America from Sweden in 1903 and worked in Omaha, Neb., several years before coming to Idaho. He did some mining, ending up in Gilmore (now a ghost town near Leadore) where he became a mine foreman. Gus married Clara Carlson in 1913. He was working in Gilmore when their twin boys Carl and Clarence were born in 1914.

Clarence grew up on the ranch and became a partner. He married Babe and they raised Herefords for many years, as most ranchers in the valley did then. Eventually, they began using Angus bulls to produce crossbred calves. As Rod grew up, he worked with his father and had a lot of input on the management of the cattle.

They bought some Simmental bulls in the early 1970s, then in 1977 started a "criss-cross" breeding program. Any cow sired by a Simmental bull was bred to an Angus, and any cow by an Angus bull was bred to a Simmental. Rod started using brisket tags for individual cattle identification, since they stay in better than ear tags, and used a color-coded system for the crossbreeding program. Cows by different bulls had different color brisket tags.

After purchasing another ranch in 1988 (the Mabey place) and managing the cow herd on two different summer range allotments, Rod used the color-coded tags to make cattle management easier. For cattle that went on the Mabey range, he used white tags for cows sired by Angus bulls and green tags for cows by Simmental bulls. On the cows that used the home ranges, he used yellow tags for Angus sired cows and red tags for Simmental sired cows.

Then, whenever the cattle were being worked, it was easy to know not only the breeding of a cow (to tell which breeding group she should go into) but also where she belonged in the pasture management, without having to refer to a recordbook.

For instance, when the cattle were worked in the spring and the calves branded, the cows could easily be sorted after being worked and put into their proper breeding groups by looking at the color of their tags. The calves could be sorted directly off the calf table after being branded and sorted by ear tag color.

As Rod says, anyone could sort the cattle, without having a notebook or cattle records, "as long as the guy at the gate isn't color blind."

The same system came into use when cattle were gathered (after the breeding season) to be fly tagged just before going to summer range. They could be sorted into their proper pasture group just by the color of their tags.

**Clarence Swanson died** in 1988, but Rod's mother, Babe, still takes an active part in the ranch operation. Rod started leasing the ranch from his parents in 1976, and gradually purchased cattle and machinery.

Rod has done a lot of work increasing production of the ranch. He was selected Grassman of the Year for Lemhi County in 1989. The ranch has 600 acres, which includes 180 acres of alfalfa hay, 160 acres of grass hay and most of the balance in pasture (bottomland too wet to hay).

The main summer pasture for the cattle is Bureau of Land Management and Forest Service range. Rod manages 230 cows on the range and 150 cows at home on pasture. His cows are bred before going to the range -which is one reason he calves early, so the cows can be bred in April and early May.

**Babe Swanson, left, still plays an active role in the ranching operation with her son Rod. Rod's parents, Babe and Clarence, originally raised Herefords on their Idaho ranch and then switched to a crossbreeding program.**

It's good range, yet the cows that stay on irrigated pasture at home wean off heavier calves. This is a fact of life range users must live with. Federal rangeland is not a bargain, as Rod points out, "We do a lot of work out there, fixing fence and maintaining the improvements, and doing a lot of riding." But few ranchers in this valley have enough home pasture; most operators have to depend on federal range, since most of the home acres must be used to grow hay, he explains.

Rod has weighed all his calves since 1976, comparing his home calves with the range calves when they come home in late September. The range calves are always about 60 pounds lighter. In 1994 when ranges were really dry, the range calves were 100 pounds lighter.

Rod puts up hay in round bales and feeds the hay in big round feeders. He has found there is less waste when cattle eat from feeders rather than on the ground. He built extra-large feeders (12 feet in diameter) so the hay can be put into the center and not right up against the edges. That way, the cattle have to reach in and can't pull hay out and tromp it.

He also built a "spinner" attachment for his tractor loader, for putting hay into the feeder. He can easily spin off part of a round bale into the feeder.

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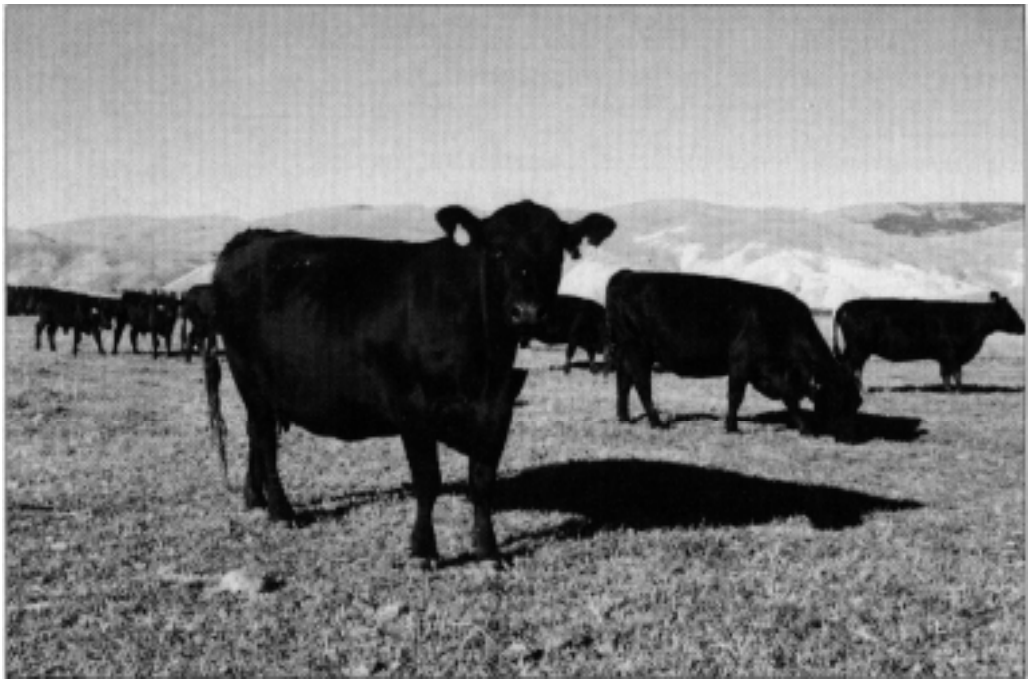
He has used these feeders since February 1980 and says that over the years they have made him more money than anything else on the ranch— just in hay saved. The cattle clean it all up instead of tromping it into the mud or wet ground. Even on frozen ground they waste a lot of alfalfa leaves. Since about 75 percent of the nutrients in alfalfa is in the leaves, much of the value of alfalfa is lost when feeding hay on the ground.

This breeder discovered his cows' conception rates improved after he started using the feeders, while feeding the same amount of hay. The day he started using them he fed exactly the same amount of hay he had been feeding, and the next morning found there was hay left in all the feeders; the cattle couldn't eat it all. They had been wasting that much hay.

Breed back conception rates have been much better on the young cows since he began using feeders, for they are fussy eaters and waste the most hay. Rod now feeds all his first- and second-calf heifers in feeders.

He feeds grass hay to older cows (in large pastures) on the ground because they will clean it up, but uses feeders for this group after they calve, when they are in a more confined area.



**Brisket tags are used by the Swansons for individual animal identification. The tags are color-coded, distinguishing breed composition and the cow's summer range location.**

**Before acquiring the Angus** herd, Rod had been fine-tuning his crossbred cows for a long time, making many genetic improvements. His weaning weights had greatly increased, yet frame size of his cows actually decreased. His goals in breeding cattle have been to produce fertile, efficient, moderate-size cows that are easy-calvers and raise big calves. His crossbred cows were achieving these goals nicely and he is continuing this breeding strategy, the same genetic goals, with his purebred Angus herd.

One thing that illustrated the success of his crossbreeding program was the frame scores of the calves. Calves sired by his Simmental bulls were close to being the same frame score as the Angus sired calves. He worked hard at "smoothing them out" and was successful in creating a uniform product.

This genetic progress was made through careful selection of sires, to create a herd of moderate-size cows that raised calves with moderate frame scores. The first Simmental bloodlines he infused into his herd increased the frame scores and mature size of his cows. He realized his cows were getting too big. The last year he saved any of those big, tall stretchy heifers to put back into his herd was 1983.

"They just don't produce as well as the more moderate-size cow," he says.

He started looking for smaller framed bulls. As Rod points out, a person has the best success if you don't use extremes. You should use bulls of the same frame score as the cows. Then you don't get such vast variation in the size of calves and replacements heifers.

He feels that a 5 to 6 frame score is best. This type of cow doesn't cost as much to feed, and does well on the range. She doesn't get so thin trying to raise a big calf (especially in dry conditions) and is more likely to breed back on schedule. The moderate-size females reach puberty faster than the great big ones and tend to be more fertile throughout their lives.

"The most expensive part of the feed bill is maintenance on the cow," Rod says.

He culls hard on fertility (with a short breeding season) as well as on quality of progeny. Early on, he tried evaluating cows using percent of body weight (the ratio of calf weight to the cow's own body weight), but heavy fleshed cows didn't wean off as much percent of their own body weight as the tall thin cows, but were more likely to stay in the herd and to come up open. He realized he needed to use frame score and body condition score along with percent of body weight in determining how well a cow produced.

A moderate-size cow with body condition score of 6 (good flesh covering but not overly fat) that weans off only 50 percent of her body weight is still a good cow, and maybe a lot better than the bigger, thinner cow who weans off a calf that is 60 percent of her own body weight. That thinner cow may come up open after a few years.

He uses this same philosophy with the Angus, aiming for a type of cow that is moderate framed and fertile, milking adequately to raise a big calf, but not so much that she puts her own breed-back in jeopardy in harsh conditions.

**Rod used to calve** out 370 commercial cows, but sold most of them in the fall of 1995. When he sorted them and cut the older cows out by themselves, it was a real eye-opener to see the difference between the older cows (most of them larger than frame score 6) and the younger ones (frame scores 5 to 6, and averaging 1,100 to 1,150 pounds). The younger cows were more moderate-size, exactly what Rod had been striving for.

He has the same goals for his

purebred Angus herd. He wants cattle that can calve easily, grow fast, without the mature cows being too big. He wants easy-fleshing cows, and good growth without sacrificing fertility. He is breeding for moderate milk production, not the top.

He feels it's also a mistake to choose bulls with low birth weight expected progeny differences (EPDs) for use on heifers, and high birth weight EPD bulls for use on the mature cows. He wants the whole herd to have moderate birth weight and fast growing calves. Heifer calves kept from extremely low birth weight bulls often don't grow well enough and often do not have the ability to give birth to anything but tiny calves. And heifers kept from mature cows that were bred to high birth weight bulls have the genetics to create a huge calf even when bred to low birth weight bulls themselves.

Rod discovered this problem when he bought the Mabey Ranch and its herd of commercial cows. He bought two Red Angus bulls with low (minus EPD) birth weights to breed to the heifers. He still had major calving problems with the Mabey heifers, since they came from a herd that had been using high birth weight bulls; those heifers were big at birth themselves and put those genetics into their calves. In contrast, he had no calving problems with his own heifers bred to those two low birth weight bulls, because his heifers had moderate birth weights themselves.

Just because a bull has low or minus EPDs for birth weight doesn't guarantee he will sire low birth weight calves. Rod discovered this with some low birth weight bulls bought earlier. They were low weight at birth themselves and were sired by a low birth weight bull, but their mothers were high birth weight cows-the genetics were there for big calves. He realized that it's best to stick with moderate birth weights all around, with no extremes.

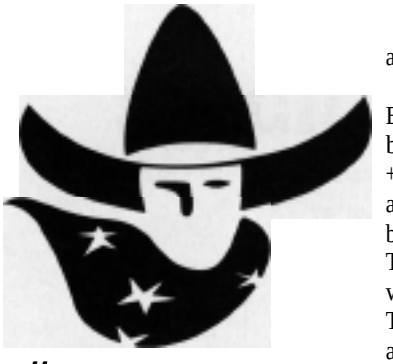
**Rod is pleased with the Angus** herd — 160 cows, 34 yearlings and 45 heifer calves — purchased in 1995 from Bob Adams. They are well fleshed, good-doing cattle; not overly tall, but long and stretchy The cows on irrigated pasture probably weigh 1,200 to 1,330 pounds. Rod is impressed with their temperament as well. Adams had already done a good job of culling and selective breeding for disposition. When Rod calved out the cows the first spring (1996) he only had two that were hard to handle.

He wasn't sure at first how they would do out on the range; he put all the cows with heifer calves on the range in the summer, along with all the yearling heifers, so they would grow up knowing the range. He feels that heifers develop better on rangeland than on irrigated pasture where they tend to get too fat. He was pleasantly surprised at how well these inexperienced cattle took to the range, proving to be ambitious travelers and not hanging down on the fences at all.

Rod leaves first calvers home since they do better on the green feed when raising a heavy calf while still growing themselves. He also leaves cows with bull calves at home.

Those little bulls would run all their flesh off on the range, chasing any in-heat cows," he says. He weans the bull calves the first of September.

He breeds most of the purebred cows by artificial insemination (AI). He and his hired man built a set of AI corrals in the spring of 1996, just before the breeding season. Any mature cow that calved before Feb. 20 was bred AI but the first and second calvers were put with bulls. In 1996 he bred 108 cows by AI and they had a 75 percent conception rate.



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The AI set-up is a 20-acre area with corrals and waterer. The cows come into the corral readily, since they are used to coming into these pens for water. The big holding pens are divided by three-strand electric wires. Rod has been using these three-strand electric fences on his place since 1977 and has never had a bull mix-up. But at the AI corrals he had a problem with bulls trying to jump the wooden panels when an in-heat cow was right through the fence, so he started putting an electric wire over the top pole, which solved the problem.

**The main bulls** he used in 1996 were two he got from Adams and one from Select Sires. One of the Adams bulls, Glory B Bando 900Z, sired calves with light birth weights and lots of growth. The bull himself weighed 2,300 pounds in the spring of 1996 and stood 57 inches tall at the hip. His EPDs are: birth weight (bw) 0, weaning weight (ww) +31, yearling weight (yw) +55 and milk + 17, which is about as high as Rod likes for the milk.

The other Adams bull is Embassy of Donamere 112. This bull has EPDs of: bw +1.8, ww +29 yw +55 yearling weight, and milk +7. The Select Sires bull is Rito 2RT2 of OB5 RR Traveler, with EPDs of bw + 1.8, ww +36 yw +61 and milk +22 The Traveler bull has too high of a milk EPD and Rod wants to smooth that out as he breeds the bull's offspring selectively.

The cows calve from late January through February, with the AI program starting April 5. The cows have a chance for two heat cycles before they go to the range. If they don't settle in two cycles, Rod culls them. Fertility is one of the most important things he selects for— a fertile cow will produce fertile bulls with large scrotal circumference and daughters that reach puberty early.

"Ranchers want an even group of calves to sell in the fall, not a strung out calf crop," he says. He also culls hard for sound feet and legs, good udders on the cows, along with easy handling temperament.

Rod plans to build his registered herd to 300 head. His first production sale was in March at Mabey Ranch at Tendoy, offering about 65 yearling bulls. At his sale he placed cows (the mothers of the yearling bulls) in a nearby pen so that prospective buyers could look at the mothers of the bulls. He says there are a few cows in the herd with poor udders, and he wanted buyers to know exactly what they were getting.

Rod wants to tell his customers everything he knows about these bulls and their mothers. He wants to present his cattle honestly, "Honest cattle, honestly presented" is the motto of the Leadore Angus Ranch and this breeder is determined to make that a tradition that buyers can always depend on.