



Jim Skinner's father, Ray, started the Angus herd in 1949 with the purchase of 10 registered Angus cows from Webb Valley.



Judy Skinner says her husband, Jim, never brands his bulls. While some say brands are good advertising, she says, "Word gets around."

# 50 Years and Counting

*Jim and Judy Skinner and Jim's mother, Rubie, are building upon the Angus breeding program begun in 1949.*

BY HEATHER SMITH THOMAS

Jim Skinner's father, Ray (who passed away in April 1996), was born at Soda Springs, Idaho, in 1917 and grew up helping on his parents' farm. He also worked in a potato warehouse and later drove teams of horses for a road-construction project.

In 1934 Ray's father leased a ranch on Kirtley Creek north of

Salmon, Idaho, and the family made the move to the Lemhi Valley in March, trailing their draft and saddle horses through deep snow over Gilmore Pass.

The 160-mile trip took seven days, during which they camped in a tent on their wagon. In those days the road was not kept open during winter. They had to leave three of their wagons along

the way and return for them in the spring.

In 1937 Ray went to Milo, Idaho, to manage a ranch for his father. While living there he met and married Rubie Morgan. They came back to Salmon and worked with Ray's family on the Kirtley Creek ranch. They started out on their own in 1941 — first leasing the Slavin Ranch

on Big Flat north of Salmon, raising hay and milking 20 dairy cows.

Since they had extra hay, they decided to buy sheep and purchased 300 ewes from a rancher in Montana's Big Hole Valley. The rancher trailed them to the top of Gibbonsville Pass (a three-day trek) where Ray and

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Rubie met the herd and trailed them down to Big Flat (another three-day journey).

In 1945 and '46 Ray and Rubie became managing partners of Rafe Nelson's ranch. They leased the Stoddard Ranch on Geertson Creek after that and started their own herd of cattle in 1949 with the purchase of 10 registered Angus cows from Webb Valley.

From then on, they raised all of their female replacements (with the exception of one cow purchased with a bull calf at her side). They continued to lease the place on Geertson Creek until 1957. Then they moved to the Weigand Ranch near Baker, where they raised sheep and cattle.

During these years Ray and Rubie had three children — Lyle, Kay and Jim. All were active in 4-H. The youngest son, Jim, decided to stay in the Salmon area and work with his folks on the ranch.

With a growing market for Angus bulls, the Skinners eventually phased out the sheep, and in 1966 they purchased the 900-acre Weigand Ranch, which

they continued to operate with Jim.

Ray and his family worked hard to improve their herd of 150 cows and to promote the livestock industry in general. Ray was an active member of the Lemhi Livestock and Wool Marketing Cooperative and helped organize its bull-sale committee, serving as chairman during the mid-1970s.

He served three terms as a director of the Lemhi Cattle and Horse Growers Association and was a member of the national and Idaho cattlemen's associations and the American Angus Association. He also served on the Lemhi County Fair Board.

In 1986 he was named Rancher of the Year by the Salmon Valley Chamber of Commerce. He was inducted into the Eastern Idaho Agricultural Hall of Fame in 1988. His hard work, willingness to help others and wry sense of humor were admired and respected.

For many years the Skinners offered their neighbors the best bulls they could raise, and by

1996 their breeding program had grown to the point Jim and his dad made the decision to have their first bull sale. Ray passed away shortly after that first sale, but Jim, Judy (Jim's wife) and Rubie are dedicated to continuing their efforts in producing quality seedstock that have moderate birth weights but fast growth.

### The breeding program

Over the years, the Skinners have used genetically superior sires via artificial insemination (AI) and purchased high-performing calving-ease bulls. Jim feels strongly that some Angus breeders got too far from calving ease in pursuit of larger, fast-gaining cattle. He tries to make sure his program keeps this important quality.

"We want our cattle to perform well in all aspects of production, so we emphasize low birth weight in combination with good weight gain," he says.

In selecting bloodlines, the Skinners place emphasis on low-birth-weight expected progeny differences (EPDs), calving-ease score and calf shape, while

maintaining high weaning and yearling weights. Jim describes the ranch's goal as producing cattle that are "down the middle of the road" — affordable cattle that can work well for anyone.

The Skinners feel their success depends upon their customers' successes. Jim never expects to sell bulls to the big Angus breeders. He tries to produce bulls for the commercial breeder and says he wants to make his customers happy.

His philosophy in breeding cattle for the commercial cattleman is to produce "sound, functional cattle that excel in growth and carcass traits, while maintaining very rigid maternal standards." He feels his breeding program must be able to produce efficient and profitable females and beef calves. The Skinner motto is "quality without compromise — breeding generations of cattle with consistency."

Jim says: "We think that our herd and our years of experience give our buyers the competitive edge they may be looking for, and our customers are our No. 1 priority. We strive for powerful Angus genetics with predictable performance and a sound breeding program directed at producing genetics that are profitable and productive. Our customers can count on the performance of these bulls' progeny, whether it's calving ease, high growth or maternal qualities."

### Bull selection

Jim spends a lot of time studying EPDs, pedigrees and the bulls themselves. He starts evaluating a new bull or bloodline by looking at birth weight.

"We watch that real close. There are three generations on the pedigree, and I also use what I call the 'bible' — the Angus sire summary," he explains. "We go back through it and study all the maternal and paternal traits on both sides to make sure they are



**One reason Jim and Judy Skinner decided to have an annual bull sale was to expand their customer base. "It's quite expensive, having a sale — the advertising, getting everything ready and having to wait for just one paycheck a year," Jim says. "But it's also kind of exciting. We are bringing in a lot of new people. This year our cattle went to Washington state and southern Idaho, as well as locally."**

consistent — on milk, weaning weight and yearling weight, as well.

“Scrotal circumference has also become a big thing to watch in the last few years; we try to keep a positive EPD on that, and now we’re also looking at keeping positives on the carcass traits.”

Jim believes that to produce a good calf, the traits also come from the dam, so he thoroughly checks both sides of the family.

He seeks moderation, Judy says. “For example, he doesn’t want a whole lot of milk in the cows; they’re not supposed to be dairy cows. Angus already have a lot of milk. You get those great-big heavy milkers out on the range, and they get bad udders or can’t maintain themselves. Jim feels there’s a moderate average that he should be happy with.”

Jim points out that most of his customers run cattle on the range. “In my experience,” he says, “you don’t want to get that milk EPD too high. If it gets too high, the cows just can’t perform under range conditions. So I don’t like to see plus 25 or 30 EPDs on milk.”

A bull Jim purchased this spring combined a +50 weaning weight EPD, a +79 yearling weight EPD, a +18 milk EPD, good structure, a tight sheath and a good disposition.

“I don’t want sheaths hanging down and dragging in the sagebrush,” Jim says. “The tighter sheaths make for a lot less injuries.”

Jim says his dad always told him to look at a bull from behind and from the front to see if his legs were straight. “A lot of breeders say you ought to stand behind him once, but you also need to stand in front of him and see him coming and going,” he explains.

Another trait that doesn’t show up on EPDs is disposition. “I don’t want any high-headed bulls,” Jim says, adding that disposition is one of the things he considers during visual appraisal. “I also look at the bull’s mother if possible.”

Jim says he tries to look at the cow herds but doesn’t always get a

chance to see some of the bloodlines in which he might be interested.

“Clyde Nelson, who also breeds Angus here in our valley, does a lot of traveling and looks at a lot of cattle,” he says. “I’ll call him occasionally and ask him about certain herds or bulls and if he’s ever seen any calves from a certain bull. . . . If I see something he might be interested in, I tell him, too.”

Jim says he doesn’t want seven-frame cows. “I don’t want the big, horsey cattle. They don’t do as well on the range; the medium-framed cow is more efficient.”

Jim says he started using AI in 1972 and Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) as soon as the program began.

“I’m a real believer in the EPD values,” he says. “For instance, the birth EPD will often give you a better indication — a more accurate value — on what a bull will sire than will his actual birth weight, especially if you take into consideration both the maternal and paternal EPDs.

“The individual, himself, might just be a fluke, such as how you fed the cow, or he may throw back to something either way if the ancestry is not consistent. The generations of selection are important.”

The ranchers who buy their bulls want easy-born calves, yet Jim is concerned that if they keep selecting for lower EPDs for birth weight, they won’t be able to put those bloodlines into their cow herd. He’s concerned about the minus numbers some people seek.

### Historic herd award

At their golden-anniversary production sale March 25, 2000, Rod Wesselman, American Angus Association regional manager, presented Rubie Skinner with the Historic Angus Herd Award commemorating 50 years in the Angus business. It was a special moment for Rubie, Jim says. “All her great-grandchildren were present, and each one gave her a

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At their golden-anniversary production sale at the ranch March 25, 2000, Rod Wesselman presented Rubie Skinner with the Association’s Historic Angus Herd Award, which commemorates 50 years in the Angus business.



The cow herd starts calving about Feb. 10 and calves through March. Weaned around Oct. 15, bull calves are wintered on corn, long hay and a mineral supplement until mid-March. Then they’re gradually backed off grain and given all the long hay they want.

rose when she was given the plaque.”

Reflecting upon this 50th anniversary, Jim says: “We’ve been very blessed in this way of life we call a business and

grateful to all the folks who, through all the years, have been a part of this experience. These cattle today represent 50 years of progress, and as we prepare for the start of the new millennium,

we wanted to dedicate this sale to Ray and Rubie, who started it all and who inspired us to be the best that we could be.”

He says they will continue to develop bloodlines that add

value to the herds of their customers.

“We’re going to forget about raising the next ‘great’ bull; we’re going to try to keep in perspective the needs of the commercial cattleman — from the calving barn to the packinghouse — improving the carcass characteristics of our cattle. We believe that with the solid base herd we now have, we can raise heifers that will produce bloodlines with quality carcass traits.”

Jim says he believes strongly in supporting the beef industry and is presently serving his 15th year with the Lemhi Cattle and Horse Grower’s Association. He and Judy also work with the 4-H program.

Judy says Jim “is working hard not only for the cattle but also for the community. He’s on the hospital board, county fire district, etc., and tries to give of himself to the community, as well as to the cattle business. He believes in giving back as much as he can. There’s so much more to this man than just ranching! But he doesn’t say much about it himself — so I guess it’s up to the wives to brag about our kids and our husbands.”

Judy describes her feelings about raising cattle as “a beautiful, hard-working way of life” in which a good sense of humor helps “to get you through the long nights of calving and the hard days while haying.” It’s filled with many rewards, however, such as “the first breaths a new calf takes, watching wild game from your kitchen window — deer, elk, antelope, quail and a few passing moose.

“This family has been through drought-filled summers, hard winters, the frustration of losing a calf you work so hard to save — yet their love of the land and the cattle continues, while striving to be caretakers of the land,” she says.

## Protecting the land

The Skinner family always has been conscientious about their role in land stewardship. They are presently undertaking a three-year program in cooperation with several conservation groups to address the issue of water quality.

“Right now we’re putting in a \$90,000 sprinkler system to replace our flood irrigation in an effort to keep the fines from running off the bar ground and into the creek,” Jim Skinner says. “We will also be moving our feedyards away from the creek, starting this fall, and eventually fencing our pastures off the creek. We decided it is better to work with the conservation groups than against them.”

This all came about because one of Jim’s friends and neighbors was on the Soil Conservation Board. The neighbor attended a meeting where they were showing pictures of a ranch they thought had a problem.

“Even though they didn’t mention any names, my neighbor recognized the place,” Jim explains. “He came to me and said, ‘If you wait, they would probably come and jump on you one of these days. I think if you go talk to them, and try to work with them on this, they’ll be a lot better to work with.’” Jim took his advice.

The National Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) had done a study on Wimpey Creek, a tributary to the Lemhi River. “They’d found that at the mouth of the creek it was not as polluted as it was above — about three miles above my ranch. But they still wanted to get the fines out of the creek,” Jim says.

At first the Skinners thought that the cattle by the creek in winter were causing the problem, but they soon learned the flood irrigation was washing the fines off the bar ground and sealing the bottom of the creek so it couldn’t purify itself. The sprinkler system will lessen the runoff from the fields.

Working with the conservation services, the Skinners are getting some financial assistance. The NRCS is paying 50% of the cost of putting in the underground sprinkler lines, and the Lemhi Model Watershed is helping with part of the cost of the aboveground system.

The next priority is to move the feedyard.

“We can keep our working corrals in their present location, since these don’t impact the creek, but we have to move the feedyard,” Jim says.

At first a lagoon was proposed, but Jim said it would be cheaper and better in the long run to move the feedlot to a flat area well above the creek. “In a few years they might change the rules, and I’d have to move the corrals anyway, so why not do it now?”

Jim’s wife, Judy, feels that even though the creek is not polluted through the ranch, it’s in their best interest to work with the conservation groups and to actively try to improve the creek.

“Our kids and grandkids have always played in that creek,” she says, adding, “It gives ranchers a better name. We are working not only with the cattle, but also for the community and the environment.”



**Jim and Judy Skinner are working with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) to clean up Wimpey Creek. “Our kids and grandkids have always played in that creek,” Judy says, adding that helping preserve the creek “gives ranchers a better name. We are working not only with the cattle, but also for the community and the environment.”**