

**F**olks shook their heads when a burned-out, 24-year-old Illinois welder came to Oklahoma ranch country five years ago. Tim Freeman had his doubts, too, about taking over the family's 1,000-cow Angus ranch, but he was serious about looking into it.

He grew up as a contractor's son south of Chicago and had earned a living as a union welder until lung damage from fume inhalation sent him looking for fresh air.

"This was supposed to be a stop for me until I figured out what I really wanted to do," he says. It didn't take him long to find out. "I wanted to get into the business."

Tim's father, Larry, had put the Holdenville, Okla., Angus herd together as a tax shelter in the mid-1980s and hired managers to operate it.

"Until I came out here, the only thing we knew about the cattle was the paperwork," Freeman says. Although 75% of the cows were registered, management was commercial-oriented, and calves sold at weaning, rarely as breeding stock.

### *Chapter 1: Learning fast*

"When I moved down here, I really thought the cow business was looking out the window in the morning and saying 'Yep, they are here.' I found out it's a seven-day-a-week thing," Freeman relates. "But I still didn't know anything about cattle, cows or carcasses."

He learned fast, thanks partly to advice from kindly locals who couldn't help but like their soft-spoken but determined young neighbor.

"I'm not a cowboy, don't have the hat or buckle, but I've learned a lot by trial and error," he says.

There were plenty of greenhorn stories going around for the first few years, and Freeman had to laugh with the rest. Horses were among the many ranch topics on his "clueless" list. A new friend had just the horse for him, and Freeman bought it after considering a dozen others that were less gentle.

"The first week I had him, I waved at a neighbor, and the horse bolted," he recalls. "I just about fell."

With only his dignity bruised, Freeman went on learning, finally taking control of the reins at A.C. Freeman Angus in 1998. "In the time it took to learn the business, I found out I love it," he says. "I look back and say, 'This is what I should've been doing all along.'"

He found another love and last year married Trena, a local rancher's daughter, who is now his computer recordkeeper and partner in every way.

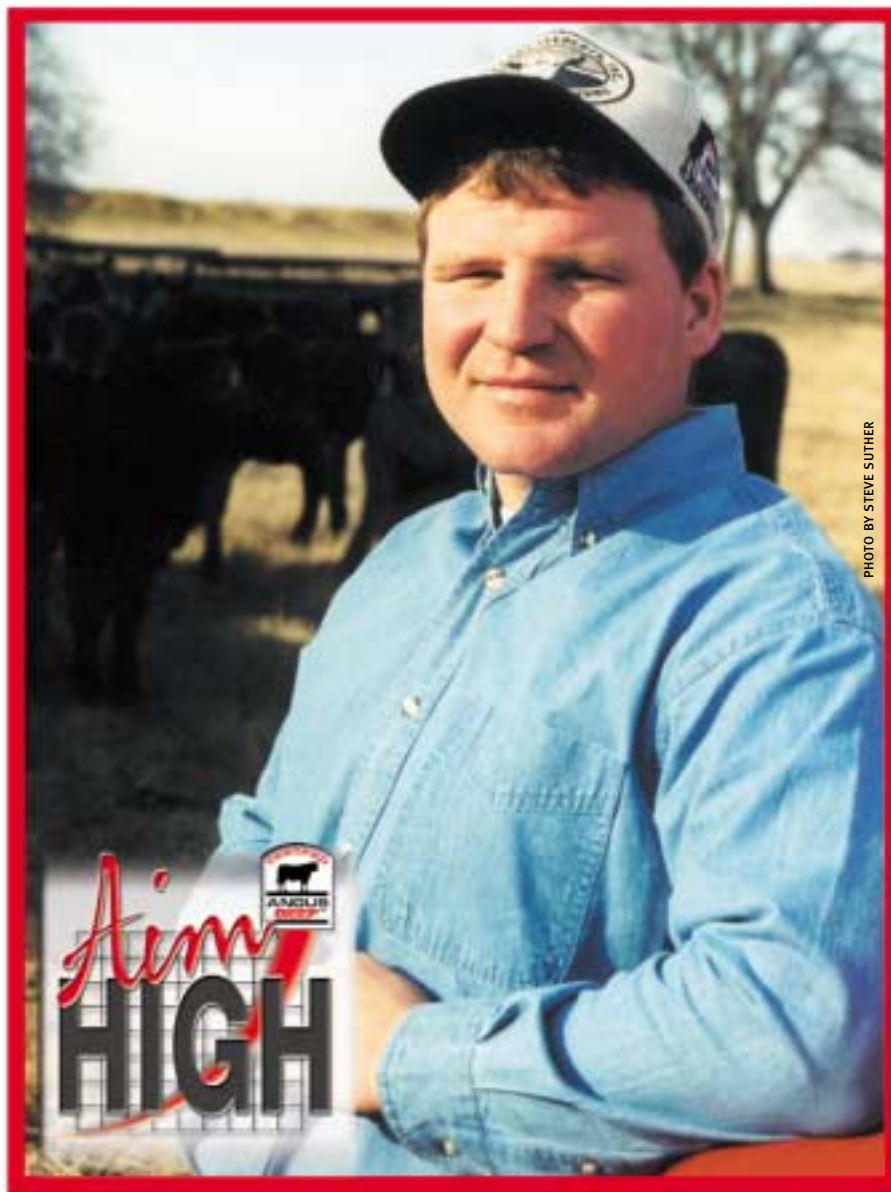
The "A.C." in the ranch name whimsically stands for "another chapter," Freeman

CONTINUED ON PAGE 142

# One Chapter at a Time

With carcass data backing up pedigree and EPDs, Tim Freeman sees new opportunities in marketing seedstock.

by *Steve Suther*



**"In the time it took to learn the business, I found out I love it. I look back and say, 'This is what I should've been doing all along.'"**

**— Tim Freeman**

explains. "It has several meanings; it was a new enterprise for Dad to get into, and it really fit after I came down and took it over." Freeman's new management and marketing ideas promise a continuing succession of chapters that will fill a book.

## Chapter 2: Convenience

Preface that with an understanding that Larry Freeman studied the *Angus Sire Evaluation Report* for years before buying cattle from Virginia to Montana that excelled in carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs). He tried some that wouldn't work under ranch conditions, sometimes watching a sizable investment come to no good.

After paying \$5,000 for one bull and getting negative manager feedback from one calf crop in the 1980s, Larry didn't quibble. "Haul him to town," I said. They told me I would only get \$1,100 for him, but I said, "We'll lose a lot more if we keep him," the elder Freeman recalls.

Convenience traits were honed early on, an advantage that allows the Freemans to operate their herd in 11 pastures across a 20-mile span without hired help, for the most part. To put up 3,200 big bales of hay

each summer, they hire someone to rake while Trena mows and Tim bales. Friends back in Illinois might question his sanity, but not his work ethic, when he says, "I really enjoy the cows and the haying, especially with what my vision was when I came out here."

Except for critical herd management days when they hire a few helpers, the couple gets by with a horse, an all-terrain vehicle (ATV) and a gritty little border collie named Molly.

She's on board for 1,500 of the 1,600 miles the Freeman ATV racks up each month.

"As spread out as things are, I spend a lot of time hauling cows," Freeman says. "With me on the horse and Trena and Molly on the four-wheeler, we're ready for roundup." The dog lives for her daily contact with cattle, speeding from the kennel door to the ATV when her masters say, "Molly, load up." At the work site, she springs into action at the command, "Get 'em, Molly," halting on command when the job is done.

## Chapter 3: Carcass emphasis

For the past 15 years, the herd grew steadily to 1,200 head today, "all we can handle," Freeman notes. But that doesn't mean he thinks A.C. Freeman Angus has reached a peak. Just another chapter.

Growth had come from retaining heifers

and natural service from home-raised and purchased bulls with balanced traits. Nine of the 11 pastures are small enough for single-sire service, and sibling bulls patrol the two bigger tracts.

The Angus genetics were being tested for convenience traits, but not for how well they lived up to their carcass potential. Nor was the seedstock-level investment being managed in a way that would lead to value-added breeding stock sales.

When Freeman took over management, he knew they were selling their genetics short. "It always seemed funny that my neighbors were lined up ready to buy our calves," he recalls. Just as they were starting to inquire early in the fall of 1998, a Kansas cattle feeder happened by. He was a manager of Pfenninger Cattle Co., Scott City, Kan., which is now a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedyard.

"I met Greg [White] by accident," Freeman says. "He was just driving through, and I was giving him directions, but we got to talking. I still didn't know anything about the fed-cattle side, but he explained some risk-management ideas, and I said I was thinking about feeding because of the market. I said, 'I'll just send them to you,'" Freeman says. "That's how I got started feeding."

It may have been a coincidence, but Freeman didn't take it lightly. With a reputation on the line, he knew there were risks not addressed on any board of trade. If the cattle didn't perform or grade well, would word get out and dim his future in the Angus business?

"The point was always to sell seedstock," he notes. "We needed some type of direction, rather than just sending these calves to the feedlot when the calf price was down."

He needn't have worried. The first 113 steers gained 3.7 pounds (lb.)/day with a dry-matter conversion ratio of 5.85, for a 39¢ cost of gain. None of them were treated for sickness during the 131-day feeding period. At harvest in June and July 1999, they achieved 45% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) and Prime grade with 75% Yield Grade (YG) 1s and 2s, returning an \$89.35/head profit on a Farmland National Beef (FNB) grid.

## Chapter 4: Using the data

On the ranch, calves are tagged and weighed the day they are born, thanks to the ATV, Molly and three-hour rounds twice each day in calving season. That meant

**Using the Angus Resource Clearinghouse Network (ARCNet), the CAB feedlot fax line and Angus GeneNet connections, Freeman had contact from 37 feedyards within a week.**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF A.C. FREEMAN ANGUS

► Except for critical herd management days when they hire a few helpers, Tim and Trena Freeman get by with a horse, an all-terrain vehicle and a gritty little border collie named Molly.

Freeman had no problem connecting data with parent cattle and culling where blame was unavoidable.

“None of the calves were implanted,” he says. “We get a clearer picture of genetics without that, and our numbers say we’re doing all right.”

He retained ownership on steers at Pfenninger’s again the next year with similar to better results. Last year, with a strong calf market, he decided to use two years of data to shop around for other buyers or partners. Using the Angus Resource Clearinghouse Network (ARCNet), the CAB feedlot fax line and Angus GeneNet connections, Freeman had contact from 37 feedyards within a week.

Freeman chose to sell outright to CAB partner Gregory Feedlots Inc., Tabor, Iowa, which returned data to Freeman in exchange for retained ownership business this fall.

“They were excellent cattle, but it just wasn’t the winter for us to get the most out of them,” manager David Trowbridge says. Despite the worst winter in decades, 68 of the Freeman heifers sold to ConAgra and IBP with a combined average of 62% CAB and Prime quality.

Weather and related sickness held average daily gains (ADGs) to below 3 lb. and put the damper on profits, but Trowbridge is glad to have another shot at those genetics this fall. Freeman plans to send cattle to both CAB yards. Trowbridge and White agree it makes sense to compare feeding



► Three of the joys the Freemans found on the ranch this spring were triplets, competently raised by their mother in a pasture alongside 49 other cows with traditional one-calf families.

programs in different areas, and both say they appreciate being able to work with the Freeman genetic potential.

“I’ve sent steers and heifers, not trying to pick and choose,” Freeman says. “I figure the numbers should improve every time. We’re talking about retaining 50% ownership in the spring calves.”

With carcass data backing up pedigree and EPDs, Freeman sees new opportunities in marketing. He recalls hearing from a potential customer, through Excel’s Angus America, whose goal was to sell truckload lots of 100% CAB quality.

“He said he was tired of raising hamburger and wanted to raise steak. We started out checking on whether these genetics could pay their way just selling meat, but now we figure we can sell breeding stock,” Freeman says.

## Chapter 5: Accelerate genetics

Acquiring veterinary and artificial insemination (AI) technical training last fall, Freeman opened yet another chapter. It will mean more hard work and long hours, but it suits the 29-year-old who found more than fresh air in Oklahoma.

“There is nothing I’d rather do with my time. Now that this is turning out where we want it through the carcass data, Trena can run the numbers on computer. If we get the right ones culled and bred, I really think the success that we’ve had can increase,” Freeman says.

“If I am going to keep growing and expanding, I can’t keep everything I have,” he adds. “We’re full of cows now. We calved 232 4-year-olds in February. We’ll use our data and sell some bred females. I would like one day to have an annual sale, but we have a lot of work to do first, applying what we’re learning and getting calf health programs better coordinated with the feedlots.”

Meanwhile, the push for greater efficiency and convenience traits will continue. “Feed cost is always going to be the greatest expense,” Freeman says. “If you can keep that down without taking anything away from the cow, you’re going to be all right. Oklahoma is a pretty good place to work on that.”



► When herd managers complained about the calf crop of a bull for which he’d paid \$5,000, Larry Freeman ordered the bull be shipped. “They told me I would only get \$1,100 for him, but I said, ‘We’ll lose a lot more if we keep him,’” the elder Freeman states.

