



# Dick Kelley

## No Secrets, Just Common Sense Management

—by Frank J. Buchman—

*"It's the bottom line that counts," says Dick Kelley. "... the name of the game is business." Owner and operator of 5K Ranch, he sticks to basics in culling his commercial Angus herd.*

Dick Kelley has not bought a bull for 15 years.

He has produced all of the sires used in the commercial cow herd on his 5K Ranch near Alma, Kan., mating to a closed family of cows without producing any "trash."

"Prepotency and depth of breeding" allow this method of reproduction, according to Kelley, who has a broad experience in cattle breeding and improvement.

"The cattle we produce weigh, grade and most importantly reproduce," the rancher said, surrounded in his home office with photos, certificates and plaques adorning the wall. "I spend quite a bit of time in here; I get up at 4:30 to 5 in the morning and try to figure out the business. The name of the game is business," noted Kelley, as

he pointed out flyers, brochures and a file filled with long-accumulated information.

"The herd has improved while at the same time paid its way. We have no secrets, just common sense management of herd and pastures combined with strict culling and selection under conditions where the cattle are expected to perform," explained Kelley.

"You can ask me my opinion and I will tell it like I see it. It may not be right, but it is my opinion," he added.

Raised in New Mexico and a 1950 graduate of New Mexico State University in animal husbandry, Kelley still credits John Knox and Marvin Koger, "two of the nation's great leaders in beef cattle management and research," for their assistance and advice.

From college, where he was on the judging team and helped organize the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (serving as the southwest regional director), Kelley worked as a buyer at the Oklahoma City stockyards. And then in 1952, he moved to Florida where he married his wife, Raymond, and went into a partnership cattle operation.

With what he now labels "scrub cows" as a base, in the course of 32 years the cowman has built the efficient herd he has today. "We just had grade Brahman-type cattle, half Brahman and half native; the kind that are awfully hard to beat. These grade Brahmans off those old scrub cattle are probably as good as any in the country for what they do," explained Kelley, as he showed pictures of cows, in Central

America, which he said were similar to those he started with.

For four years he used Shorthorn and Angus bulls in the herd and also added a limited number of females with Shorthorn bloodlines. "We decided we needed more quality, size and uniformity in the cattle, so we bought some Angus bulls from Wye Plantation at Queenstown, Md.

### **Big, correct cattle**

"They were big and correct, different than what others in the industry were wanting, but just what I was looking for.

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## **"We have always stressed selection for reproduction rather than feeding for production."**

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If it had not been for those big, growthy bulls, I probably would have started a three-way-cross program," Kelley continued. "We have used nothing but black bulls since then."

"They are not Angus bulls unless they are Wye," inserted wife Raymond, who has always been an integral part of the business. (Her family operated a sale barn in Florida and she has been in the saddle much of her life.)

With strict emphasis on reproduction ability of his cows, Kelley culled those that did not produce a heavy calf as a 2-year-old and every year after. He was one of the first in the country to breed yearling heifers.

"We have always stressed selection for reproduction rather than feeding for production," Kelley pointed out.

When the need for larger, more efficient cattle caught up with the industry, demand for bulls of this type swept across the country. Kelley found that bulls he had been buying for \$600 to \$1,000 now sold for as much as \$5,000. To offset this, and because there was a shortage of good bulls in southern Florida due to the difficulty for northern cattle to become acclimated, Kelley decided to raise his own.

"I figured the top 20 percent of my commercial cows were just as good as any registered herds, so I bred these animals artificially to the best Angus bull I could find and saved the top calves to use on the rest of my cows," the rancher explained.

### **A closed herd**

It was not long until Kelley was not breeding any cows artificially and

closed his herd, just using bulls he had produced. "I breed and select these cattle for performance in this environment. They did this successfully with sheep in west Texas and with Herefords in South Africa and it is working for us too," Kelley said as he prepared to host a tour of the cow herd now in Kansas.

In addition to the Florida cow herd, two decades ago, he also had partnership cows with Lawrence Anderson near his present Wabaunsee County, Kan., location. That herd has long been dispersed, but the Kelley family developed an appreciation for the Flint Hills and decided to move to Kansas in 1979.

Now headquartered just east of Hessdale, Kelley also has several pastures leased to summer graze steers in addition to the black cows he brought from Florida. All pastures are connected.

The cows are all black, but still show the Brahman traits of a large navel, slope out over the rump and "a touch of ear." "They are not fancy, but they produce or they wouldn't be here," Kelley said.

"Good cattle come in all shapes, all sizes and all colors," he commented in his slow, quiet southwestern manner.

Starting to explain his feeding program, the rancher said, "About 99 percent of these registered breeders do not know they overfeed their cattle. To a lot of them, it is a game anyway, either for shows or bull tests. I do not care what it is; you can screw your herd up if you get away from the basics and that is the bottom line.

"When it gets down to when and where to spend a dollar we must make decisions on the money generated from our cash flow. At the end of the year, it is not whether a group of calves top the sale, but rather the bottom line of the profit and loss statement that counts.

"What difference does it make if a man only weans a 400-lb. calf if there is more profit in it? More cattlemen are starting to look at inputs now," continued Kelley.

### **Pressure on heifers**

Cows, estimated to weigh about 900 lb. at the thinnest point and up to 1,200 lb. at a peak, are wintered on cubes or alfalfa hay with rations increased after calving. "It all depends on the year, but I sure want their weight going up when I turn the bulls in," noted the manager.

Calves come from March 10 through May 1. "For me, the way I run things, it is cheaper to winter the calves in the

cows instead of on the ground," he said.

Bulls are out with yearling heifers 42 days and about 30 more days with older females. Kelley personally pregnancy checks everything in the fall about the time calves are weaned.

Conception rate among yearling heifers has been over 90 percent, and 70 percent of the heifers calve in the first three weeks of the season. And 90 percent of the heifers breed back to calve at 3 years of age.

"A short season on either yearling or 2-year-old heifers is the first step to shortening the season on your cow herd," Kelley explained. "I would not worry if I only got 80 percent bred as yearlings and 80 percent of these bred back, since the 60 odd percent left would more than likely hold up for me from then on. It is cheaper to get rid of them as poor producers early. If some heifers can do it, should not all of them be able to?" the breeder asked.

Emphasizing his belief in records, Kelley does not see the need for recording birth weight or even birth dates. However, on the right side near the hip, he does hot iron brand all heifer calves according to the year born (example 1, 2, 3, 4) and bull calves get year brand plus a second number (11, 12, etc.). The distinguishing mark on all cattle is the 5K brand, also on the right side forward of the hip.

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"It doesn't really matter to me when a calf is born because I just save the best ones back. They are usually the first ones born, but sometimes heavier calves will be born later and I will still be keeping back the top bull prospects," he explained.

Pointing out the importance of weighing, the rancher said, "If a breeder does not have a set of scales, he is just whistling Dixie, if he says he knows what he is doing."





A native of New Mexico who ran commercial cattle in Florida before moving to the Flint Hills of Kansas, Kelley won't hesitate to tell you what he believes. In his functional operation reproduction is most important and progress is made by putting as many young females in production as possible.

Because of low profits in feeder cattle, Kelley started selling bulls in addition to those raised for his own use. Although there have been numerous questions about the inbreeding or line-breeding program used in the operation, the breeder compares it to sparrows, which started out with just two birds and have intermated throughout the country without bad effects.

"If you do not have trash in your cattle, you do not have to worry about inbreeding. There is so much prepotency and depth of breeding in this herd that we have never had any problem," Kelley emphasized. "I just have to look for an excuse to cull some."

He likes to keep all heifers for possible replacements to continue culling as they mature. They are not placed on full feed for heavy gains. "The heifers have the growth potential, so the main thing is to keep them growing," explained Kelley.

"Calves from heifers are as good as those from old cows and we like to breed all of them because that is the place any trash would show up," he added.

Yearling bulls, turned out at about 900 lb., are used for 10 heifers each and rotated twice a week. "After breeding season, we give the heifers plenty of good grass, but during the fall months they get no additional feed. We calve a little on the thin side. If they need feed, we wait until after they calve," Kelley stated.

Bulls sold to other breeders are semen checked, and all, several hundred,

have shown high fertility. Kelley does not semen-evaluate bulls used in his own herd, but keeps several in pastures and rotates during the season. He estimates mature bulls could weigh over a ton, but in working condition usually weigh less.

### The steer end

Unlike most breeders who work calves before turning out to grass, Kelley does not work his until late July. "What is the use in vaccinating before they are 3 months of age anyway? And by that time, we can start deciding which bull calves to castrate," he said. The steer calves also receive an implant at this time in addition to insecticides.

Although he has creep fed some calves, success was not high and Kelley has discontinued the practice. After weaning, steer calves are preconditioned for about four weeks and, for the past 20 years, sold to an Iowa feeder.

"You cannot ship a green calf, but after we wean them, give them shots, pour-on and another implant, the steers can stand the trip to Iowa without any problem," Kelley explained.

Calves have averaged 550 lb. at weaning, with the steers weighing 1,100 to 1,200 lb. at 18 months. They have been sold on a grade-yield basis or open top which is a bonus over a set yield price. The calves traditionally grade Choice, according to the breeder.

Explaining that nature has designed his cows for functional efficiency, Kel-

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ley described, "They have small teats that are uniform in size. It is easy for a young calf to get one into his mouth, so he takes some milk from all quarters even when his capacity is limited. Too much milk is as bad as too little."

Although he weans over a 90 percent calf crop, including heifers, he does not try to watch them closely at calving time. "Cattle thrive on being left alone. I may not see a bunch of cows but every two weeks during calving," Kelley explained. "They have to do it on their own. If a cow does not have a calf by herself and then wean it, we sell her. And we only save replacements from the best, earliest heifers."

He helps a cow, however, if he sees a problem and keeps a closer eye on first-calf heifers.

Saving all heifers as replacements "gives me a long time to look at them to see which ones should make the best brood cows," Kelley said. "We cull about 20 percent of the herd each year."

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About 10 percent of our culls are open or did not wean a calf and the other 10 percent are the poor producers.

"I like to keep a young herd," Kelley emphasized. "If you are making improvements in the herd every year, your younger cattle should be your best ones. I like for the bulk of the herd to be under 12 years of age."

### Other sides

Changing to a more pessimistic tone, Kelley talked about merchandising grass through cattle. "If you look at figures—the cost to produce a calf—it will scare you to death. The Midwest has the highest cost per unit of any place in the United States because of the winter feed bill," he said.

Early intensive grazing shows much promise to Kelley, who has done considerable research on purchasing feeders in the fall on a spring futures market, taking delivery at grass time while locking in a July 15 sell price at that time. "I do not know if it will work, but the figures I have show it will. I will have several more people look this over before I decide to try it," explained the cattle manager, who has served as a consultant to several ranches, including one in Central America.

Admitting he would reduce or even sell his entire herd for the right price to the right buyer who would continue with it, Kelley might then pursue intensive grazing.

He concluded, "I have been in the cow business 35 years. It has been what I wanted to do, breed a good herd of cattle, and I have done that. I can raise a better bull than I can buy." AJ