

# OASIS



*Wyoming's Ray and Kathleen Weber are true stewards of the range —  
and Angus are an important part of their operation.*

STORY & PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT

Unlike the early prospectors who saw this land as "a valley of desolation," Ray Weber sees opportunity along the rearing Muddy.

**W**hen George Forman traversed Wyoming's Muddy and Bitter Creek valleys in September 1865, he had little good to record in his journal. To him, it was a sea of sage devoid of water and vegetation, a place of relentless wind, a landscape of despair.

"We pass nearly 50 dead mules starved to death in one train," he wrote. "It is a veritable valley of desolation, without grass or water fit to drink."

The Overland Trail still traces across the valley, and each day rancher Ray Weber — who makes his living on this land — pauses to think about the people who once passed through. Unlike Forman, Weber sees hope among the bunchgrass and opportunity along the meandering Muddy, which pushes southward toward the Little Snake River.

Weber, 65, is a soft-spoken Wyoming cowman, who prefers to let his actions and the land he loves tell his story. He likes good horses and good cattle, and his favorite moment takes place in December when he trails his 1,000 head of crossbred-Angus cattle back home. The hay's put up. The sky is clear and blue. The cows string out for miles, moving with purpose and ease along the shoulder of the highway.

Nothing could be better.

"There's never been much money in this deal," says Weber. "But when all the conditions are good — the cattle look good, the feed is good, and the work is easy — it's a good feeling to be in this business."

One of the challenges of this business — particularly in the western United States — is the heightened public scrutiny of ranchers like Weber who use federal lands for grazing. That's why he and his wife, Kathleen, have had a long-term commitment to being good stewards of the land to demonstrate that ranching can be beneficial for the environment. They also believe it's crucial that they produce high-quality food for consumers as an effective and justifiable use of their natural resources.

### Angus fill the need

"We got into the Angus business about 15 years ago," says Ray. "We saw that the Certified Angus Beef Program was starting to gain momentum. We thought we'd better jump on the train or get left behind."

To ensure their cattle operation remains competitive into the future, the Webers take great care in selecting the genetics they use in their program. They buy only Angus bulls with balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) — nothing that's too extreme — because cattle that are too big, with too much muscle, simply don't perform on their rugged range. They also want bulls with proven EPDs for carcass characteristics.

"We want a bull to look like a British bull, and for his calves to reach a high quality grade," says Weber. "We select bulls that are better than average for growth, although we try to hold down our birth weight EPDs as low as possible. We also want to produce cattle that are uniform, that will make the Choice Quality Grade without getting too low on yield grade. Our target is the kind of beef that's high in quality, the type of product you buy in the best steak houses."

Since turning out Angus bulls 15 years ago, the Webers have reaped other benefits as well. Because their calves are black, they have better buyer demand and more interest in the heifers they sell.

The Webers have also practically eliminated cancer eye and sunburned teat problems because of the breed's black hide and pigmentation. That's a big plus, considering the amount of snowfall and the light-colored sandy soils of Wyoming's southern range.

"Every fall we used to have to treat 20 cancer eyes," says Ray. "Now we have maybe two or three. Plus we have no horns to worry about, and these cows are good mothers. They take care of themselves. These things are a real advantage to using Angus."



**Even the cows improve the quality of the soil by spreading manure and seed and by removing dead grass that chokes out new growth.**

The Webers winter their calves at a lot near Fort Collins, Colo. While they used to retain ownership of their cattle all the way through to the packing house, they stopped that practice a couple of years ago. Now they sell their calves in January, after they've been preconditioned for a few months. "We try to own them as long as we can," says Ray. "If we don't own them through, we still try to get as much carcass data on them."

### Environmentally sensitive

In addition to producing a better-quality product for consumers, the Webers also believe it's important to do so in an environmentally sensitive manner. Much of the family's energy has focused on improving the land they use for grazing.

Their 80,000-acre allotment north of Baggs was severely abused along the Overland Trail by the immigrants who passed through with thousands of oxen and horses. In many cases the pioneers had to go five miles from the creek just to find grass. Because they left behind little vegetation or willows along the Muddy, the creek had cut deep banks into its shoulders. This lowered the water table and further compounded the problem.

A solution to improve the range came when local ranchers and the federal government, which oversees the management of most of these lands, divided the range into individual allotments tied to individual operations rather than allowing free range for everybody's livestock

"This was a big stepping stone toward the good,"

**Above: Ray and Kathleen Weber made a long-term commitment to being good environmental stewards to demonstrate that ranching can be beneficial for the environment.**

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recalls Weber. "Each permittee started taking care of his allotment, instead of having a contest to see which guy could beat out the other guy to the good grass."

Since that time, the Webers have invested heavily in improvements, putting in about 20 reservoirs on their allotment. This helps distribute cattle and keeps them off streams. They also installed solar-powered wells in areas where reservoirs were unfeasible.

"We use the water to move our cattle: it's part of our controlled grazing management," says Weber. "We rotate our grazing, using about nine separate pastures that we move our cattle into and out of. We keep the cattle in one large group of about 800 head. This method of grazing improves plant health and increases the amount of vegetation."

### Protecting the Muddy

To protect the Muddy, the Webers don't graze along the stream during the growing season, using those sensitive areas in the fall and winter when cattle can do less damage to plants. "This lets the grass and willows get their growth in the spring and summer before they're grazed," Weber says.

Even the cows improve the quality of the soil by spreading manure and seed and by removing dead grass that chokes out new growth.

Most notably, the Webers, along with their Bureau of Land Management (BLM) range conservationist Andy Warren, have constructed a number of stream obstructions to slow the water's flow and to back up the water table. Already willows are regenerating as water becomes more abundant to their roots. The stream banks are stabilizing, too.

"So many of our industry's detractors think our goal is to ruin the environment," says Weber. "All you have to do is look at the diaries of those people who passed through here 150 years ago. This was a tough country. No water. No grass. That's changed. Half of what we do on our ranch is squeeze a profit out of our cows, and the other half is making the land better."

Perhaps even George Forman, who passed through here so many years ago, would appreciate the hope among the sage that's been created by the Webers. Back then, his words revealed how deeply — and quickly — he wanted to get across this sagebrush sea of despair. "We are a tough-looking crowd of pilgrims," he wrote in his journal. "Most of us are dead broke and longing to get home."

Today, this is the Weber's home — for the long haul. And Angus play a key role in making that feasible.



The Webers look for bulls with better-than-average growth, while holding down birth weight and producing cattle that are uniform, grade Choice and yield well.

### ESTABLISHING ROOTS

Ray Weber's ancestors settled near the banks of the Muddy near Baggs, Wyo., in 1899. They built a modest home and barn, sheltering them against the northern winds with cottonwood trees they planted. They were tough, independent people, the descendants of German immigrants who had left Wisconsin for the high plains of Colorado. When they heard of land that could be homesteaded near Baggs, they packed up again and crossed the Great Divide.

For the first 40 years, the Webers grew small grains and raised a few milk cows and hogs. They cleared the sagebrush from lowlands, dug irrigation ditches from the streams and transformed Forman's land of desperation into hay meadows and pastures.

Ray's father, Sid, bought the ranch in 1939 and worked odd jobs for the neighbors to pay for it. It took him 30 years to build his dream into one of the valley's finest cow-calf operations.

Ray, too, had a love for cows in his blood; and when he left for college to study animal husbandry, he knew he was coming back. On his return, he bought his first 80 cows in 1957 and partnered up with his dad. In 1971 Weber married Kathleen Sheehan, who had grown up on a ranch east of Baggs. "I like this way of life," says Kathleen, whose grandfather was the first European child born in the Little Snake River Valley. "I wouldn't have done anything else."