

A Special Breed for a Special Breed of Ranchers

by Barbara LaBarbara



he diversity of a commercial cow-calf operation, a club calf herd, a feedlot, row crop farming and an outfitting business has kept the Petsch Ranch, Meriden, Wyo., in the business of agriculture through four generations.

C.B. Irwin was the founder and first generation. A colorful character in the history of Wyoming, he homesteaded the

original Petsch Ranch in the late 1800s. Irwin was instrumental in founding Cheyenne Frontier Days and he traveled with the Wild West Show. Today his portrait hangs in the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Irwin's widow sold the ranch to Fred Petsch in 1935. Irv Petsch, Fred's grandson, tells the story that it took only two hours to close the deal on the ranch, but three days to purchase the "Y6" brand.

Fred was an early-day entrepreneur. He moved his family from eastern to western Nebraska and opened a livery stable. Later, he owned a filling station and had a consignment auction on the side. As his auction business grew, he built the first livestock auction barn in western Nebraska. Eventually, he sold his interest in that operation and built the first livestock auction barn in Wyoming at Torrington. Two

more auction barns followed, one in Wheatland and one in Lusk.

By this time, Fred's sons, Roy and Bus, were able to take over the auction business. Fred and his other son, Irvin, started working the new 20,000-acre ranch.

Today the ranch has 34,000 deeded acres and 2,600 acres of state school section land. It sprawls 11 miles north-south and 20 contiguous miles east-



BARBARA LABARBARA PHOTOS

The Petsch Ranch homeplace and feedlot near Meriden, Wyo. This ranch was established in 1890s by C.B. Irwin.

west. Five Petsch families share responsibility of managing this 38,000-acre spread. Ranching is their heritage and it's in their blood.

The ranch includes 1,600 acres of irrigated farmland and 2,000 acres of irrigated meadowland. The elevation ranges from 4,000 to 6,500 feet. Horse Creek runs through the entire property which allows Petsches to operate Horse Creek Adventures, an outfitting service for hunters and fishermen.

Three enterprises are connected with the ranch—Petsch Ranches Inc. is the name of the ranch and owner of the cattle; Petsch Land Co. owns the land; Petsch Farms LLC is the feedlot operation. It owns the elevator, the land it sets on and the machinery. Wyoming was the first state in the Union to allow Limited Liability Companies (LLC).

Originally, in 1960, the separate enterprises were created for tax purposes. Today it's an excellent management tool for following incomes and expenses through profit and loss statements.

Irv Jr, who is third generation, shares management responsibility with his two sons, Brady and Trevor, and his brother's two sons, Dave and Rowdy. They all live on the ranch and have families. Dave and Rowdy's father died while working calves in July 1984—one year to the day their grandfather Irvin passed away.

Petsch Ranch has six full-time employees. Two single employees live in the bunkhouse and three married employees live in housing on the property. The other employee is the cook, appropriately named "Cookie." The single men get three meals a day at the cookhouse while the married men get their noon meal. During branding and other busy times, ranch wives work with Cookie to feed the hands. There are 26 houses on the property. With the number

of employees and lots of ground to cover, two-way radios have become one of their most valued tools.

Petsch Ranch's sharecrop farmers, Tom and Dave Abe, raise sugar beets, pinto and Great Northern beans. Petsches raise corn, barley, alfalfa and grass hay for their feedlot operation.

Breeding Program

Originally the Petsch Ranch used Polled Herefords in their commercial cow operation. In the 1960s they began crossbreeding heifers to Angus bulls because they needed lower birth weight calves with added hybrid vigor. They kept the best heifers for replacements and soon had a black baldie herd.

When exotics hit the U.S. beef industry, the Petsches tried about every breed because they needed bigger bone structure on the cattle leaving their feedlot. They used Simmentals for six or seven years. Suddenly the cows were too big. They started breeding back to Angus and Maine-Anjou bulls to regain the muscling they had lost.

Their older cows have a Simmental base. All red cows are bred to Angus bulls. Black cows are bred to a percentage Maine-Anjou bull with the hopes of getting a black calf crop. Their 70 registered Angus cows are part of the club calf herd.

"We take the best of both sides and it's working," says Rowdy, the oldest of the fourth generation. "We get the muscle, meat, capacity, feed efficiency, hybrid vigor and mothering ability we need in our program."

The average size of their 1,200 cows is 1,200 pounds. As their cow size came down, the calf to cow ratio went up.

The Petsches artificially inseminate the registered cows and replacement heifers, most of which come from the club calf herd. Calving starts the first of February, with the club calf



The third and fourth generation of the Petsch Family (1 to r): Dave, Rowdy, Irv, Brady and Trevor work on the ranch and oversee its commercial Angus cow-calf operation.

cows bred to calve in April.

The majority of their 52-bull battery are registered Angus. A 1:20 bull to cow ratio is followed for commercial herds that run on large pastures. The closer-to-home, more confined herd has a 1:25 ratio.

"We use expected progeny differences (EPDs) as a tool but still visually appraise the bulls. They have to fit my pattern of an ideal creature," says Rowdy. "If they don't, I don't care what their numbers say, I won't buy them."

Even though efficiency, fertility, carcass and overall quality throughout the entire herd have vastly improved in recent years, Rowdy worries about inconsistency in the

calves. He wishes carcass data from processing plants wasn't so difficult to attain.

"Genetics puzzle me. When everything is equal and good, why in the world do you get an occasional bad calf?" questions Rowdy. "I know registered cattle have more predictability than a two-way or three-way cross. My club calves are basically Maine-Anjou/Angus with a touch of Chianina. I get calves all over the spectrum because I never know which breed trait is going to come out. I stay within certain bloodlines within a breed hoping to eliminate differences within the breed itself. We continually strive for uniformity."

Feeding Program

When Rowdy's great grandfather started the feedlot in 1945 he needed the diversity of feeding his own cattle. Located several miles from a market, it gave him new options. Fred Petsch started with 800 head. Today the feedlot has a capacity for 1,300 head.

They like to wean 500 to 525 pound calves to go into their ranch feedlot. Larger calves are too big to work for them and go to the sale barn where they will end up in somebody else's feedlot. Smaller calves go to market as well. The rest of the calves winter on meadows where they receive a maintenance diet. They are sorted again in May and turned out on grass until the first of October when they go to the feedlot. Each calf raised on the ranch is inspected at least three times before going into the feedlot or being kept as a replacement heifer.

The Petsches purchase 500 extra head a year to go with the weaning calves they raise.

Animals go into the feedlot at 16 months and are usually out of the feeding facility in 110 days. Steers weigh 1,300 to 1,325 pounds and heifers 1,200 pounds when they leave the feedlot. Normally they record a 4 pound average daily gain (ADG). In 1995 they took 400 steers to a commercial feedlot where their gain was as high as 4.6 pounds with a feed conversion of 5.9 to 1.

"Our cattle topped the feedlot of 120,000 head. We had the best conversions, so we know we have the genetics," Irv Petsch says.

The Petsch feedlot ration consists of dry rolled corn, rolled barley, corn silage and ground alfalfa hay which they raise. The feed is mixed at their elevator where protein and minerals are added. Silage is carried on the feed trucks and



Angus genetics are dominant in the Petsch Ranch commercial herd. They favor the breed for its strong maternal and carcass traits.

mixed with the grain as the trucks dump into feed bins. The feeding operation takes five men, including two truck drivers. They feed 1,300 head twice a day. The operation takes a mere 30 minutes.

Their ultimate goal is feedlot efficiency.

"There is a big difference in the way we feed as opposed to commercial feedlots," Rowdy says. "We feed more roughages because it's economical for us. We have to get through the feeding period with the corn we raise. Barley is used to increase the energy factor. Because we have surplus, we continue to feed silage throughout the entire feeding period. Our rations change every year according to the crops raised."

Marketing Program

Because of Petsch Ranch's long-standing reputation, cattle buyers use the phone to place their orders. Seldom do buyers visit the ranch. Last year 80 percent of the finished cattle they sold were yield grade (YG) 2, 10 percent were YG1, and the remainder were YG3s.

Five to 10 percent of the feedlot cattle qualify for the Certified Angus Beef Program. Rowdy says Angus genetics have helped their cattle grade. He

believes it's vital to have an Angus influence when marketing cattle.

The Petsches rent the sale barn at Scottsbluff, Neb., for their club calf sale. Cattle that don't go through the feedlot or the club calf sale sell at Torrington.

"Our biggest advantage is the diversification we have in our operation," says Rowdy. "We have the ability to feed our own cattle, sell whatever we want whenever we want. We have the feed, roughage, ingredients and manpower to do what we want. The markets decide where we make our money?"

Environmental Concerns

The University of Wyoming advised the Petsch Family on location of the original feedlot. The Extension Service said it was an ideal location, close to water (Horse Creek) and well protected. It was also close to the ranch house. They suggested that anyone interested in building a feedlot should study Petsch's.

Now, 50 years later, Wyoming's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is making them move the operation.

Three years ago, a fisherman found some dead trout four miles downstream from the

Petsch feedlot. It was at a time they and all of their neighbors were fertilizing meadows for miles upstream. Then it rained 1 inch in a half-hour. Conditions could not have been worse.

The fisherman reported the incident to the Game and Fish Department which immediately began an investigation of Horse Creek. An officer worked his way upstream to the Petsch Ranch and rushed a memo to the DEQ - "Major fish kill on Horse Creek, Petsch Ranch feedlot facility perpetrator."

When a DEQ official checked the facility and found live fish swimming right beside the feedlot, he said it was unlikely the feedlot caused the kill. Because the Game & Fish Department filed a formal complaint, DEQ had to act on it. DEQ was cooperative with the Petsches and gave them a period to come into compliance.

"We looked at what it would cost and decided it would be better to move the feedlot," Irv says. "We had talked about making some changes for a long time and began looking at the move as an opportunity to expand. Economically the timing wasn't good for us, but it neveris."

Because of the new location

of the feedlot, which is more than two miles from the current operation, they will have a conveyance system. Waste will drain out of the feedlot, across the road into the main irrigation ditch and distributed over pasturelands. There is no need for containment ponds or monitor wells. The feedlot is four miles from Horse Creek.

The new facility will allow Petsches to increase capacity to 2,000 head with a potential for 6,000, offer commercial feeding, and breed up to 1,200 cows.

One side of the facility will be for artificial insemination (AI) work. Because many ranchers in the Rocky Mountain region's higher elevations cannot raise their own feed, there is a market for conditioned replacement heifers. The Petsches plan to feed weaned heifers a few months, bring them to an acceptable breeding weight and AI them. The heifers would stay at the facility and be exposed to a clean-up bull before being



Weaned calves penned and sorted by the Petsch Ranch crew. Top steer calves go into their backgrounding and feedlot program, while quality heifers are targeted for a replacement heifer program.

taken home as bred heifers.

The Petsches realize this enterprise will be labor intensive, but with fourth generation Petsches returning from college to the ranch, there is a need to become more specialized, generate more

income and create new markets.

Another option being considered is a herd of 250 registered Angus cows that would supply bulls and replacement heifers for the commercial herd. Rowdy, who currently does the AI work, will

be bringing ultrasound technology to the operation to gain breeding and carcass data.

There will come a day when the fifth generation will take the reins. The Petsch Ranch Family will be ready and their ancestors proud.

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