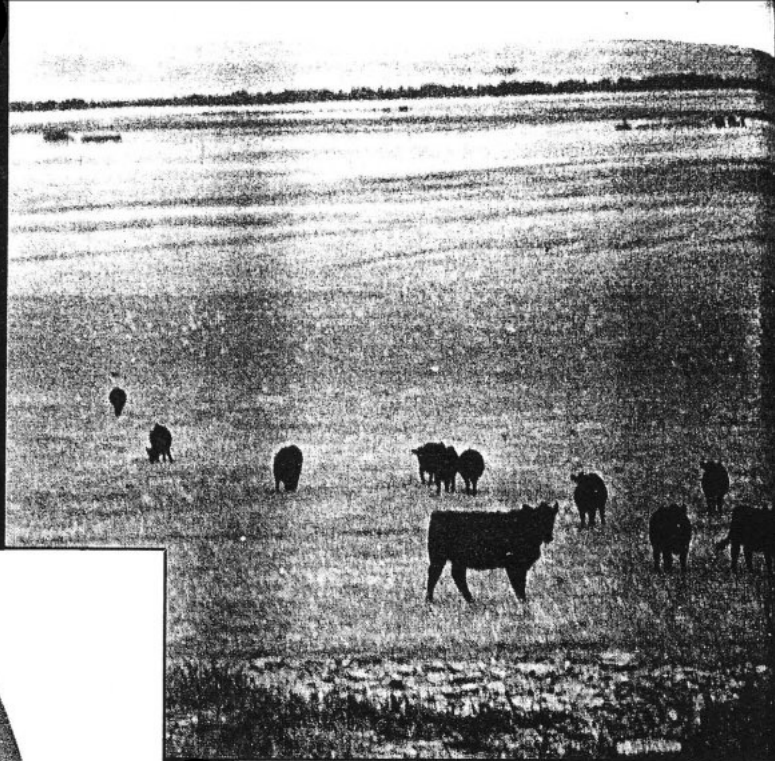
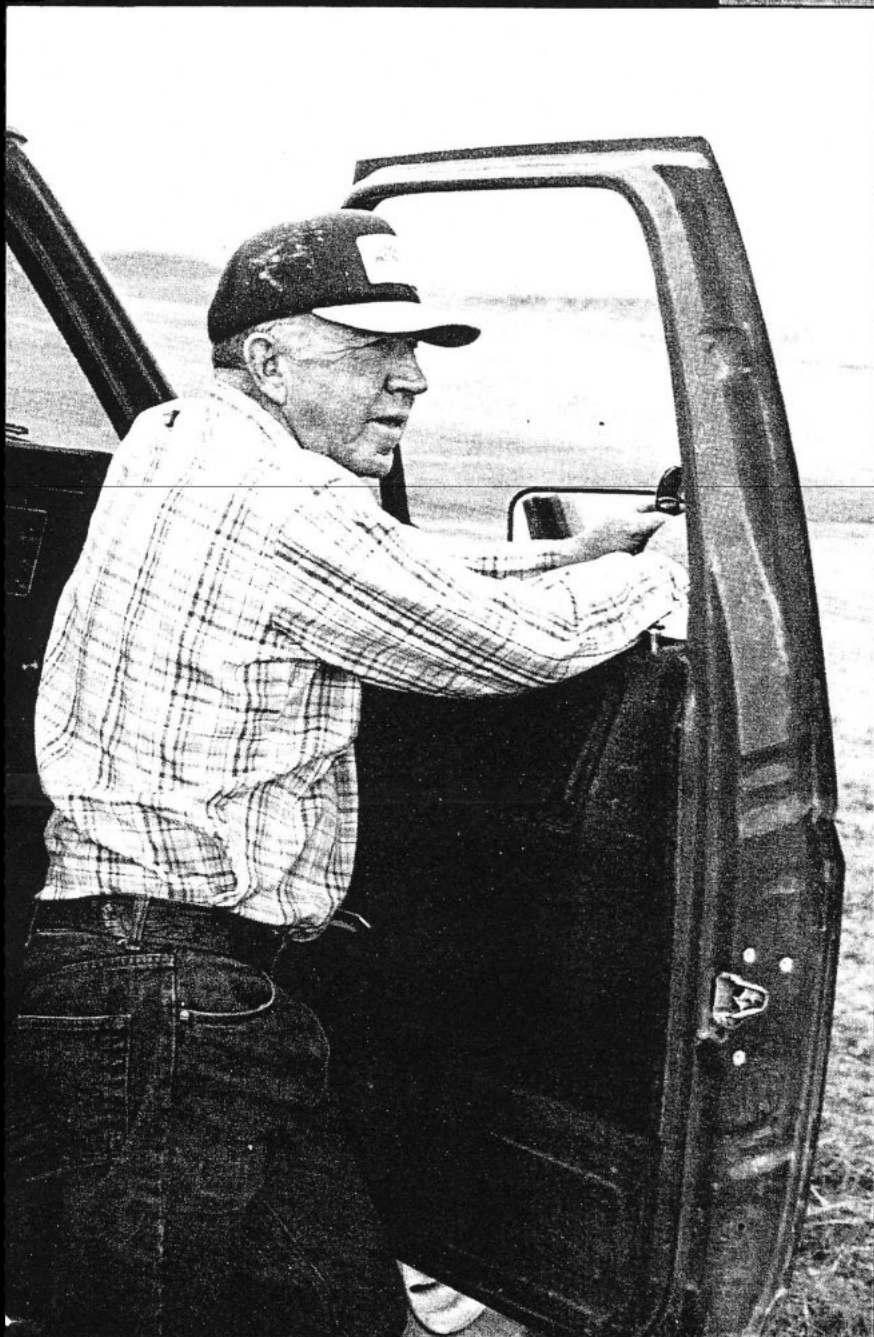


# Cooney Brothers

**Buying the Best  
And Keeping it Simple**

by Nancy Ann Sayre



**“They are excellent bull buyers . . . they sort bulls off awfully well.”**

—Pat Goggins, Billings, Mont.

**“I’ve never seen anybody go in and pick out the quality bulls that they do . . . and then they go home with them.”**

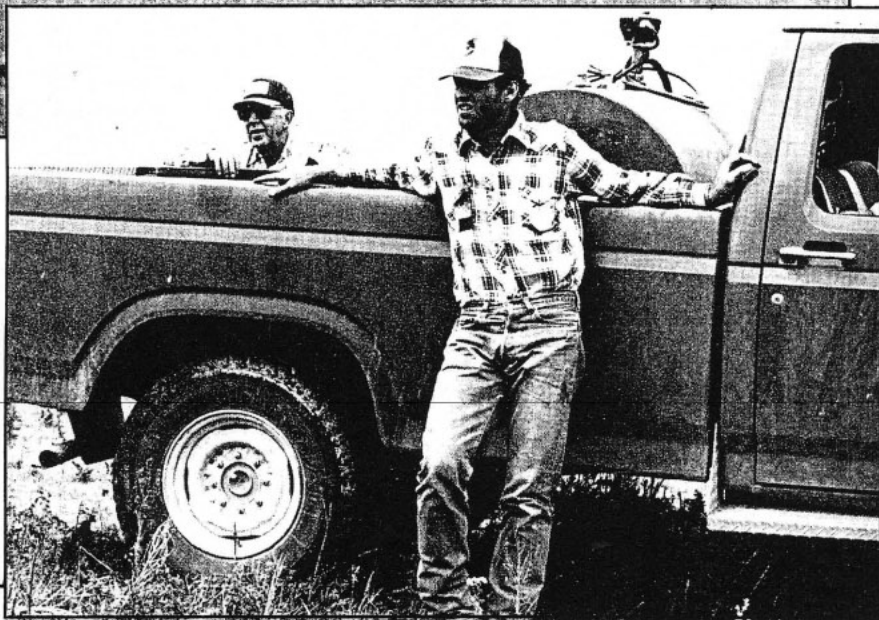
—Bob Sitz, Harrison, Mont.

**B**oth men refer to brothers Bill, Frank and Robert (Bob) Cooney, owners and operators of the Cooney Bros. ranch, Harlowton, Mont. And both men should know good bull buyers when they see them. Bob Sitz sells more than 200 Angus bulls every year; Pat Goggins is the auctioneer for Sitz and many other Montana cattlemen.

Last year alone, Cooneys bought 11 bulls from the seats at Sitz’s sale, spending \$40,000 before the day was done.

“That is not unusual for them,” explains Sitz. “Some years they pay a little more and some a little less, but that’s about average . . . And they compete on the top ones. They’re after just about every top bull.”

It’s a good practice for someone intent on refueling their herd with



top genetics each year. And it's a particularly notable practice when it's a commercial herd being supplied.

Notable because this commercial operation—Cooney Bros.—can compete with purebred breeders on the top cut. And make it pay. Straight across the scales.

Cooneys run 1,500 cows—all commercial and basically all black. The family started in the cattle business with Herefords, but Angus bulls have a 40-year history here. And although black baldies still sprinkle pastures, Cooneys have bought only Angus bulls in recent years.

Not just any Angus bulls, obviously. All are registered. All come from performance-proven herds. And all are top sellers, even in such elite company.

"They've been doing this (buying such bulls) for a number of years," says Goggins. "I remember their dad (John P. Cooney) used to go to the Green Meadows Ranch at Helena years ago. He would sit there in those days—30 years ago—and buy the very best bulls.

"They're very performance-oriented," he'll add. "They insist on bulls that have good figures as well as bone and length of rib—they're very touchy about that length of rib. And, of course, bulls must have some muscle to suit Cooneys. They've never given on muscle. They've never gone for the new look. If bulls are long and thick, Cooneys want 'em. They don't really care how tall they might be."

#### **Stick to basics**

Cooneys may not concern themselves with hip height, but they do

search for big, growthy cattle. They stick to basics. In fact, to listen to Bob Cooney or his son John (who does much of the bull buying now), the task of selecting bulls seems relatively easy. Straightforward, at least.

Cooneys find Angus breeders with a good track record—a solid reputation and solid records—then set their sights on the biggest bulls they can find. To them, that means length and muscle.

And once they make up their minds which bulls suit their needs, they bid competitively, usually taking their picks home.

"They don't spend their time standing around drinking coffee and visiting at a sale," observes Goggins. "They spend all their time in the pens and really do their homework. They are ready to buy when the sale starts—they know just exactly which ones they want or don't want. I don't think they make any decisions in the ring, they make all of them in the pens."

Bulls selected by Cooneys may not always head the sale's tally, but they are often high on the list (at Sitz's, or Jorgensen Angus, Ideal, S.D., or other sales), even if purebred breeders crowd the stands. They have paid as much as \$7,200 for a bull, and have signaled many \$5,000 bids. All for yearlings or 2-year-olds. And all for use on commercial cows.

Is such spending justified? Bob will eliminate any doubts quickly. To him, it's quite simple—you get the best by using the best.

Better genetics have paid off in Cooney pastures in pounds, he emphasizes. Even without implants or growth stimulants (they implanted steer calves with Ralgro this year for the first time, but do not plan to continue), average weaning weights have topped 500 lb.

What's more, Cooneys command a premium for their calves. For 12 consecutive years, a Nebraska feeder paid top price for the cattle (sight unseen) straight off the cows with a



*With the Crazy Mountains as a backdrop, 1,500 commercial Angus cows graze Cooney Bros. pastures, one of which spans 20,000 acres.*



two percent shrink built in. This year another feeder, determined to buy the calves, contracted them at 70 cents early in the summer.

### **An invaluable reputation**

John credits part of this strong demand for the calves to the reputation Cooneys have built by continually buying top bulls. Cattlemen such as Sitz, Goggins and others are aware of the genetics in this herd. And because the calves continue to perform well once they leave Cooney pastures, repeat buyers are even more anxious to bid on the cattle.

Goggins has observed the same and has fed the calves himself a few years. "Cooney cattle will feed and convert better than most crossbreds. They're straightbreds and I don't think there are hardly any crossbreds that will stay with them."

Cooneys have also capitalized on the power of these calves for the past few years by selling about 30 bulls. A neighbor impressed with Cooneys' herd pays them one and a half times their steer price (including premium) for the bull calves at weaning; Cooneys keep the top calves as bulls when castrating at branding time.

The female counterparts to these calves can't be ignored either—in fact Cooneys' greatest return on their bull investment may be in their replacement females.

The group of 230 replacement heifers that will calve next spring rivals any set of registered heifers in the state. They are big, rangy, uniform cattle. Most importantly, they produce. At

least their predecessors have done so.

Generally, cows calve at Cooney Bros. within a 20-day period. In fact, most calves are born within the first two weeks of the late-March through May calving season, says Bob. Nearly the entire herd (1,200 to 1,300 mature cows) will calve within the first month, yet bulls run with the cows for several months each summer.

### **High fertility, no excuses**

All cows calve unassisted, but the story is a little different for first-calf heifers. Cooneys watch them round-the-clock, penning the heaviest springers each night and pulling many calves. They believe firmly in research which shows the advantages of pulling those calves at first sign of trouble to speed recovery and rebreeding among first-calvers. And as indicated by the schedule maintained in Cooneys' mature cow herd, the practice seems to work.

Clearly, superior management complements the top genetics in Cooneys' operation. In fact, Cooneys have established equally strong reputations as managers and bull buyers.

And again, they stick to basics. Most culling is done right after calving season. All dry cows are sold then, including both open cows and those that lose their calves. Cooneys also mouth mature cows to eliminate the oldest cows, and they will make note of cows that wean extremely light calves (although no individual weights are taken). Otherwise, all cows that continue to produce stay in the herd.

Replacement heifers are selected on size. Each year, the entire heifer calf

crop is wintered in a feedlot, then the 230 to 250 biggest are kept to enter the herd. (This year, though, all heifers were sold at weaning, a decision based on range conditions.)

"We keep the biggest ones," says Bob. "We cut out the top end, I hope. Then we'll go through them again in August after they're bred and cull 10 of the smallest ones."

By keeping the largest heifers annually, Cooneys select (without any individual or adjusted weight records) for calves out of early-calving cows as well as for growthy calves.

Heifers are bred to calve earlier than the cow herd. For the first half of the breeding season, bulls are turned in with the heifers while they are still confined and on some grain. Groups of four or five yearling bulls are turned in with the entire group, then rotated every few days because they breed hard in such a situation where heifers are on a high plane of nutrition and cycling well.

This intensive breeding scheme works well—heifers calve in a tight season, too—and the practice spills over from sheep management. The Cooney Bros. partnership includes some 2,500 ewes now (Frank heads up the sheep operation), and at one time 12,000 ewes ran on the ranch.

### **Sheep history pays**

"Sheep put cattle in this country," says Bob. "They made it possible for ranchers to afford cattle."

And in the process, it seems, sheep made better managers out of ranchers.

"Cooneys are really good operators and good cattlemen," summarizes Sitz. "Of course they're old sheepmen and people that were good sheepmen make excellent cattlemen."

Goggins agrees. "The sheep business demands attention to detail."

Attention to detail may be the key. From range management (some pastures span 20,000 acres) to genetics, these folks are good managers. They are committed.

Bob, Frank and Bill own the cattle, sheep and land in the Cooney Bros. partnership. And the next generation of Bob's family plan to carry on. Bob and Loraine's son John (and wife Mary) and son-in-law Gordon Nash (and wife Leta) are active in the ranch operation.

Each of them knows the land and the cattle business. From buying bulls to culling cows, they stick to the basics and keep things simple. They use the best to produce the best. And make it pay.

**AJ**