



# PROOF POSITIVE

*Ken Stielow strives for predictability in his beefproduct.*

*Story and photos by Troy Smith*

**“It** took some really tough ol’ boys to fence this country,” muses Ken Stielow. His part of Kansas must have seemed formidable to settlers of a century ago. It’s an area where the state’s famed wheat fields give way to rugged hills covered with grama and buffalo grasses. Limestone outcroppings jut from steep banks that rim the grassy valleys.

Limestone formations lie anywhere from a few inches to a few feet beneath the central Kansas sod. The limestone once served as building material for foundations and walls of houses, barns and businesses. It was also a source of posts for the fences those “tough ol’ boys” built.

Stone fence posts still dominate the landscape near Stielow’s hometown of Paradise— a name that suggests great esteem for the area by those who settled it.

Although well settled by the time of his arrival, Stielow’s grandfather liked the country well enough. A skilled stone mason, the German immigrant may have come to Russell, Kan. to ply that trade, but his desire for land and livestock led him to Paradise. Grandfather Stielow purchased land and raised sheep, horses and cattle. A son, Frank, took over the operation in 1945.

Frank’s own son, Ken, didn’t hurry home following graduation from college in 1969. Instead, the young animal science graduate stayed on as a farm manager for the Kansas State University Extension program. But in 1975 Ken returned to Paradise and the family’s Bar S Ranch.

Operating on a little more than 6,000 acres, Ken Stielow manages the ranch’s 400-head cow herd, plus a growing feedlot. Up to 800 feeders are purchased each year and backgrounded along with the home-raised calves. Farming interests include 1,100 acres of wheat, 200 acres of milo and some 400 acres of sorghum forage.

“If you stay in one place very long, you have to decide what the area’s advantages are,” says Stielow. “Here it is wheat, but also, for us, cattle.”

**Black-hided cattle** have dominated the Stielow herd since the late ‘30s. Crossbreeding was once used extensively, but recent years have brought greater emphasis on straight Angus genetics. The late ‘70s saw Stielow start buying a few purebred Angus cows. Today, the registered herd numbers 150 head.

“We abandoned the crossbreeding program and decided to stick with Angus to accomplish what we wanted to do,” Stielow explains. “We have been and still are trying to concentrate on moderation. Using EPDs (expected progeny differences) to select Angus genetics, we’ve developed higher levels of predictability and consistency. We can raise highly acceptable feeder cattle and there is a ready market for straight black females as replacements.

There also exists a good market for Bar S Ranch Angus bulls. Stielow has been selling a few bulls locally during recent years. In 1991 they saw their first production sale, with 40 Angus yearlings offered.

**Making a big splash** as a purebred breeder is not something Ken Stielow has on his agenda. He insists that his is a commercial cow outfit, with a few registered cows. His real

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*(above) The North Central Kansas area is known for its stone fence posts and braces like this one shown on Stielow’s ranch. Early settlers cut the posts from the limestone rock formations that lie from a few inches to a few feet beneath the prairie.*

*Ken Stielow with spring-calving Angus cows at Bar S Ranch.*



goal is to breed cattle that display acceptable performance and produce a beef product of exceptional quality. Extensive use of artificial insemination, comprehensive recordkeeping and progeny testing are Stielow's tools.

"We give every cow a chance to be bred through AI says Stielow. "And our AI conception rate averages about 70 percent."

Stielow keeps careful records, documenting birth and weaning weights plus feedlot performance as the cattle make their way through the finishing phase. But the thing that sets

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### *Thirteen bulls listed in the Angus Sire Summary's Carcass Evaluation earned their place as a result of data collected on Stielow cattle.*

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Stielow apart from most producers is his insatiable appetite for carcass information on the cattle he raises.

"You can try to sell the concept that Angus steers produce higher quality carcasses for just so long," Stielow says. "Then you have to prove it. That's why we started collecting carcass data, beginning with our 1987 calf crop. Back then, there was very little information relating to carcass traits."

Stielow's cattle are finished at 37 Land & Cattle Company, owned by Richard Waller of Holdrege, Neb. The identity of each animal is maintained through the feedlot and into the packing house where American Angus Association personnel collect data for carcass weight, ribeye area, fat thickness and marbling. For the past two years, John Stowell, who heads the Denver office for the Certified Angus Beef program, has worked with Stielow and Waller collecting data.

"Rich Waller lets us know when steers are going to slaughter, so we can go to the plant and gather data" explains Stowell. "We compile that information by sire groups and run it through the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHR) program. The result is a carcass evaluation for the sires featuring EPDs for carcass weight, marbling and ribeye area."

According to Stowell, 13 of the bulls listed in the Angus sire summary's carcass evaluation earned their place as a result of data collected on Stielow cattle. Of course most are AI sires, but

some of Stielow's clean-up bulls rank among the top 10 for specific carcass traits.

**Stielow says the quest** for bonafide carcass EPDs with accuracy is a long, slow process. Still, he believes it is worth the work and wait to be able to breed predictable cattle.

"Certified Angus Beef is a market that a lot of people would like to go after," Stielow says. The problem for most people shooting for CAB, is the lack of predictability in their cattle. Out of most sets of black cattle that meet CAB's visual criteria, fewer than 20 percent qualify after slaughter. If we can get the right cows, and breed them to a bull that is a highly predictable sire of CAB qualifiers, then we should be producing a product of consistent quality and realize the premiums quality can demand."

However, Stielow says that CAB market might not be for everyone. He says he has tested some bulls that have not sired a high percentage of CAB qualified cattle. Those bulls did sire calves that yielded well and graded Choice. And that isn't bad.

"If you can produce steers with 12.75-square-inch ribeyes and sufficient marbling, and if you can do that consistently with predictability, that's terrific," adds Stielow. "We might not want everyone producing CAB. We might not want everyone producing 18-square-inch ribeyes. We do want to eliminate the undesirables. So shouldn't we eliminate the sires of undesirable calves?"

**Stielow says the packing industry's pricing system** is still rooted in 19th century. He believes today's producers should realize a premium from the sale of superior carcasses. Due to the increasing predictability of his cattle, Stielow is doing just that.

During the last year, a number of Angus breeders have contacted Stielow, wanting him to test their bulls. Consequently, he does have the opportunity to use semen from a variety of bulls. What Stielow doesn't understand is why so few producers are working at gathering more carcass data on their cattle.

"I guess some breeders are afraid to try, fearing they have little to win and everything lose," says Stielow. "But I think they had better identify any bull that sires sorry carcass cattle, and do it before they decide to save a hundred of his heifers. If the industry had concentrated as much on carcass data collection as it has on genetic engineering, we would already know what carcass traits are prevalent in various bloodlines. We have fallen behind and it's time to catch up."

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