



*Marian Nolan and her father, Richard Christy, have built a strong Angus seedstock and commercial beef business in western Kansas.*

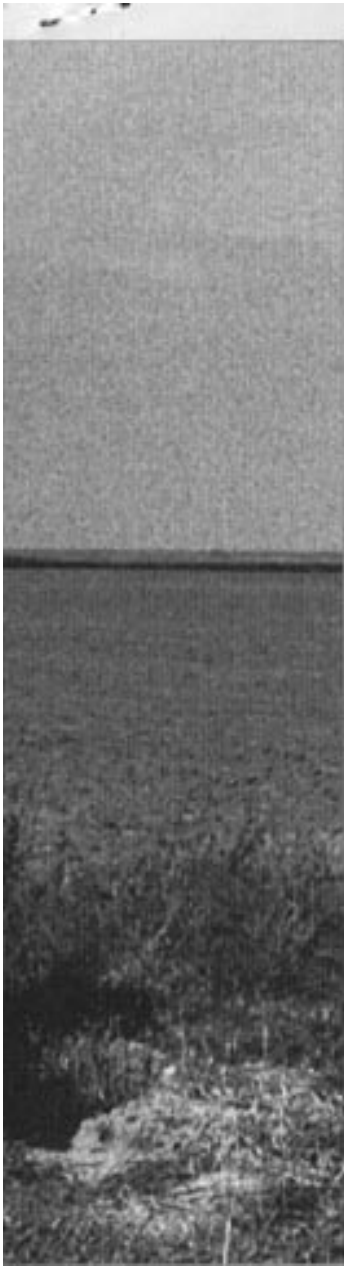
# Quality on the Platter Starts with Quality on the Hoof

**This is the motto and goal at Zanobia Angus Ranch in Kansas.**

*by Troy Smith*

“THIS IS FEEDLOT COUNTRY,” says Marian Nolan, “and that fact colors our perspective. There’s nothing unique about our philosophy but I’m afraid that too many seedstock producers still are out of touch with the feeding segment of the cattle industry”

For this native Kansan and her family, designing a breeding program that addresses production on the ranch and in the feedlot involves four G-words: genetics, growth, gain and grade. The fourth point of their motto goes beyond daily gain and feed conversion to consider



TIMOTHY SMITH PHOTO

the packer and ultimately, the consumer. Marian believes quality on the platter starts with quality on the hoof.

Marian and her husband, Bill Nolan, like to think it starts at Zanobia Angus. Several miles north of Scott City, Kan., stands a sign bearing that name. It marks the turn to where the couple headquarters the registered and commercial Angus herds shared with Marian's father, Richard Christy. Even if they deny any singular claim to fame, that exotic-sounding name, their individual backgrounds, plus the location and development of the family



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*This Zanobia Angus cow-calf pair meets all production goals: genetics, growth, gain and grade.*

business make a story good for the telling. There’s plenty of history here.

Not far from the Christy-Nolan operation are the ruins of El Quartejejo. The only known Native American pueblo to have existed in Kansas, the communal village was last inhabited some 300 years ago. Scott County State Park now occupies the site where those inhabitants once quarried stone and built their ancient village. The park neighbors Zanobia Angus grazing land humorously dubbed, “the goat ranch.” Now 82 years old, Richard Christy was just a youngster when his father bought the place located about 18 miles northwest of the Christy Farm.

“When my dad took Mother to see it for the first time,” Richard remembers, “she said it looked like it was only fit for goats. It’s been ‘the goat ranch’ ever since.”

Its rough hills and ragged creek bottoms challenge a four-

wheel-drive vehicle, but the ranch’s short grama and buffalo grass proved to be an asset to the Christy operation. It allowed for the building of a cow herd that’s been straightbred Angus since 1928. Papered cattle numbered among the Christy herd through the years, but it wasn’t until 1985 that Zanobia Angus took an aggressive approach to the seedstock business. Adopting the name of the area’s long-gone country post office, the Christy-Nolan Family is keeping Zanobia on the map.

The ranch’s rugged terrain offers marked contrast to the farm’s level to gently rolling fields of wheat, milo and irrigated corn. Today, Bill Nolan manages the 2,500 crop acres, but how did a Mississippi-born, engineering graduate of West Point become a Kansas farmer?

“It wasn’t planned,” says Marian, who met Bill while she too was a cadet at West Point. “I chose to come back to Kansas

State University as a pre-veterinary medicine major, but I quit when Bill proposed. He served five years in the Army and during most of that time we were at Fort Hood, Texas.”

Marian says her sister and brother-in-law already were farming with her dad. Bill had no background in agriculture anyway, so the Nolans never even considered joining the operation. But changes back at the farm coincided with Bill’s completion of military service in 1984.

“My sister’s family chose to leave the operation and Bill suggested we give it a try,” explains Marian. “He thought it would be a challenge he would like. Dad liked Bill’s lack of preconceived ideas on farming. I think he figured he could train Bill to do things his way.”

Richard Christy says his son-in-law approached farming in an engineer’s analytical fashion and it became his primary

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interest. Bill liked the older man's innovative no-tillage methods and the pair went on to develop a successful cropping rotation for their dryland acreage. Their three-year succession of wheat, stubble-drilled milo and fallow will yield two crops in three years instead of the area's traditional wheat-fallow rotation that yields two in four.

Richard still serves as a sounding board and mentor on crop matters, and he is primary counsel to Marian whose main responsibility is the cattle. His sage advice is to remember that the cattle business boils down to pounds times price. Together, they are selecting for thickness and rapid growth to get the pounds, and quality to boost the price.

Striving for low maintenance females, Marian manages 75 registered cows and a commercial herd of 230 head. All are treated alike and the same selection criteria apply to both. She says frame 6.5 to 7 is plenty big enough for western Kansas resources. They also stress volume in their females and the mature cows weigh an average of 1,350 pounds.

The cows summer on native, short-grass range and winter on corn stalks plus protein supplement. The level of protein is increased and some silage is fed prior to the artificial insemination (AI) season which Marian squeezes into Bill's crop planting schedule.

"He's a really good AI technician and we normally see close to 70 percent conception," says Marian. "We breed heifers to start calving Feb. 15 and cows for March 1. We usually AI about two-thirds of the cows. We don't even try to AI anything that calved after mid-April."

Marian says October weaning finds calves weighing



*Marian and Bill Nolan with their sons, Richard and Rane, carry on her father's ranching and farming tradition.*

close to 700 pounds. About 20 bulls are chosen for development at home. She says she hasn't identified the ideal ration yet, but the mix of corn silage, ground milo and protein pellets is working well. Shooting for 3 pounds of gain and plenty of skeletal growth, Marian says the bulls will weigh 1,200 pounds or so by April and May when most of their private treaty sales take place. Replacement heifers are grown on a similar ration and usually weigh close to 1,000 pounds by breeding season.

Encouraging feedback from bull customers and the performance of their own fed cattle indicate that Zanobia selection criteria are on target. Performance heads the list, followed closely by maternal strength. Disposition is important too, since Marian often handles the cattle alone. She says Hi Spade and Valedictorian are two prominent bloodlines that really seem to fill the bill. In fact, their main herd sire is Hoff Dakota, a Valedictorian son.

"He stamps out uniform

calves and produces some really good heifers," Marian says. "We also use High Expectation (a Valiant son) and we believe he'll prove to be a good carcass sire."

This cattewoman is careful not to discount the importance of easy-keeping, good producing females, but she is determinedly focused on how their calves do in the feedlot and beyond. With the same genetics at work, the commercial herd tests the Zanobia selection process through retained ownership of the calves.

"Most of our customers sell calves at weaning time, so we have to be concerned about weaning weight, and we emphasize yearling weight to get rapid growth in the feedlot. By feeding our own cattle and noting which sires and dams produce calves that gain efficiently and quickly, we're breeding for more consistent performance," says Marian. "Our most recent group of steers gained right at 4 pounds per day. Slaughtered at 14 months of age, their pay weight was 1,245 pounds and 80 percent graded Choice."

Marian hasn't ignored carcass traits either, and pursues carcass data on fed cattle. She uses carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs), but does it with caution. She remains concerned about low accuracies but believes more data from more progeny will improve the usefulness of carcass trait numbers.

"We've also learned that environment and management during the feeding phase greatly influence carcass quality," she says. "We've seen some measurable differences from year to year among cattle that came from the same cows and the same related sires. Weather, rations, implants—all of those things make a difference, so it's important to have cattle fed by a good manager."

Marian heaps high praise on Craig Duff, who feeds Zanobia cattle at Kansas Feed Yards near Scott City. She appreciates his willingness to sit down and talk about the best way to handle, feed and market the cattle they put under his care. Duff has been helpful in gathering individual weights and performance information that make evaluation of sires and dams possible.

Through evaluation of feedlot performance, the Christy-Nolan Family strives to shorten the time between conception and consumption. And by increasing their emphasis on carcass traits, Zanobia Angus is targeting cattle genetically programmed to deliver consistent quality while efficiently reaching market weights at 12 to 14 months of age.

Marian says they won't stop pushing for performance. She believes her dad is right. The cattle business boils down to pounds times price.

