



# Competition, Change & Chaos

by Barbara LaBarbara

**G**ood cows, change, competition and chaos have put Alderhurst Farm on the map.

A small farm located 40 miles northeast of Seattle, Wash., Alderhurst has become a mighty force in the Angus industry. Even though there are only 30 cows on 21 acres, some of the winningest heifers have called this tiny place home.

James and Elsie Covey, owners of Alderhurst, embarked into the Angus business 20 years ago. A six-acre farm in Redmond, Wash., was home to them and their four children who were just starting in 4-H.

Their two daughters were showing horses which held no interest for the boys. James bought each boy a registered Angus heifer to teach them the joy and responsibility of owning an animal.

The herd grew and 4-H became a major family activity. Even though Elsie knew nothing about cattle she learned and soon became a 4-H leader. She says they all enjoyed their time in 4-H.

When the boys went off to college, James was flying his own small airplane to work as an Advance Systems Engineer and Lightning Expert. By this time they had moved to a larger farm near Snohomish, Wash.

Elsie was left with an empty house and a corral full of cattle. So began her full-time farmer career.

"Most of my cows are young, in production and doing well," Elsie says. "I haven't culled any cows for three years because they make wonderful recipients."

She does extensive artificial insemination and embryo work. She raises her own replacements through the embryo program. There are three members of the original cow family still in the herd that are 10 years old and go back to the Erica line.

"I usually breed for January, February, or March calves," Elsie says. "I do get a few September calves because they are popular with 4-H members. One thing I don't like is November and December calves because that is flood time here."

Elsie's herd is enrolled in the AHIR performance program. Growth and weight per day of age (WDA) are the two most important things in her program.

She is producing a good product; one that is efficient, healthy, sound and correct. Her cattle have growth potential and quiet personalities.

When she recently sent a bull calf to test with a 228 day weaning weight of 935 pounds she said, "I just couldn't

believe it so I weighed him three times. He is an Excitement calf and he is exciting!"

Two donor cows Elsie owns are the famous Piney (Miss Supreme Pine 8405) and Franco (Thomas Miss Franco). Piney's impressive show resume includes several grand and reserve grand championships.

FFF Diablo Suzie, a daughter of Piney, is one of the winningest heifers on the show circuit today. Her record includes grand champion female at the Illinois and Indiana State Fairs, the Western National Angus Futurity, American Royal, Mid-South Fair in Tennessee and reserve grand champion heifer at the All-American Futurity in Louisville. Elsie sold her as an embryo to Lori Franklin from Colorado. A sister to Suzie, Whitestone Lynnette, was the reserve junior heifer calf champion at the Roll of Victory 1989.

Suzie's popularity has made marketing easy for Elsie. Most of her calves and embryos are sold privately.

"People working together and supporting each other is the biggest benefit of being in the cattle business," says Elsie, who is active in many organizations that promote Angus.



*Elsie Covey and her top cow, "Piney."*

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Success at Alderhurst is a result of foresight. When Elsie bought Franco, she knew that was the one that would make a difference in her herd. She also knew Franco could not do it alone. She uses selective breeding and does not always follow the trends. She feels records are there to be used and she uses them to the best of her advantage.

Foresight also saved her herd from the devastating floods that hit Washington in November 1990.

Thanksgiving morning the Covey's woke to a driving rain that was adding to the already swollen Snohomish River located only 25 feet from their back door.

By 8 a.m. they had their first load of cattle hauled to higher ground. The river was rising rapidly and they were afraid they would not get all of the cattle out. At 4 p.m. when they returned from rescuing the last load, the water was over the road, which leads three-quarters of a mile to their house. The board fence that lines the road was gone.

In 24 hours the Covey's had received 9 inches of rain accompanied by a "pineapple express" or warm wind that

melted the early snows in the mountains.

There are three rivers that convene two miles above the Covey farm. An island between their house and the river serves as a buffer zone and is credited for saving the Covey home, the only thing that was saved.

There was 8 feet of water in an outer garage; 3 feet in the garage next to the house and in the barn. Their son lives in the guest house and lost everything in the water that inundated it. Water was up to the front porch of the Covey home.

James' airplane and all of the farm equipment were under water. All of their vehicles were totaled. Two saw mills on the property were completely destroyed and all of the stockpiled logs were gone.

They hauled water to use and drink because their well was damaged. Lawn mowers, show equipment, shovels — everything was damaged or lost. Two freezers full of meat floated like rubber ducks. All of the contents were destroyed.

"When the water receded it left this awful mud," Elsie says. "I don't think anyone can imagine what it was like.

"There was silt on the pastures. We

had silage and hay from the dairy farms up stream from us. There is a sewer transfer station above us, so we had potential health problems. We had to wait for a cleaning rain to make sure the pastures were alright before I let the cattle out."

**Looking ahead** Elsie says at her age she should be thinking of retiring but doesn't know what she would do without a cow in the backyard to talk to.

"Actually, I enjoy what I do. I have as good of cattle as anybody and I have a lot of satisfied customers. There's the reward for it all," says Elsie.

The Snohomish River has returned to its banks and quiet gentleness once again. Life at the Alderhurst Farm goes on. Elsie will pick up the pieces and continue her quest to raise productive Angus cattle, knowing all the while that changes are just around the bend.

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