

# Know Your Rancher

**T**hink you need an agriculture background to start a successful ranch? Try telling that to Bob McClaren, owner of 44 Farms — the largest registered-Angus herd in Texas and the fourth largest in the United States.

McClaren is, in all actuality, a fourth-generation rancher. He grew up in a Dallas suburb, yet still read the *Angus Journal* and spent much time at his grandparents' home and ranch in Cameron. At the time, McClaren says, his father strongly tried to persuade him away from thoughts of an agriculture career by telling him it was not a desirable occupation.

"He reminded me often of how hard it was for his parents to make a living," McClaren says.

So McClaren went to law school instead and practiced in Dallas. In 1989, he joined McLane Co. in Temple, Texas, where his uncle, Drayton McLane, led one of the nation's largest grocery distribution foodservice companies. After several years, McLane asked McClaren to take on the position of president of business operations for the Houston Astros Baseball Club.

Most ranchers aren't also the campaign leaders for Minute Maid Park in Houston, either. After 10 years with the Houston Astros, his role turned into consultation. He helped form a television joint venture between the Astros and the Houston Rockets basketball team. Ultimately, McClaren says, in his heart of hearts, he loved agriculture and wanted to ranch.

S.W. McClaren, Bob's great-grandfather, started the ranch. He raised many crops upon moving to Cameron, but started branding cattle with the 44 brand in 1909. McClaren explains that the couple-thousand-acre ranch was split between the several children in his grandparents' generation. It remained split until he and his sister decided to buy the separate parts and put it back together.

## A different business venture

With extensive business experience, McClaren says he wanted to focus on a fresh, new approach for the family ranch.

"I was not a believer that eared cattle were the only way to go. The research I had done said to go with Angus, and the cattle have adapted very well to the environment," he explains.

The marbling premiums were the first indication that Angus was the right fit when he started in the seedstock business in 2002 with 70 head.

"We wanted to be part of the solution to help cattle producers be successful. We have good-quality Angus genetics to help producers get paid for their hard work," he adds.



► Bob McClaren, left, and James Burks both brought outside experience to the ranch and learned the agriculture aspects together.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF 44 FARMS

**Largest registered-Angus herd in Texas increases confidence of consumers.**

by **Kasey Brown**, associate editor

44 Farms has grown considerably in size. In 2014, they sold 1,295 registered-Angus bulls and several hundred registered- and commercial-Angus females, McClaren says. To sell that many cattle, focused genetic selection is necessary. McClaren says emphasis is placed on maternal characteristics like calving ease, but adds that equal emphasis is placed on performance traits like growth and carcass quality.

All registered cattle are genetically profiled with a high-density (HD) 50K test, and the commercial cattle get tested with GeneMax® Focus™.

“If you use these tools, it really makes this business easier,” McClaren emphasizes.

“We think these tools pay for themselves by making our customers and us more profitable. Instead of running from technology, we encourage our customers to use it.”

### Culture

McClaren attributes the operation’s growth and success to his employees and the culture of the operation. Like him, General Manager James Burks didn’t grow up in agriculture, but always had the lifelong passion to work in ag. McClaren explains that Burks had a work background in sporting goods.

They learned the agriculture aspects together, and now McClaren quips that Burks



► **Left:** McClaren says they started the 44 Steaks branded-beef program to show producers that their Angus genetics really work.

► **Below:** 44 Farms has an open-gate policy, so consumers can better understand their operation.

## 35 Keys to Success Being a Good Neighbor

is often mistaken as Gus McCrae from *Lonesome Dove*.

Burks is completely devoted to the needs of the customer — he is always working to make 44 Farms better.

Luke Jenkins, farm manager, has a background in agronomy. He maintained the athletic fields at Louisiana State University and for the New Orleans Saints and the Houston Astros — a feat to maintain live turf in a ballpark with a retractable roof.

Many of the members of the 44 Farms team do have Angus and cattle backgrounds. Doug Slattery, COO, has been in every level of the Angus business for decades. He is joined by Tracy Woods, director of herd management, and Bryan Carroll, genetics manager, who together provide 44 Farms’ management firepower. The team’s diverse

experience and knowledge — whether agricultural or not — has helped create a strong employee culture with fresh ideas.

McClaren notes that culture revolves around producing a great product and taking care of the customer.

“We make sure to talk with our customers and listen intently. We want to know their challenges and goals. We aim to help them meet those goals through service, kindness and friendship,” he adds. “To do this, we bring on the right people who see our business as one of service.”

### Invest in the story

McClaren asks all of the employees — and customers — to invest in the story. The farm has an intensive system to train employees and cooperator herds on how 44 Farms

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**— Bob McClaren**



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functions. McClaren's business experience has shown that people do business with people, not big companies. Because of this, 44 Farms has a "Know Your Rancher™" policy. The farm gates are always open.

The story of the ranch and Know Your Rancher approach to consumers helps market the 44 Farms branded-beef program, but also serves as a connection to the broader production agriculture community. 44 Farms sits in the middle of Dallas, San Antonio and Houston, and is at the center of 18 million people, McClaren says.

The 44 Farms all-natural branded-beef program started in 2012 online.

"It's a great story of business relationships," McClaren says. When it was launched, a

few steaks were sold online, and the website told the story of 44 Farms and the open-gate culture. The success of the branded-beef program began when two separate Houston chefs approached McClaren looking for local product. McClaren notes that the whole steak program is based upon knowing the cattle and the rancher, and because of this, a good working relationship was built with both chefs, and foodservice was off and running.

Word spread, and demand for the steaks grew. The demand for local product was there, but the idea stemmed from the high-quality carcass data of their calves fed in Hereford, Texas. Of the first crop of fed calves, 33% made the Prime quality grade, and the remainder were USDA Choice. The second calf crop earned 63% Prime, and the remainder were Choice. The quality, along with the story, certainly helps build demand.

Yet how do they supply 44 Farms Steaks?

44 Farms buys calves back from bull customers if the calves are guaranteed 50% 44 Farms genetics, and only if certain management practices are met. McClaren explains the program helps everyone achieve common goals of quality beef through sharing information like breeding strategies, genetics and expected progeny differences (EPDs), health protocols, nutrition planning, weaning procedures, feedlot data and more.

It's a symbiotic relationship. 44 Farms helps their customers by helping increase quality and providing a market for their customers' calves. In turn, 44 Farms gets enough high-quality cattle for their 44 Farms Steaks brand.

Additionally, customers in the calf buyback program must meet the requirements of the 44 Farms RightWay™ program, which

include animal health and welfare protocols. These commonsense protocols give the calves the best chance of qualifying for the 44 Steaks program, he says. RightWay helps ensure good records are kept on weights and measurements, vaccinations, creep feed and backgrounding. No growth hormones or antibiotics are allowed in the program.

“Of course, we’ll treat a sick calf with antibiotics, but they can’t qualify for the program,” he explains.

While there is a quality component to this branded-beef program, McClaren emphasizes that it is not in direct competition with the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

“They are the king of the hill,” he acknowledges. “They have a great team, and they are the best at what they do, second to none. For me, the success of the Angus breed has been powered to a great extent

## Replacement-heifer program

As another customer service, 44 Farms recently launched 44 NEXT, a replacement-heifer program. It is designed to provide breeders with top-quality, source-verified replacement heifers with known genetics bred to predictable 44 Farms high-calving-ease bulls. The calves out of these heifers are eligible for the 44 Farms Feeder Calf Buyback program.

by the leadership of CAB. Our program is a Texas product and allows us to really tell the local story. We got started in branded-beef products to show producers that our Angus genetics really work.”

The branded-beef program also includes some value-added products, like hot dogs and beef jerky. The jerky uses smoked Prime and Choice trimmings. The hot dogs use the trim from Prime and Choice carcasses, and include no nitrates. McClaren grins and says the hot dogs are his favorite.

“I’ve been in baseball for 10 years, and I’ve had a lot of hot dogs, and these are so good,” he says. “The concept of conception to the plate sparked the idea to provide as many products as we can.”

This outside business experience has proven to be beneficial in the agriculture business. Plenty of experience as a consumer helps shape decisions as a producer. These fresh ideas, combined with passion and hard work have helped launch Texas’ largest Angus herd.

