

Adapted to the Heights

Shamrock Angus Ranch crowned for Commitment to Excellence.

Story & photos by Steve Suther

West of Laramie, Wyo., the arid High Plains meet the Snowy Range Mountains. Ranchers here learn from nature, or they don't stay long. Gary and Gloria Parker have been in the registered Angus business in this high, dry valley for 15 years.

Surviving would never be enough for the Parkers, however. They and their cattle adapted so well as to thrive. Their seedstock have helped supply genetics for the growing *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. Shamrock Angus Ranch has grown to 700 cows and annual sales of 250 altitude-tested bulls, putting deep roots into these foothills.

The Parkers have devoted themselves to improving the Angus breed and making their cattle work for everyone, from high-country bull customers to consumers. That's why Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) named them 2003 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winners at the CAB annual conference in Cleveland, Ohio, Aug. 23.

Wayne Smith, manager of Hergert Feeding Co. (HFC), Mitchell, Neb., nominated his customer for the award. Smith and HFC have the unique distinction of being runner-up CAB Quality Assurance (QA) Officer and a runner-up Feedlot Partner of the Year. Moreover, Smith won the top QA award from CAB last year, in part for helping build a producer network with Shamrock Angus.

Opportunity in Angus

The Parkers' roots run as deep in the Angus business as they do in the high country. Though Gary grew up with Herefords, he started feeding calves and commercial Angus cows 34 years ago. He jumped into the registered side in 1980 as founding managing partner with the late John Hoyt in Jolly Roger Angus Ranch, Belt, Mont. Opportunity led to an association with Stevenson-Basin Inc., Hobson, Mont., before Parker reprised his role as start-up manager

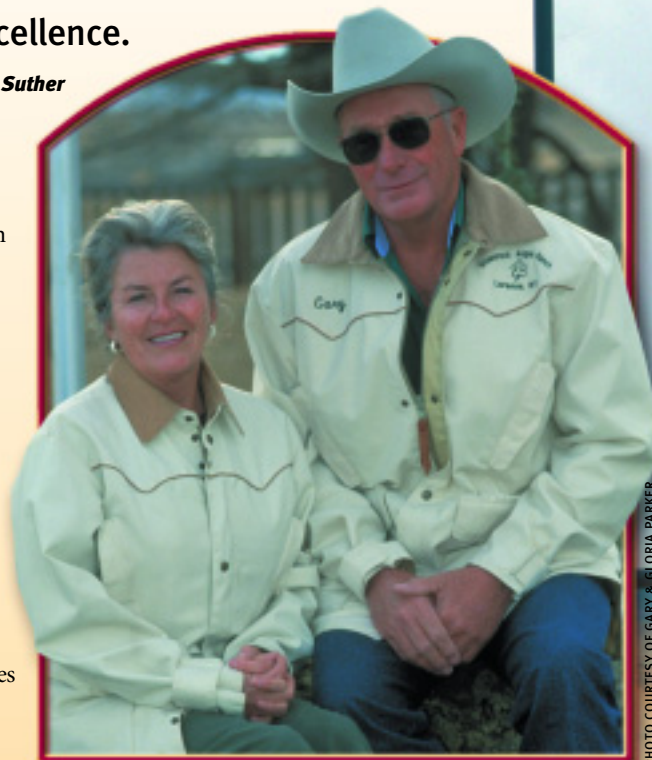


PHOTO COURTESY OF GARY & GLORIA PARKER

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in 1988 on Dave Taylor's new Angus ranch, Taylor Angus, in the Laramie Valley.

Encouraged to build his own herd along with Taylor's, Parker set out to conquer the High Mountain Disease, or "dropy," that was holding many cattle back.

Though the country was fierce and the air was thin, he refused to write off cow deaths to "harsh environment."

"Those who haven't experienced the elevation challenges in cattle don't understand how

devastating it can be," says Doug Hixon, head of the University of Wyoming (UW) animal science department. "Many ranchers have cattle genetics that are susceptible to the high-altitude or 'Brisket disease.' It's important for them to be able to go to a seedstock source and feel confident in solving the problem."

With Parker's leadership, Taylor Angus began to develop a niche for solutions, taking quality Angus to higher levels. In 1994

the current Shamrock property came up for sale and Parker wanted to strike out on his own. Taylor decided to disperse, and a select 175 of his cows served as the Shamrock foundation.

"We wouldn't have stayed here to compete with Dave, but the dispersal opened a door for us to develop this market," Parker says.

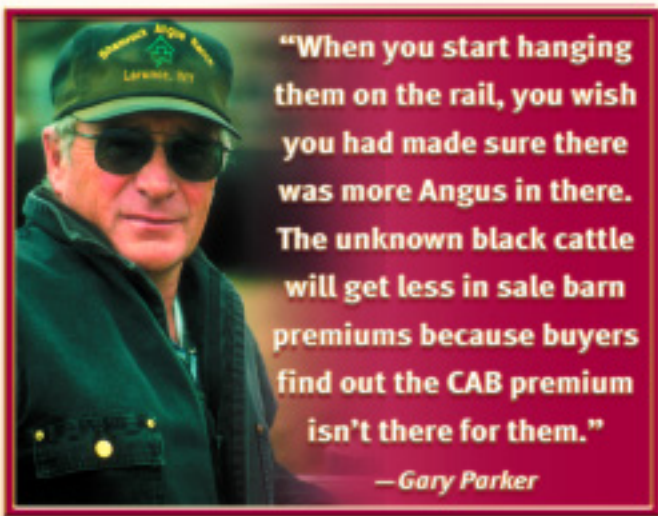
Hixon is glad he stayed. "Gary's been involved in the Wyoming Beef Cattle Improvement Association (WBCIA), twice serving three-year terms on its board," he notes. "Shamrock was our 2002 nominee for BIF (Beef Improvement Federation) Seedstock Producer of the Year. Gary knows the cattle business. He understands the importance of data to support what the cattle can do, and using that data to fine-tune his program and better serve his clientele."

A hardy herd

Today the ranch operates on 3,000 owned and 15,000 leased acres at an elevation of 7,500 feet (ft.). Three of the Parkers' five



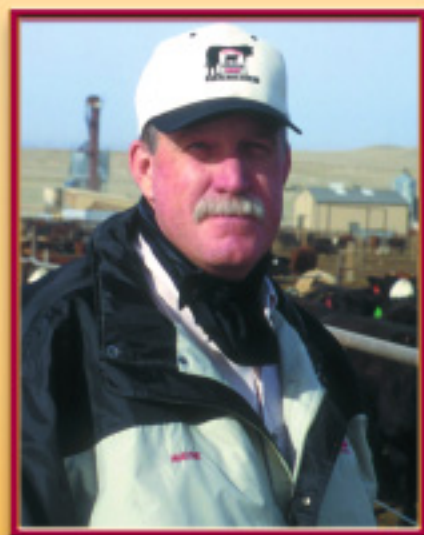
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daughters — Gerri, Roni and Kelly — are still involved in the operation.

Shamrock has developed its specialty in selling hardy Angus stock tested for pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP), the critical health issue for herds operating above 5,000 ft. They have tested more than 3,500 bulls since the early 1990s.

Shamrock cows start calving Feb. 1 and continue into early April. The later-born bulls sell as 2-year-olds and are much sought after by area commercial ranchers. Parker counsels them on how to capture the most value from their calves. That leads to talk about retained ownership or partnering with HFC, or outright sales to feedlots that



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heifers grading 100% Choice or better and 86% CAB, making a \$77-per-head premium on average.

"He helps organize loads," Smith says. "The feeding option and carcass data through CAB are his customer-service tools." Parker supports ultrasound-derived expected progeny differences (EPDs), but says he must convince "the crusty old cowboys." In 2001 Shamrock provided semen on young bulls for use in HFC cows, along with some from older bulls with both ultrasound and carcass data on progeny. Parker gets all of the harvest information. "We can show a customer some actual data," he says. "This is the way a set of calves out of this bull fed and hung on the rail. He's seen that kind of information, so there is a common reference. Then I show him the ultrasound, and he can see the numbers are starting to come together."

Parker knows producers resist new ways to look at selection. "I was with Stevensons when the changeover was coming from EBVs [estimated breeding values] to EPDs," Parker says. "I may have handed out more sire summaries than the Association for a couple of years. John Crouch and I became a little unpopular with some breeders. They didn't like the fact that their winners were negative on milk and +9 on birth weight.

"We just wanted to educate people on what the bulls really are," Parker continues. "I congratulated those [who had] great bulls to look at, but I said there will come a day when this information will be on every table. Maybe I'm doing you a favor by getting you to change your program quicker."

That sounds like the producer board member whose view Hixon appreciates.

appreciate high-quality Angus genetics.

"Gary leads by example," Smith says. "Some Angus breeders are afraid to put their cattle to the ultimate test in the feedlot and packing plant. Gary not only feeds a cross section of calves here, he encourages bull customers to feed here." That's easy when Parker can show reports like the one on a group of

"Gary will have an opinion, often a unique perspective, and he'll share it. He's not afraid of going against what might be popular," Hixon says.

Like the animal scientist, Parker appreciates data, but he says, "There's no such thing as a perfect number. We have to keep visual and number-based selection in the middle." While building the Shamrock reputation for PAP-tested bulls, Parker paid more attention to adding ribeye area than marbling. "It was hard to find balanced genetics then, and we had enough intramuscular fat," he says.

Finding a way

"In the last few years ultrasound has identified so many more of the balanced-trait bulls," Parker says. "It's easier now to include IMF in that balance while keeping some backfat for cows in our severe winters." Marbling drives premiums, he says. Steers he sold at HFC in May brought home \$77 per head in premiums. "You can have all the gain and conversion figures you want [Shamrock cattle typically exceed 4 pounds (lb.) average daily gain (ADG)], but if you don't get into the premiums there still isn't a lot of profit."

He tells customers the CAB Program works through a trickle-down effect. "When you raise your weaning weights, and the buyer gives you a nickel or dime more per hundredweight, you're getting the premium. But I tell them you aren't going to get in on the bigger premiums until you feed them yourself," Parker explains. "You have to take some of the risk to get that reward. It is too big a gamble to go from selling calves in the fall to selling all fat cattle the next year. But I tell them take the end that doesn't fit, big or light, and start that way, or just retain 25% ownership.

"Wayne [Smith] is straightforward and tells them about all the costs," Parker says. One Shamrock customer last year decided that was too high, so he fed at another lot expecting lower cost. "There was a lot that the other guy forgot to tell him, so this customer will likely go to HFC this fall," he says. If customers are more inclined to sell, Parker helps them find a buyer who appreciates the genetics, whether that is HFC or another feeder.

Most feedlots have come to value bona fide Angus genetics, Parker says. "When you start hanging them on the rail, you wish you had made sure there was more Angus in there. The unknown black cattle will get less in sale barn premiums because buyers find

out the CAB premium isn't there for them. An exotic bull may give you a 10-pound quick fix, but you will pay for it at the other end when you can't produce the information that confirms they are truly Angus-type calves that will grade."

Parker urges customers to prove genetics in a feedlot. "If our customers don't get some information gathered, they're going to end up selling at commodity beef prices. It may be too late then to start getting information — they may go out of business. So we have been pushing for the last 10 years to try to get information back on what their cattle did, at least group data."

He provides lots of management and marketing advice after the sale. "Our bull buyers are also friends," Parker says. "We get calls about anything and everything, from dogs to kids. That's the way we like it. Ninety-eight percent of our customers keep heifers, too, so we help them build their herds."

With his experience in adapting cows to the ranch, Parker doesn't advocate terminal crossing. "You need to acclimate the herd to your ranch," he emphasizes. "You can't do

that [by] always using somebody else's heifers. If everybody breeds to make a cow, the steer or bull side takes care of itself."

His opinions are as sharp as Hixon describes them. "The terminal cross is an outdated idea," Parker maintains. "We have the genetics, the outlier bulls and pedigrees, so we don't need to crossbreed, much less use composite bulls. Nobody is going to get any benefit out of that. If we want consistency in our beef, why would we do that?"

Proud of his cattle but never truly satisfied, Parker demands continual proof from his herd. The last couple of years of drought have provided a critical test, with a measure of satisfaction in the results. "Our cows have come through and showed us that kind of



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volume is what we had to have," he says. Over time, Shamrock Angus Ranch cows have become adapted to being on top of the world, bringing quality to a new level. 