

# Nontraditional Traditions



► **Left:** David (right) and Kathy Speiser met Bob Brackin (left) at a salebarn 15 years ago when he bought their calves to fill an order for a Kansas feedyard. Since then he has become a family friend and marketing contractor.

networks in recent years as the Speisers deal with day-to-day decisions on the 600-cow ranch.

They met Bob Brackin at a salebarn 15 years ago when he bought their calves to fill an order for a Kansas feedyard. Since then, he has become a family friend and marketing contractor, even helping the Speiser children learn to fit and show cattle. His connections have helped the Wyoming ranchers immeasurably.

“A relationship just kind of grows, you know,” Pep says. “Bob used to come up here with a young fellow from Fort Collins and pick up a club calf every year, and he did well, even won the reserve champion heifer at the Colorado State Fair the one year. Our kids would go along with them sometimes.”

Brackin puts in, “We have a relationship. If he says something he likes and I don’t, I tell him — and if I say here’s something I like and he don’t, he tells me.”

## Angus decisions

That’s how it’s grown, just by sharing opinions. Before long, Brackin offered to buy bulls, and he had an eye for Angus bulls.

“Most of the bull sales are in March, and that’s right in the heat of calving,” Pep says, “so I just can’t get away.”

The 2002 drought forced changes that led to more of an Angus focus by channeling genetics from two seedstock ranches. As a means to adapt, the Biddick Ranch sold the small fall-calving herd and transitioned to all spring calving. The drought made keeping replacements much more costly, so they sold those heifers and

## Chain reactions over the years guide this Wyoming Angus ranch, from high-quality people to the beef they produce.

by **Morgan Slaven**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

**A** 13,000-acre Wyoming ranch could be a kind of island, where generations learn about self-reliance and love of the land. It could also be a unique, high-quality Angus cattle operation built up by a chain of relationships beyond family, over the many years since 1870.

That’s when John Biddick and his family emigrated from England and settled along the Laramie River, north of the frontier town by that name. They built up a thriving business that daughter Mary Ethel inherited when her father passed away in the next century.

### Thicker than blood

It was she who started the unusual chain of ownership, and that began when she hired Wales Wenburg in 1938, when drought had forced him off his own farm at Fullerton, Neb. Years passed and the never-married Ms. Biddick, as she was always known, named her capable foreman as sole heir when she passed on in 1972.

Forty years later, Wenburg passed away at the age of 97, but long before that he took

steps to honor the Biddick tradition. In the 1990s, he began transferring ranch ownership to its managers, David (Pep) and Kathy Speiser. Wenburg had hired three Speiser brothers as ranch hands, and Kathy later as a summer camp cook. Two brothers moved on, but Pep earned his way to foreman, married the cook, and they have been there ever since.

“That is how it’s been from the start,” Kathy says. “The ranch has never really had any other kind of family until now.”

The land brought together people who would form lasting relationships and seek out others who wanted to join in. It wasn’t about blood, but finding the right people. The model has extended to marketing and business

► **Right:** Once they made the switch to Angus in 2002, Biddick Ranch managers have focused on quality, Pep explains. “Not just black calves, but Angus-bred calves. Anyone can just make them black. Our calves have got to be out of bulls that will throw calves that grow and grade.”

PHOTOS BY LAURA NELSON



started using the services of calf-grower feedyards Brackin knew in Colorado.

Most of the bulls since then have come from Rishel Angus Ranch at North Platte, Neb., or Pass Creek Angus at Wyola, Mont. Most of the heifers have been purchased, artificially inseminated to order, from Weller Ranch, Kadoka, S.D. Those Angus females may cost \$1,600 or more, but Pep says it evens out with selling his heifer calves and gaining a year on the calf crop. Much of the resulting Biddick herd could be managed as seedstock, but it retains the commercial focus.

Still, the switch to Angus was a big change for a ranch that favored Shorthorn cattle since the 19th century. Pep says it took some persuading to finally convince Wenburg, who was still part of the management team in those days, that it was more than a change in color. It was a move to add value.

“Not just black calves, but Angus-bred calves,” Pep stresses. “Anyone can just make them black. Our calves have got to be out of bulls that will throw calves that grow and grade.”

The young bulls from Rishel and Pass Creek, used for natural service on most of the herd, spend a few months at the Colorado growing yard to pick up condition before coming to the ranch to start work. Yes, it costs a little more, but the Speisers say it pays in keeping bulls fit throughout the summer and breed for the strict calving window of no more than 55 days.

Maintaining carcass quality in their calves means more to them than just another marketing point. The couple may retain ownership through finishing, and even when they sell, Brackin tries to get performance and carcass data back. They know firsthand the impact of high quality on the final paycheck.

The marketer helps the Speisers sort out their options.

“I go to the sales in the fall probably four times a week, and I’m on the phone talking — you know, what’s going on over here and what’s going on over there,” Brackin says. “I was always told there is no such thing



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as a dumb question, so I don’t spare the horses on asking questions.”

### Business sense

That turned up an opportunity to sell “naturally raised” calves at a premium to Oklahoma producer Robert Gray a decade ago when he was developing supplies for the new *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand Natural program that started with B3R Meats in Childress, Texas.

Another link in the marketing network is Terrill Ostrum, a Colorado-based buyer for Texas-based Crossroads Cattle Co. Brackin credits him with helping place the Biddick Ranch calves and getting feedback data. Three years ago, 550 head of mixed cattle at Mc6 Cattle Feeders in Hereford, Texas, dressed at 64% with 96% Choice, and a hearty 85% qualified for the CAB brand.

Over the years, Biddick Ranch cattle have been fed at several CAB partner yards in four states.

Pep and Kathy are the only full-time employees, so they look for more than growth, grade and phenotype. Disposition is another key, and they understand low-stress handling helps all the way to a higher-quality end product.

Calf health starts with the cow, so they worked through their local veterinarian, feedlot veterinarians and feed company to set up a thorough vaccination program and customized chelated-mineral program that satisfies local needs to boost copper and zinc.

The Speisers use CowSense® herd-management computer software that

supports accurate recordkeeping and analysis, and they’ve used AngusSource® for age and source verification, plus other marketing advantages.

When it comes to settling on a price for the Biddick Ranch calves, Brackin takes into account answers to all those questions he asks, along with the futures market, auction prices, even private contracts that he has heard about.

“Never begrudge somebody for getting a good price,” he says. “If your cattle are selling good, it means mine have a heck of a lot better chance to sell.”

From start to finish, it’s a little more complicated than in the old days.

“If you’re not business people, you can’t survive in this business now,” Kathy says. “You can’t just go on doing it like you’ve done it for a hundred years. Pep is always keeping up with the latest journals and reading everything he can get his hands on. So he knows what’s down the pike and what we need to be doing to improve things.”

Always open to new relationships, this team sees beyond just building a customer base or selling high-quality cattle: They’re building a professional level of trust. Interested buyers are always invited out to the ranch.

“The quality is there,” Brackin says. “The big thing is to say, ‘Hey, let’s go look at the cattle; you’re more than welcome to look at them anytime.’ That’s invaluable.”

Working with and learning from partners old and new helps the team challenge their own management and selling practices. They’re always open to new ideas, like those Brackin finds as the eyes and ears on the industry.

“It’s so interesting to go see other programs, and if I latch onto something that might work, then Pep and I will talk about it,” he says.

The chain of relationships that form Biddick Ranch roots keep finding new levels of support. “It seems to be a chain reaction,” Kathy reflects. “You meet somebody, and then they know somebody else and the word just gets around.”

Brackin says, “The good thing about this industry is that you can pick who you work with. You can pick the people that work with your needs in mind.”

That’s what builds deeper roots for everyone in those customized networks across the country.



**Editor’s Note:** Morgan Slaven is the spring industry information intern with Certified Angus Beef LLC.

