

Out of the Box

Box W Ranch: Where vision meets determination.

Story & photos by Julie Vrazel



Brady Chandler is living his dream at the Box W Ranch near Lipan, Texas. The first scenes played out when he was just a boy doing odd jobs for the Wilson family. Now he manages all aspects of the ranch — from the breeding program to the land.

Chandler loves the lifestyle, the hard work and the challenges every day brings.

His wife, Micah, says he finds fulfillment by implementing all the knowledge he has gathered over the years. He's always thinking about the cows.

"If you were to bust his head open, black cattle would come running out," she says with a laugh.

The Wilsons' original 400 acres, settled in 1873, has remained in the family for five generations, growing to 1,200 acres by the time Bob Wilson and his wife, Maxine, formally established Box W Ranch in 1983. Their aim was to produce quality cattle, but crossbred cows and Angus influence through bulls were producing average calves that fell short of expectations.

Meanwhile, Chandler was working long hours starting his career as a cattle broker specializing in high-quality Angus cattle, as well as a cattle health consultant. Traveling and making contacts in the industry added more knowledge of Angus cattle. So did his visits with influential people and studying the operations that had successful, proven breeding programs.

"I traveled to Wyoming, Nebraska, South

Dakota — all over the U.S., and I only bought cattle for customers that I would buy for myself," Chandler says. "If I bought something that wasn't going to help them be successful in their own operation, then they would not come back for repeat business."

But he started noticing a new trend — demand for cattle that not only had the right pedigrees but were carrying the right progeny.

Filling a need

"It was hard finding them with the genetics customers wanted in addition to being bred to a certain bull," he says. "So, I started artificially inseminating (AIing) them."

Naturally, he kept a few for the family operation, Chandler Cattle Co. That was partly to help fill orders, a program that worked so well that, along with his father, Rusty Chandler, they increased their herd of selected replacements to 300 head for four years starting in 2004, just to meet customer demand.

Then in March 2008, the dream opened. Mark Wilson, partner and son of Bob and Maxine, saw in Chandler a "perfect fit" for managing an expanded Box W Ranch.

"Brady had worked for the ranch for many years," Wilson says, "and knew the land and cattle business so well."

Chandler quickly agreed, happy to be back and glad to have the freedom to make

significant changes at the ranch.

"My goal for Box W is to produce high-quality Angus cattle with the genetic and carcass merit to reach the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] brand and all the other high Angus standards," he says. Drawing on lessons learned with cattle customers, he says, "I want to feed the hungry consumers the best steaks, so they'll keep coming back for more."

High standards

Chandler and the Wilsons keep that vision in mind in all their management strategies. That's why they AI their cattle herd and use clean-up bulls that are in the top 10% of the Angus breed.

The Box W has expanded its herd to 525 females, 410 of them purebred Angus, all on 4,500 acres. At four times its original size and scope, the ranch provides more than enough to keep head and hands busy.

"Starting out with Brady, we bought 300 first-calf heifers out of Colorado, Montana and New Mexico. These heifers calved during some cold weather," Wilson recalls. The Chandlers, along with Micah's parents, took shifts looking after them all day and night. It was a learning experience, but not one they aim to repeat at that volume.

"Of these 300 head, I knew the herd health and genetics, and how the steer mates performed on the 100 head from Montana, so I was confident in my selection," Chandler says.

"Even with our growing herd, we know the genetics behind each cow and our goal is to keep improving every year," he adds.

►Above: Brady Chandler and Mark Wilson evaluate calves on feed with Dale Moore at Cattlemen's Choice Feedyard, Gage, Okla. Feedlot and carcass data is used to cull the cow herd and set direction for areas to improve.

Before 2008 the Box W didn't have the resources to ear-tag all calves and keep accurate information. Now, each calf is tagged within a few days of hitting the ground.

To continually improve and one day increase the herd to their 1,000-head goal, Chandler and the Wilsons have high expectations of their females and bulls. The cows are their factory, working to produce the best for the ranch and consumers, Chandler explains.

"Our culling standards are high, because we expect the best from our females. Their offspring have to grade Choice or better, and the cow must breed back within the first two cycles after artificial insemination," he states.

Feedlot performance

To be sure the herd is performing to all standards, the staff compares notes with Dale Moore, owner of Cattleman's Choice Feedyard, near Gage, Okla.

Chandler sends six loads of weaned calves to Moore every fall, collecting performance and carcass data on each calf.

"We used to get basic information from the other yards, but Dale breaks it down for us in a form that is easier to understand and fits our operation," he explains. "We can look at the data in a number of different ways now — sorted by bull groups, cow families or any other way we need the information broken down."

"Brady has made some changes over the years, starting with his attention to genetics," Moore says. "The Box W cattle are grading well at a young age, and that helps us learn about them more quickly."

"Their cattle just don't give us any trouble; that's reflected in their gain and grade," he notes. "Last year, Brady sent me cattle that were younger than most would have to be to grade and perform like they did, but it's all based on their management strategies and program."

Only healthy, naturally raised calves are sent to the feedyard.

Setting the bar high

Besides having a good report card, the cows, as well as the bulls, have to look and act the part. Box W cattle have a good disposition and are structurally correct.

"They have to look good in addition to being and acting good," Chandler says.

With most of the herd bred using AI, the clean-up bulls have to look and perform at



► The crew at Box W is family-oriented and includes (from left) Carole Viotto, Leah and Mark Wilson, Brady and Micah Chandler, and Maxine and Bob Wilson. Not pictured are partner Tony Viotto and full-time employee J.A. "Choan" Perez.

similar levels, Wilson says. "This year the average \$B on our AI sires was \$65.56 and the average \$B on our 18 head of clean-up bulls was \$61.46. We have made great strides in improving our herd bulls."

The cows have a tough assignment as well, and Chandler sets rigid standards when it comes to culling.

"At the end of the day, we are determined to produce home-raised cows that can supply consumers with the tasty, flavorful beef they want,"

— Brady Chandler

"If her production record says Select, she goes. If she loses a calf, regardless if it's my fault or hers, she goes. And we eventually cull when they begin to get up in age and replace with our home-raised heifers," he explains. To make sure the herd stays in the right condition and on the right path, the people at Box W work hard and learn together along the way.

Those 300 purebred Angus heifers are now 3-year-olds with their second calf and will soon have enough data on them to determine if their progeny can meet the Box W requirements.

"We've kept a few of the offspring, but we wanted to get more data before we start selecting heifer replacements," Chandler says. "We don't want to waste our time and efforts with cattle that won't meet our goals of producing the best product for the consumer."

As he rides through the pastures checking the cattle, Chandler is happy with the progress the herd has made in such a short amount of time.

A life as well as a living

Horses are part of the daily routine at Box W, where almost everything is done horseback. The workhorses are fed first thing each morning to prepare them for their day's work.

The crew at Box W is family-oriented, consisting mainly of Brady and wife Micah, Mark and Leah Wilson and other partners Tony and Carole Viotto, as well as Bob and Maxine Wilson, and full-time employee J.A. "Choan" Perez.

Ranch projects, such as building fence and other maintenance or repairs are done by Chandler, Wilson and Perez, with Carole keeping all office work in line.

Since Chandler signed on, the Box W has built new preconditioning pens for weaning, modernized the working pens with a hydraulic chute and scales, and generally redesigned facilities as needed to minimize stress when handling cattle.

"We still drag the calves to the fire when we brand 'em," Chandler says. Doing the hard work the traditional way keeps it fun, and it's easy on the cattle.

"It's a big deal during our spring and fall work," he explains. "We hire local cowboys to help get the job done, and everyone really enjoys it."

Throughout the daily chores and projects, they keep the end product in mind.

In fact, a load of Box W heifers finished in Oklahoma made more than 40% CAB, or about twice the national average, which helped the yard gain \$50 per head in added premiums.

Pleasantly surprised that his calves did that well, Chandler says it's a good start for his plan to continually improve each year.

"We haven't been feeding at Cattleman's Choice very long, but Dale works well with us; therefore, our expectations for our next calf crop should be even better."

With a couple of years under his belt as ranch manager and partnering with Moore at Cattleman's Choice, Chandler feels good about the future.

"At the end of the day, we are determined to produce home-raised cows that can supply consumers with the tasty, flavorful beef they want," he says.

