



# Bruning, as in Nebraska

Generations of one founding family build community, Angus herd.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It's just an office, nestled in between the house and the feedlot on a southeastern Nebraska farm, but stepping inside tells a bit about the Bruning family's story.

In one corner, there's a desktop Rolodex® with all of Fred Bruning's contacts. It sits

next to the small box where every piece of machinery or equipment currently in use at Bruning Farms is indexed on a card with date of purchase, price and service schedule.

Just steps away is a flat-screen computer that his son Reiss recently used to heat-detect

heifers with mobile-synching electronic collars. Tech support could monitor from the other side of the world.

These aren't at odds with each other, but rather, they illustrate how each generation brings its own ideas and skill sets to the family ag businesses, which also include Bruning State Bank and Feedlot Fencing LLC, in addition to their cow herd and small feedlot.

The farm was once home to pigs and racehorses, too, but the animal enterprises are now squarely focused on the Angus cow herd and its progeny.

"I feel like there's so much more reliable data now than when we started in Angus," Reiss says. "We're just trying to pay more attention, keeping the total bloodlines intact and then packing on the carcass."

Like many in the area, purebred Herefords gave way to Continental breeding, followed by Angus in the 1970s. Today about one-third of the herd is still commercial, while the balance is registered.

## Following the data

Fred admits he first introduced the breed because he "gave in to peer pressure" of his



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became members of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) in 2001.

“I’d sell 40 to 50 at a time, and I couldn’t get packers to come out,” Fred says, recalling the decision to start sending loads into Kansas for harvest. It was also a way to access a quality-based grid.

“We thought we had better cattle than the average and thought we should get paid for that,” he says.

Some of those early loads showed 88% Choice and 34.3% CAB brand and Prime, which was more than double the national average at the time.

Having feedback on the carcass is just one more tool they can use to measure the cattle, and adds to the quest to always know more.

“Data doesn’t lie and, as an industry, we need to record, report and utilize it as much as possible,” Reiss says.

Information-based decision-making comes natural to Reiss, who grew up a student of Fred’s lists, hand sketches and numbers-filled, back-office white boards. Today, the cattleman uses spreadsheets and apps, and continues to bring new ideas to routine tasks. This year, they marketed their bulls via auction for the first time since his grandpa was raising Herefords.

A test of a farm couple’s relationship could be having your first Angus production sale before you say, “I do.” Reiss and his fiancé Heather Oentrich spent much of the year preparing for their Feb. 21 event.

“I didn’t like putting a value on my animals, because they’re a different value to me than to somebody else,” Reiss says. “With how much time and focus we put into it, I thought this was the way to go. Plus, I wanted [my customers] to get what they want, for the price they want it.”

From website and sale book details to preparing the animals and arranging the meal, the planning was intense, and came with a lot of opportunities to learn.

“I really mean it when I say it’s great working together,” Reiss says. “It ended up being a lot of fun.”

For Heather, it was a chance to use marketing skills she honed while earning a degree in agricultural communications at Kansas State University (K-State), where she and Reiss met while he was getting his



► Ninety-year-old Grandpa Frank Bruning, right, and his son Fred, center, run the farm in partnership with Reiss, who returned after graduating from K-State three years ago.

college roommates. He notes his dad “wasn’t too happy about it at all.”

With his first purchase of Angus females, Fred discovered the docility, calving ease and mothering ability. The family stuck with Angus because they can get everything they need in one package.

“I feel that as an industry, the most inefficient thing we can do is produce just a terminal sire or maternal sire,” Reiss says. “Our generation needs to breed for versatile efficiency.”

For him, that means narrowing high-accuracy sires based on expected progeny difference (EPD) parameters, with goals of +1 for ribeye and marbling, and limiting milk to 20-something. He follows that with phenotypic evaluation.

“If I bred strictly for good-looking sires and neglected the data, we would be missing out big on premiums,” Reiss says.

Whether they’re feeding out their own commercial cattle or buying back customers’

calves, they see firsthand the economics associated with better breeding.

Last year four truckloads of home-raised steers and heifers went 100% Choice and 17.8% Prime. The 40% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance rate is tempered by the fact that they didn’t save any replacements out of their crossbred commercial herd, so it’s more heavily weighted with Hereford and Red Angus influence than a typical year.

They try to fill the rest of their 400-head pen space by purchasing customer calves at auction. Each season they’re trying to learn more about which genetics perform from the feedlot to the rail.

“There’s a huge circle that doesn’t connect in everybody’s cattle,” Reiss says. “You can trace at least half of it back to somebody having more reliable bloodlines.”

Although they’ve always fed cattle, this idea of feeding to see their genetics in practice got a bit less complicated when they

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bachelor's in animal science. For both of them, it was an opportunity to showcase the vision they have for their program.

"Consistent quality," Reiss starts and Heather finishes, "narrowing the playing field for a uniform product for essentially everyone."

Especially as prices soften, they see that quality-grade premiums are an important part of the business model.

"Around here, corn is king," Heather says. "Cattle are really a second thought, and the more value you can put into your calves, the better it is for everybody."



**Editor's Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*

► **Below:** Reiss Bruning and fiancé Heather Oentrich appreciate learning from Reiss's parents, Fred and Penni Bruning.



### **Inherited traits**

The adage is "work smarter, not harder." If edited to, "work smarter *and* harder," then it could be something of a motto for the Bruning family.

Perhaps that was a value brought over from the old country when the family first emigrated from Germany in the 19th century. Five brothers continued on from Illinois to found the town of Bruning, Neb.

Reiss Bruning is the fifth generation to put down roots there. He knows the youngest of those original five as great-great-grandpa Frank, who started the bank that now extends to five locations. Great-grandpa Fred started a cow herd that has continued down through the generations so that, today, its managers include another Frank-Fred pair. Ninety-year-old Grandpa Frank and his son Fred run the farm in partnership with Reiss, who returned after graduating from K-State three years ago.

"That's every parent's dream. You work hard and long hours, wishing that's what would happen," Fred says. "It's exciting to have a future daughter-in-law who is also involved in the industry."

As Reiss and Heather survey all that's left on the to-do list at the end of the day, they look in wonder at the generations before them.

"We're young and able, and they're schooling us," Heather jokes. She's referring to Reiss's parents, Fred and Penni, and grandparents Frank and Mary Bruning, all still actively involved in the operations.

"Grandpa still drives out to the farm three times a day," Reiss says. "His life's dedication is grass and cattle."

They also have a long history of giving back to the local community and the larger ag community. They've funded several scholarships and continuing-education opportunities for both students and adults. Things like the Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture's Heifer Link program and the University of Nebraska's ag banking major have Bruning fingerprints on them.

"I'm trying to share our ideas and successes," Fred says. "Stewardship and philanthropic giving is part of our mission."

Any year in the Bruning family is a busy one, but 2016 may go down in the record books. It kicked off with the inaugural production sale, but it's not short on significant life events: Reiss's sister just had her first baby, Grandpa turned 90, and they're in the middle of a major home remodel. Reiss and Heather's June wedding will be followed by his brother getting married in August.

They know a thing or two about keeping many irons in the fire.

"Part of it's genetics, and part of it's phenotype," Fred says. Predictable, dependable — just like the cattle they raise.