



2012 CERTIFIED ANGUS BEEF

2012 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award



Nebraska Sandhills ranches are not short on history. When looking back shows a pattern of forging ahead, that's when it seems certain they'll continue their legacy. Witness the Zutavern Ranch Co., bordering the 70-person town of Dunning, Neb.

It's hard to imagine what George Zutavern envisioned in 1902 when he packed up his family, fence posts and livestock in rail cars and headed further west from southeastern Nebraska to settle in Custer and Blaine counties. Yet 110 years later, the succeeding generations have maintained its origins as a sustainable, profitable ranch.

Now home to a large Angus-based cow herd and feedlot, that legacy covers more than 36 square miles and supports the fifth, sixth and seventh generations.

Brothers Conrad "Con," Zak and John Zutavern always have their sights set on getting better.

"You never want to get to the point where you go backward," says Con, CFO and recordkeeper.

Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) was to recognize the ranch family for its progressive philosophy, along with carcass data to back it up, at the CAB annual conference in White Sulphur Springs, W.Va., Sept. 19-21. Con and his mother, Marcena, were planning to accept the 2012 Commercial Commitment

Always Better

Unwavering drive to improve guides Nebraska commercial Angus ranch family.

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



to Excellence Award on behalf of the seven family-member shareholders.

The decision for Angus

Herefords were the mainstay in 1952, when Marcena and her late husband, Rich, were just newlyweds.

"When Zak was just a baby, Rich had been calving out cows and he came in and got the baby's A+D ointment, and he used the whole

10-ounce jar on the cows," says Marcena, recalling the Hereford cows' sunburned teats after an April snowstorm. "Rich always said that was the year everyone around then started using Angus bulls."

Those black white-face cattle later gave way to Charolais, Limousin and Gelbvieh influence when crossbreeding became popular as "the boys" went off to college at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) and then returned home one by one in the 1970s. They eventually settled back on a straightbred approach, using solely Angus bulls since 1988.

"We thought we could do everything we wanted with Angus," Zak says. The family agreed on that, but which specific bulls were still up for debate.

When Rich and his brother, Bill, split the ranch, Marcena got more involved in the business, taking an interest in the genetics.

"They'd send me along to make sure Rich didn't go buying big-birth-weight bulls," she laughs, while thumbing through the 1989 Hoff's Scotch Cap Bull Sale sale book. "That was the first year we used EPDs (expected progeny differences)."

Zak had crossed out bulls that were too high on birth weight, the first criteria they selected on, but Rich continued to use the "eyeball method" only.

► **Above:** More than a century after George Zutavern settled in southeastern Nebraska, succeeding generations have maintained Zutavern Ranch Co. as a sustainable, profitable ranch. Pictured are (from left) Con, Marcena, Adam and Zak Zutavern.



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Technology improvements

“When we talk about revolutionary things that changed our business, we talk about center-pivot irrigation, distillers’ grains and the introduction of EPDs to help us pick Angus bulls,” Con says.

Birth weight still carries importance, but as the sole suppliers to their own feedlot, their selection breezed right past common ones like weaning weights to instead emphasize growth and carcass traits.

“We’re looking at the dollar beef values (\$B) — and we don’t want cattle that are too fleshy — because selling on a grid, you don’t want a bunch of Yield Grade 4s,” Zak says. “So we try to keep them average there.”

His son, Adam, has taken on many selection duties and adds, “We’ve been trying to keep a count on the wilder cattle and watch disposition. Looking at Angus EPDs, you can basically get anything you want.”

Good mamas are a universal need, but other economically important factors have received more emphasis with the changing of the times.

The Zutaverns added the feedlot in 1975. At the time they were just looking for an outlet for the homegrown corn and alfalfa they started producing as a result of installing center-pivot irrigation.

“We always sold cattle to a guy who sold irrigation systems, and he talked [us] into buying one,” Zak says. “But once we got irrigation, we didn’t need to sell our calves anymore.”

Irrigation helped them develop their own feedstuffs, but when distillers’ grains came along, they were happy to haul in the alternative.

“They love that stuff, and it’s easy to feed. You don’t have the sickness or the bloat,” Zak says. “To top it off, the cattle grade better just because we’re feeding it.”

They saw a 15-point jump in percent Choice that they attribute to the byproduct.

That’s especially important to the Zutaverns, as they’ve sold virtually every head on a grid-marketing arrangement since they first came out. Registered breeder Doug Hoff first encouraged them to give it a try.

“We grabbed onto that opportunity thinking it’d be a way to maximize our income, because we had good cattle,” Con says. “Of course, we knew it was going to require above-average-quality grades, so that has been our focus: to raise high-quality cattle.”

When Ken Conway launched the GeneNet grid in 1996, the Zutaverns were among his first customers.

“They have spent a large number of years improving their genetics,” he says, “That’s why their cattle are so consistent and uniform.”

February- through June-born steers weaned from Sept. 1 through October finish at 13-15 months of age. Last year’s calf-feds made more than 50% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and 11% CAB Prime.

Big picture legacy

Holding a picture of the “Zutavern boys” taken in 2002, Marcena Zutavern talks about late husband Rich’s passion for the land. The couple built a house overlooking the Middle Loup River valley.

That closeness to nature, the hard work, the fervor is either genetic, or their three sons and four grandsons had great teachers. Perhaps it’s a little of both. Although they went off to college, each male in that picture has returned to become a Sandhills rancher.



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“They’re very good at sorting and getting cattle sold at the right time, which is important when you’re selling on a grid to maximize premiums and minimize discounts,” Conway says. “They’re in the top 5% of all cattle that go through my program, and they’re able to do it with such high numbers.”

The Zutaverns fenceline wean in the feedyard and start them on a ration right away.

“We were feeding yearlings, and they were getting too big,” Zak says. After attending a feedlot meeting on calf-feds, they made the switch. It reduced carcass size and trucking labor, too.

“We were weaning and backgrounding in the winter months and then taking them out to summer grass, where now we just start feeding right away,” he says.

When the steers clear out of the feedyard, it’s ready for their next calf crop: the heifers.

Depending on grass resources, they typically save 3% as replacements and feed the rest. Since heifers go through one AI (artificial insemination) cycle before cleanup bulls join them for 30 days, the earlier-born heifers are more likely to stay in the herd.

This summer has been like the year of their centennial in 2002, a grazing season that saw more wanting for rain than actual precipitation. The “great meadow” along the Middle Loup and Dismal rivers has produced less than half the normal crop. Cows are usually fed from Thanksgiving on, but drought might move that up.

“We have a lot of baled hay carryover,



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which wasn’t the case with the previous two or three droughts,” Con says. “Our philosophy has been, ‘Boys, don’t worry about it. Sometime you’ll eventually get it fed. It might not be this year, but go out there and get it and save it. It will get used up sooner or later.’”

Drovers

Twice a year they saddle the horses and get a small taste of what life was like for early settlers of Blaine County. They drive a

portion of the cows 15 miles west to a Forest Service lease in mid-May and bring them back in September.

After the calves are weaned, the cows are driven from the feedlot down Highway 2 to the fall meadows. That’s when Marcena takes off her bull-buyer cap and plays traffic cop.

Her “rover” is parked in the middle of the road at the Dismal River bridge, and no one is going to get between her and the cattle. A hurried local might get an earful, like the hairdresser who thought she could bypass the roadblock.

“You didn’t dare go back to her to have your hair tinted after that, did you?” Con laughs.

That protective nature is just one of many traits that built the ranch. It joins a long list, like optimism tempered with market shrewdness, combined with perseverance.

The future doesn’t include packing up cattle on a frontier railcar or hand-digging a well; but, no doubt, there will be challenges. If it’s not drought, it’s prices. If it’s not lack of technology, it’s what to do with all that’s available.

Solid goals transcend all historical boundaries.

“Our philosophy,” Con says, “is if you treat the cows right, they’ll treat you right.”



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



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