

Living a Legacy

Heritage, lifestyle and hope for a high-quality future drive South Dakota ranchers.

by **Miranda Reiman & Jennifer Kiko**

Living off the land, working harder than you thought you could. Carrying the experience of generations on your shoulders and the undeniable weight of commitment in your heart. That's ranching.

That's the way of life for Donn Hett and wife Billie, fourth-generation ranchers near Buffalo, S.D. The land was homesteaded in 1909 by Donn's great-grandfather.

Earlier generations focused on crop production, but Hett took the lead in 1968 when he turned to Angus cattle. Today, the family's 12,000-acre ranch is home to 600 Angus cows. The last two years, they have raised calves for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand Natural target, without implants, antibiotics or animal byproduct feeds.

"We understand that people are becoming more concerned with where their product is coming from," Hett says. An extra few dollars per hundredweight (cwt.) added motivation, and they didn't have to make dramatic changes in their routine to qualify.

"We went to the source and age verification, which they require, but it was no extra problem for us because we have them all tagged and recorded anyway," he says. They stopped implanting at branding and began specially tagging the few calves treated on the ranch.

Foundation cows

Through selection and management,



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PHOTOS BY DEANNA WALENCIAK

► Billie (left) and Donn Hett look for well-muscled, easy-keeping cattle that will gain well. "We use a proper balance, not head-over-heels one way or another," Donn says.

the Hetts aim to meet their ultimate goal of producing the very best beef. That starts with the female side. They have been using artificial insemination (AI) since 1971 on all heifers and the top, "hand-picked" cows.

"That way, we could use the better bulls at the price we could afford. Doing that, we could upgrade our herd a lot quicker," Hett says. They have been straightbred Angus since 1978, retaining their own heifers.

"Of any decision that we've made on this place, AI has been one of the most important and rewarding," he adds. The Hetts have used 30 or 40 sires over the years, always paying attention to the total package.

"We use a proper balance, not head-over-heels one way or another," Hett says. "We look for well-muscled, easy-keeping cattle that will gain well. The cattle have to work for us and for the feedlot."

Keeping track

They care what the feedlot thinks because they prefer to form relationships, sending them to the same place year after year. For more than two decades, an Iowa

farmer-feeder purchased them; after that, a small operation near Groton, S.D., fed the calves for nearly another decade.

As the next generations exited the feeding business, the Hetts tried a few years on the video auction. Some level of satisfaction was missing.

"At that point, the calves just disappear and you don't ever get to hear much about them," Hett says. "Where we're able to upgrade with our AI program, it's important to get feedback and information so we can still change our herd to match what they need."

This October marks the second year of what could be another long-term relationship, this time with the Beef Marketing Group (BMG). The 14-member cooperative purchased the calves to feed at Lewis Feedlot, Kearney, Neb.

Manager Brett Carr says he appreciated the chance to feed the cattle and work with ranchers who care about what they're producing.

"I call and tell them how their cattle are doing — how they're eating and if we had to pull and treat any," Carr says.

The 2007-born calves entered the feedlot in October and were sent to harvest at the Tyson Foods Lexington, Neb., plant the following spring.

"It was a real bad year weather-wise for feeding," Carr says. Despite the stress, however, the cattle went 90.4% Choice and

Prime, with 35.6% of the 228-head group hitting the CAB target.

No pampering at home

Of course the cattle don't come from a background of pampering. At the ranch, the herd grazes year-round, with only supplemental feed right before calving. They haven't had an easy time of it, as the area has been in a persistent drought.

"I often tell people I've just finished up my second cutting of hay," Hett says. "That's my second cutting in the last 10 years." When they do get a crop off their 500 acres of hay ground, it's stacked as a less-expensive alternative to baling.

Cattle adapted to the heat and dry conditions of a western summer must also cope with the winter's worst.

"If a blizzard hits and you can't get out to feed her for three days, we need a cow that won't be dead when you finally get there," Hett says. But adaptability isn't the only standard. "We also need fertility, so we look for a positive scrotal EPD (expected progeny difference)."

The family also places an emphasis on disposition.

"Billie often checks the heifers at night. We joke that if one raises its head too fast when she enters the barn, she'll send them



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away on the trailer," Hett says with a grin.

"But it really is a high priority. Where we raise our own replacements, anything with poor temperament gets sold the first year. We just don't tolerate it. The feedlot likes them real quiet, too, because they gain better."

Tyler Hett recently returned to the family ranching tradition with his wife, Marisa, and their three children in tow. On any given day, there's a youngster riding shotgun in the pickup as Tyler checks cows in the pasture.

"It's a wonderful place to raise a family, and we welcomed the extra help," Donn says.

"It's the way of life that we enjoy. It's been a struggle at times, but it's been worth it."

While the Hett family hold steadfast to a rich ranching heritage, they continue looking toward what's next that can move their ranch forward. They can't do it on reputation alone. They know strong partnerships are critical to their ability to continue a tradition of high-quality cattle production.

Donn and Billie raised four children on the ranch. Perhaps someday, that tradition will encompass the sixth generation.

