

Closed Herd, Open Minds

Do-it-yourself mind-set does it best for Kansas brothers.

Story & photos by *Laura Nelson*

No one knows a cow herd as well as the owners — except maybe their veterinarian. For Coldwater, Kan., brothers Bob and Dennis Huck, no one knows their cattle better than they do.

“What’s unique about us, more than anything else, is our closed herd,” says Dennis, a retired veterinarian. “We use our own cattle bloodlines and our own breeding programs. We raise our own bulls, use our own bulls, and keep our own heifers. I don’t know a lot of ranches this size that can operate like that.”

The brothers and their sister, Janice Moore, own and manage 500 Angus cattle at Huck Ranch Inc. with the help of Moore’s son, Randy Gean. Bob and his son Nathan have another 450-cow commercial herd to the south. Dennis started a registered Angus herd in the late 1980s. Together, they manage one tight ship.

“We were just never happy with what we bought,” Bob says. “We always thought we could raise better.” So they did. The Hucks haven’t bought cattle from an outside herd in more than a decade.

They retain ownership on calves through Ashland (Kan.) Feeders, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed yard. For the past three years, manager Mick Sharp has seen the Huck’s herd produce calves with strong and improving carcass data. “They’ve been breeding exceptional cattle for several years. They keep good records and know exactly what they have in their herd,” Sharp says.

In 2008, Huck cattle graded an average of 90.4% USDA Choice, with *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) acceptance rates ranging from 35% to more than 50%. “We breed and feed for the premiums,” Dennis says.

“Dennis has done a good job with his embryo work, evidently, to get the type of bulls that produce those kinds of carcasses,” Bob adds. “All that embryo work and his bull selection — we’ve done that because we want to get those grades and the CAB.”



► Brothers Bob (left) and Dennis Huck know their cattle — and their bottom line. “The dollar speaks,” Dennis says. “The dollar leads you in different directions.”

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Beyond genetics

In addition to genetics, the Hucks focus on nutrition and stringent preconditioning to ensure feedyard performance. The family grows their own feed, with the exception of experimenting with distillers’ grains this year.

The results paid off in their replacement heifers.

“Those heifers really grew and looked in good condition without carrying a lot of fat this year,” Bob says. “The distillers’ has a lot of energy in it, and we were really happy with that.”

Consultations with a feed nutritionist also ensure calves get the nourishment they need, Dennis says.

“The fact that we wean

our calves and feed them to feedlot weight ourselves sure contributes to the performance of the cattle in the feedlot, too,” he says. “We don’t send them to Mick until they’re at about 800 pounds (lb.)”

The Ashland manager couldn’t be happier with that decision.

“Every yard loves feeding good cattle, and it just doesn’t get better than those we get from the Hucks,” Sharp says. “They bring

solid cattle in here that are ready to eat, and they always do well from here to the packing plant. I look forward to feeding their cattle every time they bring more in.”

Conveniently, the ranch has two health experts at their disposal. Dennis retired from his veterinary practice three years ago. His son Darin is a veterinarian in Dodge City, Kan. All their cattle are double-vaccinated before shipping to Ashland.

“We have a very small death loss in the feedyard because we do a lot of prevaccinations on the cows, and that carries into the calves,” Bob says. “That preconditioning program is very, very important to us.”

Not only do these brothers know their cattle; they know their bottom line. “The dollar speaks,” Dennis says. “The dollar leads you in different directions.”

The Hucks have altered their management plans several times in the past four decades to capitalize on profits. When their father purchased the original ranch in 1964, the family owned predominantly Hereford cattle. They started crossbreeding to Angus in the late 1960s, and by the 1970s their herd consisted primarily of black baldies. Then Dennis began building his registered Angus herd.

Marketing strategically

“We realized they just needed to be black to grade and yield the way we wanted them to,” Bob says. “When they started offering the quality premiums, well, then we wanted them all black.”

At the inception of U.S. Premium Beef in the late 1990s, the Hucks wasted no time in marketing their high-quality cattle in that venue. Bob and Dennis were also quick to capture an age- and source-verification premium.

“We started that as soon as they started giving us the 30 bucks to do it,

and we’ve verified every year since,” Bob says.

More revisions may be ahead for the Kansas ranchers, as they consider the recently lackluster Choice/Select spread. “We’ve worked really hard to develop this type of carcass value,” Dennis says. “So we get 96% Choice — [it] used to be that paid a lot of money. Now it doesn’t because the spread is so narrow. Times have changed.”

The brothers are not interested in leaving their Angus roots. “CAB is still paying,” Dennis says. “We want to keep producing cattle that qualify for the CAB, but we might

get some Continental crossbreeding in there to increase our yields.”

Bob says that would likely involve just the older cows, maintaining the current straight-Angus genetics of the younger herd to hold out for a more favorable Choice/Select spread.

The future may be unknown, but Dennis says there is one thing the Hucks are certain of: “We’re producing a quality product right now. Whatever happens, we’re going to maintain that quality.”

