



Simple Plans

Lee Ranch wins 2010 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

Bill and Judy Lee think about bloodlines and roots when they gaze across the Gyp Hills at the cows on their ranch in south central Kansas. Their address near the small town of Coats is on Moffett Road, named for the Irish grandparents who settled here in the late 1800s.

Moffett Brothers and Andrews Commission

Co. was a prominent cattle dealer in Kansas City for many years, and other family branches pioneered large-scale farming in several states, sometimes working cooperatively. The world changed, and as estates were settled, the ranch on Turkey Creek was an absentee-landlord range for Commission-house cattle through the mid-1900s.

The Lee branch bought it back in 1960, and when Bill and Judy graduated from Kansas State University (K-State) and married in 1963, a starter herd of Hereford cows was waiting for them. "We didn't know much about cows at the start, but we were determined to learn," Bill says.

Across the span of 47 years, they would raise sons Nathan and Patrick, and develop the ranch into a source for some of the most predictable and high-quality commercial Angus cattle in the country.

Lee Ranch was named 2010 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award winner at the CAB Annual Conference in San Juan,

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Puerto Rico, Oct. 1. Nathan will travel to the conference along with his children, Ascha and Landon, to accept the award.

Transition to Angus

“Those Herefords were short-framed, like most herds at the time,” Bill says. “But we went to Miles City [Montana] with friends and brought back several of the first Line 1 bulls to this area. They were so different and extreme we were almost afraid to turn them out with the cows.”

But the results helped make a name for Lee Herefords on the show circuit. Their steers won over all breeds in Kansas and Oklahoma, while Lee heifers stood in the top five places at the Winfield (Kan.) Prospect Show in the late 1960s. They showed a Hereford bull nationally, winning seven of the 13 Register of Merit exhibitions.

“That really brought to the forefront the need to put some altitude in the cattle,” Bill says. “I had been showing cattle since the days of baby beef at the American Royal, so we followed that side of things. We began jacking them up off the ground — weights didn’t change much, just the frame scores.”

Back in the moment, he nods, “Of course, we turned that around and headed back down to the 4-frame cow again, to produce what the industry wants today.”

It always made sense to produce for the market, and that led the Lees to start using registered Angus bulls 20 years ago when Nathan decided to come back from K-State and partner in the ranch.

“We might have coasted toward retirement with 300 Herefords, but instead we began the transition to Angus and expanded to support another family,” Bill says. “It’s been up and down, but we typically run 1,200 females now.”

Nathan says the last traces of baldie influence were sold five years ago.

Why straightbred?

“A lot of our cows still trace back to those Line 1s,” he notes. “Mom keeps the records with those family trees going all the way back. We also bought some foundation purebred Angus females in the early ’90s, so our herd today is way over 98% Angus.”

Line 1 worked because of predictability; and that predictability is best exemplified in Angus cattle today, Nathan says.

“If we were just selling feeder cattle, we might consider crossbreeding with Charolais or Simmental, but feeding our cattle, as we have for 15 years, and adding value, our need for predictability and simplicity points to Angus genetics,” he explains. “The Angus



PHOTO COURTESY OF LEE RANCH

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EPDs (expected progeny differences) go back to 1977, so Angus genetics have a 10- or 15-year jump on predictability over other breeds.”

Terminal crossbreeding would complicate pasture stocking rates, herd composition and rotation among seven local pastures, while potentially causing problems for neighbors, who also tend toward straightbred Angus, Nathan adds.

“In our low-labor operation we just can’t afford to babysit even the heifers, and with Angus bulls, we never worry about it,” he says. “The steers perform in the feedlot and we have had loads going more than 73% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) this year, but the better money may be in the really nice Angus females. It really is ‘the business breed.’”

Innovations

That suits the Lee business plan, which has a solid focus on profit generation. Bill and Judy credit their course work with the Ranching for Profit School, as well as animal handling lessons from Bud Williams, in building that focus. Judy’s degree in zoology (pre-veterinary track), and Bill’s in economics help them evaluate new ideas, such as Nathan’s plans to overhaul cow herd selection and breeding.

Artificial insemination (AI) had been a basic tool for several years when in 1999, they began a five-year program of ultrasound-scanning all heifers to help find the top ones to comprise an elite sustaining herd of the top 10% of cows.

Igenity did a DNA study on the whole herd, Nathan reports, and “tenderness” was also incorporated in the Lees’ AI bull selection.

“At first, there was a lot of variation in the heifers, and we were lucky to find some with 5% intermuscular fat (IMF),” Nathan says. “We kept track of those and noticed that it made a difference — their daughters have 7% IMF.”

That premium Choice level of marbling in young heifers on a backgrounding ration helps instill confidence that the herd is on track. Although they monitor ribeye area as well, those numbers don’t influence selection because too much muscling could affect maternal and calving traits. “It’s a safer bet to select for marbling,” he says.

Although most cows in the top 10% herd have ultrasound scan data and a long list of other data, “it’s not completely about the numbers,” Nathan says. “We might pick some that excel for disposition and phenotype as well as their EPDs and sire. Of course, we look at progeny data, where we want to see a pattern of consistency for Prime or CAB.”

Developing nearly all heifers for replacements, and breeding them AI to Angus bulls with highly predictable carcass traits, has had the planned side effect of eliminating selling cows by the pound.

“Our goal is to sell young bred cows by the head and turn the generations just as fast as we can for genetic progress,” Bill says. “It costs more to develop heifers every year, but we sell

our females before they back down to cull-cow prices.”

Another change for the Lee herd in the last few years is the use of their own AI-sired bulls from that top herd, a move Nathan suggested as a way to enhance uniformity.

Winter feeding was reconsidered in 2004, with the long-term plan of leasing more summer ranges while stockpiling up to 5,000 acres of native grass on the home ranch. That led to recent renewable yearlong leases in wetter regions of central Missouri and northeast Oklahoma. Up to 625 cows stay on those leases, hedging the risk of regional droughts.

Across the board, the Lees quit raising low-quality forages, though they may buy high-quality alfalfa. To supplement stockpiled grazing, they rely on byproducts like gluten or wheat midds. “Neither making hay nor paying for processed feed made sense because of the labor costs associated with both,” Nathan explains.

Feed to realize value

Although crossbred steers would likely grow as fast as most straightbreds, they would be hard-pressed to improve on the Lee records. Besides gain, uniformity and grade

are keys to the value-based market, Judy says.

She recalls the first years of feeding black baldies, when most feedlots sold the entire pen based on average finish.

“Some cattle would be too big, and there would be the little guys that were Select and a couple of Standards because they were too young,” she explains.

Since 1998, their increasingly Angus-based calves have been finished at Pratt Feeders, 2010 CAB Feedlot Partner of the Year, which nominated the Lees for the CAB cow-calf award.

“This year, our cattle were sold from April to June at Pratt,” Judy says. “They really know what they are doing when they sort for those truckloads. This year we only had three Select steers; the rest were Choice and Prime, and the whole bunch averaged more than 60% CAB.”

Both ranch and feedyard are charter members of U.S. Premium Beef (USPB).

“We bought in at the very beginning, when we were just starting to feed,” Bill says. “If you’re going to build a superior product and go through the expense of creating those genetics, the only way to get paid is to feed them out and realize that bonus on the grid through U.S. Premium and *Certified Angus*

Beef. Seems like there’s always some scare in the market — Greece goes bankrupt or there’s an oil slick in the Gulf — but we can count on the premiums because we have a great partner in Pratt Feeders.”

Harvest reports from USPB show ups and downs in the truckload lots over the years, but the average quality keeps improving, Nathan says. “We have the 98% and 100% Choice pens, but we also have the loads that make you think a grader was asleep on the job, so there will always be outliers. When you feed over the years, you’ll find some of the data skewed by weather or market pressures, too.”

One of the big advantages of USPB stock ownership is the risk management aspect, he adds. “When fed-cattle prices are high, we can make more money on the hoof. When they are lower, our shares in USPB help our bottom line.”

Lee Ranch will certainly consider more new ideas in the years to come, but don’t expect to see anything in the daylight of reality unless it combines simplicity with sustainability and profit with consumers in mind.



Editor’s Note: *Steve Suther is director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*