

Added Certainty

In a land of chance, Littlerobe Angus counters challenges with precision and consistency.

Story & photos by *Kristen Odom*



Nature can be a wild card along the eastern edge of the Texas Panhandle. In a good year, winter snows and spring showers encourage new growth and bring the gently rolling land to life. This year's color is muted by drought, but that's no big surprise to the family behind Littlerobe Angus Ranch.

The ranchers know the weather will alternate between too hot, too dry or too cold; they know the grass will vary — but they expect better of their cows.

In a land of chance, Duane and Donna Jenkins, along with their son Dale and his wife, Brenda, developed a herd of Angus cattle uniquely adapted to counter such challenges with precision and consistency. The roots go back to 1948, when Duane and his brother decided to show Angus steers and then heifers, which grew to be the herd's cows.

After graduating from Oklahoma State University and teaching vocational agriculture for nine years, Duane and Donna moved the startup herd to a ranch nestled near Littlerobe Creek, south of Higgins, Texas.

"I liked the business and just stayed in it,"

► **Above:** "It has always been a challenge to have available pasture and grass," Duane notes. "We lease quite a bit, and you just aren't always guaranteed you are going to have every lease for several years. You have to stay ahead of yourself and keep enough land leased to make sure it will all work out."

he says. "When we came down here, we jumped off and had to make a living from the performance of our cattle."

You might not expect a herd descended from show heifers to thrive in rough country. But these were working girls first, and Duane neither made excuses for them nor brought in outside females since 1957.

Shifting to performance

"We started taking weaning weights in 1960, and things just became more performance-oriented as time went by," he says. Performance demands are placed on the

cows first, and their progress has been charted since 1967 using Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®).

Rigid culling and selection built the uniform herd — 80% bred through artificial insemination (AI) each year.

When Dale finished college in 1982, he decided to come back to the ranch, where he and Brenda are now raising their four daughters.

Since the mid-1980s, veterinarian Richard Prather, Shattuck, Okla., has consulted on the family herd. He knows the country can be

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► Duane (left) and Dale Jenkins expect cattle to perform under ranch conditions.



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unforgiving if producers ever lose sight of their goals to adapt.

“Cows here have to be moderate in milk,” he says. “They cannot have excessive needs for nutrition or high-quality forage. They have to be cows that can breed, and they have to be cows that can travel.”

Prather doesn't worry about the Jenkins' cows.

“Our selection process has the basics first,” Dale says. Elsewhere, one might hear excuses: “She has a horrible udder, but she's a good cow; or, her EPDs (expected progeny differences) are just excellent, but she has bad feet. That isn't going to work for us,” he says. “They have to work in our real world.”

Soundness, temperament and reproduction are fundamental at Littlerobe.

“We have genetics that produce cattle that will perform under ranch conditions,” Duane says. “We don't want to pamper our cattle, and we certainly don't want anyone who buys them to have to pamper them either.”

Only when female production and dependable replacement heifers are on track can you consider steer performance and beef quality, he says. But that's not to minimize the end product, only to state the required order.

The family's website (www.angusjournal.com/littlerobe/) opens with the mission, “To provide the best Angus genetics possible to our customers so they will be successful in producing beef for the consumer at a profit.”

Indeed, given that functional females are a well-established foundation, Duane and Dale include carcass traits as one of the top priorities when choosing the next AI matings.

From either side of breeding, Prather sees an iron discipline when Duane finds a match: “He's got his mind made up — this is the animal that I'm looking for,” the veterinarian says. That conviction is based on recognizing the characteristics that will work with his cows as well as carcass quality, regardless of a bull's popularity.

Of course, the result is predictable. “If you look at their herd you know what kind of product you are going to get,” Prather says. “It is going to look like this, and it is going to perform like this on feed.”

The beginnings of scientific measurement in the 1960s grew to performance-testing bulls since 1970 and more advanced technology today.

“I never dreamed that we would be doing ultrasound and DNA tests on cattle like we do now,” Duane says. But ultrasound is a basic now.

“They ultrasound all females and all the males for sale and for return to the herd,” Prather says. “That is how [Duane] evaluates how well his breeding program corresponds to the hooves on the ground.”

And DNA testing has played an important role the last few years.

“We had 15 head of steers that showed to be carriers of a genetic problem in the Angus breed,” Duane explains. “So we put them in the feedlot.”

Feedlot experience

To be precise, they put them in the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed Cattleman's Choice Feedyard near Gage, Okla., where some of their bull customers have fed. It turned out to be a good way to gauge performance and grade.

“They were awesome cattle on all counts,” says feedyard manager Dale Moore. “Duane might seem like just a cowboy, but he is a cowboy who knows what he is doing, like doing a great job producing the best of the best.” The harvest group qualified for the monthly “30.06” honor role printed in the “CAB Brand News” column of the *Angus Journal*, as 45% qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB) brand with excellent cutability at 82% Yield Grade (YG) 2.

“It's pretty good evidence that their genetic

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program is on track to add carcass value,” Moore says.

Duane was pleased with those results as well: “It made a good thing out of a bad thing.”

Working every angle from selection to marketing, feeding and management, the Jenkins family also reaches out to help customers. That's a long-standing attitude that took on new directions with modern technology and especially after Littlerobe started its annual production sale in 1996.

“We had accumulated more cattle, and it became harder to sell all the bulls just private treaty,” Dale says. “We decided we would bite the bullet, build a sale barn and start our own sale.” The March event usually includes 65-70 registered bulls and 30-50 females.

One of the first sale customers was Steve Irwin of Irwin Angus Farms, Aline, Okla., who says the Jenkins family has always been there “if we needed a little extra advice. Our cattle have continued to improve, and I think one of the biggest reasons is that I've always really trusted anything that Duane has offered to help us with.”

Sometimes the help is offering opportunities for hands-on learning, such as the open-door policy for customers who want to learn more about the technologies available.

“He called us up one year and asked if we wanted to come and watch them ultrasound,” Irwin explains. “It gave us an insight in that direction and showed that he is willing to help out anyone in the Angus business.”

“There's no better,” Prather says. “They are the salt of the Earth.”

