

Confidence Learned



Hobbs heritage benefits from predictable genetics, experienced management.

Story & photos by Steve Suther, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Back in the 1880s, when settled life was coming to the rolling High Plains, the Hobbs family moved from Missouri to their new homestead along the Solomon's South Fork near Penokee, Kan.

They started with red whiteface cattle, and after a century or so, became known for registered Polled Herefords. Terry Hobbs respects tradition, but he didn't feel bound by it when he introduced Salers cattle in the early 1990s. Nor did he hesitate to buy Angus heifers and sell off the restless reds a few years later, using exclusively registered-Angus bulls for the past 20 years.

The fourth generation on a ranch that had grown to 8,000 acres in those days, Hobbs worked his way up to the 14,000 acres and 500 cows that now help support a fifth generation. Three sons and two daughters live within 20 miles, and most are involved with the ranch in one way or another.

They still raise crops and grain, but it's mostly for the cattle. Hobbs recalls a defining moment when he was not yet 10 years old with his dad at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver.

"We went up and down the aisles with cattle, and I saw the guys working with their bulls and heifers. Something just clicked

then," he says. "I knew I liked cows and wanted to be in the cow business."

Given plenty of "leeway" early on, Hobbs navigated the breed transition and decided to take a step beyond backgrounding calves on the ranch. He began working with custom feedlots to finish calves just as soon as the black ones arrived, planning to monitor and build profit in from one end of production to the other.

Starting at birth

Of course, it begins with live calves that start arriving in January. That's so the family can focus on the necessary farming, and calves have enough size to add pounds from forage as they graze alongside mama in May, when all pairs are shipped out to grass.

The Hobbs philosophy for consistent sustainability includes advanced risk management, so he installed closed-circuit cameras in the heifer pen and barn last winter.

"I've got a big-screen TV in the house so I can sit in there and watch," he says. "The antenna sends a signal to a computer in the house. I can get it on the iPad or even the cell phone, so I can be anywhere and see what's going on here."

Twenty years of artificial insemination (AI) to highly proven sires has eliminated most calving concerns, but weather still poses a few challenges.

"We had one night when we were calving all these Aled heifers, and it was 20 below zero, the wind was blowing like crazy, and we had this barn full and another two barns over there full," Hobbs says. "We had 14 calves in the night, so we were up all night bringing them in and saved them all."

In better weather, the video feed can be reassuring.

"One night I had three in this pen that all calved within 20 minutes of each other — I just sat in the house and watched to see everything was all right," he says. The system helps with heat detection on the MGA-synchronized heifers in the spring, too.

Out to pasture

Every calf is tagged to establish a visual identity (ID) link to the cow. The ranch has 8,000 acres of pasture, but don't think open range. It's split up into 30 pastures that hold from 10 to as many as 60 pairs. ID is essential going out to grass, putting calves back in if they get out, keeping records and bringing

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that data to bear on cows and bulls. They just started freeze-branding with last year's bred heifers.

"Our grass right around here close is where we winter everything, in these creek valleys and natural protection. In April and May we work all the calves and pair them up for certain pastures," Hobbs says. "Sometimes that's by age or size of the calf, but sometimes there's no reason whatsoever."

The drought may be easing up, but the jury's still out as to whether it's over. Just last summer an outfit in the next county had to sell out for lack of adequate grass.

"I'm always looking for a Plan B, so maybe we take advantage of more alternative feeds," he says. "In June 2013 we ammoniated a lot of wheat straw, and if we hadn't had that we would have run out of feed last March."

If it does keep raining this year, Hobbs is looking forward to a return to more conventional weaning in late September or October, after weaning a few years as early as late July.

"We'll keep them out there doing what they're intended to do: turn that grass and weeds into good beef," he says.

Early weaning had no impact on carcass quality, nearly all Choice or better with 50% or more making *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance. That's reached 70% CAB in the Kansas Angus Association's Carcass Data Project, where progeny of Hobbs heifers often win honors with daily gains at 4 pounds (lb.).

"We have gotten along good with Angus, from calving and all the way through," he says.

Proven sires

His top 100 heifers are retained for replacements, with a single AI sire used on two consecutive heifer crops. That bull must be one with accuracy in the expected progeny differences (EPDs) of 0.90 or better on most traits. They're all important, Hobbs says, especially at those times when you rely on them to breed, calve, grow and remain calm. He does not try to stack pedigrees, only EPD excellence.

"Shopping for bulls, I will look at low birth and high yearling curve benders with docility, bulls of high quality on the beef value index, easy-doing and balanced — the whole line," he says. "If they have everything else but low docility or marbling, I can't do that. As for accuracy, I learned a long time ago not to pick young bulls with fantastic numbers because they may not stay."

Some may think Hobbs Ranch is a couple of years behind the times in their use of popular sires, but he'd rather be right.

"We do follow the trend, read the literature, watch what the neighbors are doing and the results," he says. "Our cattle are pretty good, but they need to get better. In that sense, I'm never happy, but it does take a while to move the whole herd."

Hobbs admits he's happier now than when he first started using Angus bulls in the

1990s. Watching this year's heifers calving and checking out those that will bear his 2017 calves, there's a sense of satisfaction.

"Maybe I kind of halfway know what I'm doing now. Decisions come easier when you're 62," he says. "That's nothing you can buy. It's just experience and confidence that comes with the territory."

Hobbs credits progress within the Angus breed for some of that.

"That's another thing I think is beautiful about Angus," he says. "Their EPD stuff is just so spot on. If you pick a calving-ease bull or a growth bull or whatever, you're going to get one. Whatever you need, they've got so many numbers to work with, it's all there, so I don't even see a need to crossbreed."

The next generation of his family stands to gain as a tradition of 127 years on this land seems certain to continue.

"I've never worked for anybody else; I don't know what that's like," Hobbs says, adding the obvious. "I don't want to find out now."

Working with family, a guiding principle is to never get too high or too low.

"We try not to use any harsh words and remember if it won't matter in five years, it's not worth arguing about," he says. "So we aim to keep everything stable. Consistency, sustainability and neighborliness are the keys out here."



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

