

Partners in Land, Not Cattle

Two states, two generations of cattlemen share a family name along with grass and management.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC



The offer was on the table. Tom Houret sat listening to the hum of the air conditioning, his fitted suit slightly unbuttoned. In a month he'd cross the Oklahoma State University stage with more than a diploma.

There would be a shift: He'd walk on as a California rancher's son and walk off as whoever he wanted to be.

Consulting, sales or financial advising? A bachelor's degree in agricultural economics and a minor in marketing afforded the young grad many options, and they all had one thing in common: They weren't cattle.

"I had a pretty great idea of what this was like," he says of days spent on the ranch by 2009. "It was as if I'd already had a 10-year-career in the cattle business. I needed to know if anything else was out there."

The 22-year-old had long set his sights on something, anything other than ranch life.

Back home in La Grange, Calif., his dad Paul would move forward regardless, so the decision, like many before and after, belonged only to Tom.

"I had and have no problem putting in years of grunt work to pay my dues,"

he says. "That's part of getting ahead in life. I just didn't want to do it that way."

So he walked away.

Going back to cattle

The offer and the salary, the climate-controlled office; he left it all for the cattle.

"I just said, 'This isn't me.' I figured wearing a suit every day, talking on the phone wasn't going to cut it." He laughs and gives a silent nod to the cell phone by his side. He's on it a lot these days, "but at least it's with people I want to talk to."

Aside from his bride, Stephanie, there's no one Tom talks to more than Paul. Business partners, the two share more than a last name.

"It's a seamless thing," Paul says, "but it takes aggressive management." He may have started it all, but his son unpacked his own ideas when he moved home.

Today, Houret Cattle Co. operates in two states: Paul moved to Lakeview, Ore., and runs the northern unit. Tom stayed in La Grange to oversee its southern sister.

Their formula for cow herds is simple. They calve on irrigated land in the late summer, yielding a 250-pound (lb.) suckling calf in time for

California's winter rain. Instead of weaning come May, the pairs will ship to Paul in Oregon for the summer grass and wean in July before calving starts again, weighing nearly 800 lb., going on feed 45-60 days later.

The men manage each of their stocker operations with the same mentality. The point is to maximize natural feed resources and grow a big calf. In California, a calf by its mother's side will gain 2.5 lb. to 3 lb. a day before the green grass dries, another 3 lb. to 3.5 lb. daily in the north.

"A weaned calf won't perform like a yearling," Tom says, "so it helps compensate for that if you leave it on the cow. It'll help it perform."

The family hasn't retained ownership for close to a decade, but that doesn't keep them from an end-product focus.

"It's important to deliver a consistent and high-quality product," Tom says, regardless of where the cattle market falls. "As consumers are asked to pay more for protein, we need to make sure we're providing our best for them."

The Hourets do their part, with repeat buyers as proof.

They'll only breed their cows to registered Angus bulls purchased from seedstock ranches in Montana, with a few from California. Those bulls are expected to sire calves that perform with little assistance and grow into cows that rebreed.

"There's very little supplement. We'll feed a



► **Above:** Tom Houret decided to forgo office life to return to the ranch, where he manages his own herd in land partnership with his father, Paul.

little hay in the fall and maybe some liquid protein; but, as a rule, we don't mix feed," Tom says. They receive no cake or creep feed. "They make a living just on the grass."

That's the Houret advantage. The Angus one, too.

Angus advantage

"We'll run them on the native feed in California during the winter and then take them to high-elevation, irrigated pastures in eastern Oregon," Paul says.

Separately, there's a spring-calving herd that lives outside year-round in the eastern Oregon desert.

"Those Angus, they seem to thrive in any environment we put them in."

"These bulls know how to cover ground, climb a hill and do their job," Tom adds.

"That might not show up in a score, but it's in the DNA. We are consistently in the 93% to 96% conception range."

That DNA is what brought Paul to the Angus breed after trying Continental breeds when Tom was a kid. It also allows them to pick and choose what they want to raise, knowing the bottom line is ever increasing.

"These purebred breeders, they've done such a good job on the carcass that there's a ready consumer market," Paul says of demand for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

"When it comes down to it, I want to raise what others want to buy."

So they pick bulls with that in mind. Tom aims for bulls with specific expected progeny differences (EPDs), such as a yearling weight (YW) of 105 or better, and a weaning weight (WW) of at least 55. Paul wants to stay average with frame and disposition. Maternal and fertility traits are a given for both.

"Improving genetics requires a lot of patience. A cow herd doesn't change overnight," Tom says. "You've just got to stick with it and understand that by going the extra mile, investing the extra dollar, you're getting so much more in return."

It costs enough to manage cattle, so you might as well manage good ones, he says. They're more efficient that way.

It's a compounding effect, one where genetics and strict culling help a rancher raise the bar. The Hourets perform annual breeding soundness exams, and Tom even used the GeneMax® Advantage™ test on a load of heifers a few years ago.

"There's value in a bred cow whether you market her or keep her in the herd," he says. "If you cut corners, that'll show up. The heifer that wasn't really good, but you kept anyways, you're going to live with her for 10 years and never be happy with her calf."

"Cows are an investment for the long term."



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Paul calls his son an independent thinker, a good decision maker, a man who thinks with his head and not his heart. It's likely due to how the father raised the boy. Never coddled, always pushed.

"I encouraged them to try things and see what happened," Paul says of raising Tom and his older sister, Sara. "It's OK to try and fail because then we know. We either have to modify our thoughts or abandon them."

No believer in giving kids paychecks, Paul's currency was cattle. A heifer a year when the kids were young, perhaps two or three when they worked as much as the hired help, but it was up to them to pick a keeper. Paul would only come in to brand it.



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"I never micromanaged my children," he says. "From the time they were 6 or 8, I talked to them like they were 20. If they grasped it, that was fine. If they didn't, I kept talking to them until they reached an age where they could."

Today both men manage their own herds. They'll share ideas and trade off on management duties, but the cattle stay separate.

"Our motto has always been that we don't want to fail because of someone else's miscalculations," Paul says.

Applied to his own life, it's a humble statement. The patriarch could have tried to take more control. Instead he let Tom try and fail and then try again and succeed.

"His learning curve's been straight up," Paul says. "I never expected him to come work on the ranch, so it's been the most amazing thing."

It's been almost seamless.

"I don't have a mission statement, but we could put one together pretty easy, Tom and I. We'd agree on nine out of 10 points," Paul says.

What happens when they don't agree? "I'll help him. If he wants to try something, I'll sit by and see what kind of results he gets."

For Tom, he's found a way to apply his love of numbers. With a goal to raise cattle that are profitable, he aims to do so quickly and efficiently.

"I get to live and die by my own decisions. I choose," he says. "Either make the best out of every decision or the worst. I think that brings out the best in people."

It just so happens, his father agrees.



Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.