



A Reason to Stay

Wyoming women raise Angus cattle in rough country.

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

Diane Frank had a reason for leaving. The New Jersey native was young, civil protests were getting old, and she needed space to breathe.

“There was lots of civil unrest in the South,” she says, recounting her college selection process, “but Wyoming, the University of Wyoming, was removed from mainstream.”

If only temporary, 2,000 miles of distance would surely keep her safe, steady her footing and equip her for the life back home she loved.

That was 54 years ago, and before she met Gary Frank.

A cowman’s son from Lander, Wyo.,

Gary was a rough-stock rider on a wrestling scholarship looking for a date to a dance.

“I was a bit of a rural girl, so it was natural I hung out with the kids on the rodeo team,” Diane says. “That’s how I met Gary, and the rest is history.”

In borrowed boots and a bolo tie, she walked beside her future husband. She’d do it for decades after that.

“We were each other’s kind of people,” she says of the country folks she found out West. Together, she and Gary raised four

of their own, with plenty of livestock in the mix.

Rough stock or livestock

A love for rodeo and commitment to

ranching left the couple without enough days in the week to make either successful.

“There was a time where we had to decide. We’re either going to be rodeo-stock contractors, or we’re going to be cattle people,” Diane says, “but we can’t be both.”

Then came a push from Gary’s father, Bill, who laid down money for additional ground, she recalls. “We brought cows up here that first year and decided we were done with the bucking stock.”

That was 1969. Much has changed since then. The children grew up, got married and made decisions of their own. The cattle turned Angus, and Gary passed away.

One month shy of 71, six months short of the couple’s 50th wedding anniversary, “He wasn’t old enough,” she says.

On top of grief, Gary’s surprise passing left questions unanswered and roles to be filled, particularly when it came time for sorting the herd for calving.

“Anjie and I were the hold-back people,

“The accountability for me is very important.

My kids grew up knowing they had chores to do, and if they didn’t do them something was going to suffer.”

— Diane Frank

and Gary, he'd cut 'em off," Diane explains. "All of a sudden we all looked at each other and said, 'Who's going to do it?' Everyone looked to Anjie, and she said, 'I guess I am.'"

The Franks' second child and oldest daughter, Anjanette (Anjie) McConnell, had always been her father's helper. After graduating college and marrying Mike, the local ag teacher, the couple committed to joining Frank Ranches Inc. For Anjie, it was full time.

"Sometimes I wish I had Mike's job, when the weather's crappy," Anjie says on the sly.

"She wants mine, and I want hers someday," Mike quips.

Together they've brought ideas and research, pushed her parents to try new things and experienced successes along the way — which can be hard to come by out here.

Tough conditions

Cattle production, no matter the spot, comes with a handbook of hardships, but west-central Wyoming is its own beast. To capture a snapshot of Angus pairs there, content, grazing the summer's open hills would merely scratch the surface of land prone to seasonal flooding and winters below zero.

"Little Siberia," truck drivers call the lightly travelled route that runs along some of the family's land 45 miles outside of Lander. The Oregon Trail runs through it.

"There was one snowstorm where we got 54 inches," Mike recalls. "It was time to AI (artificially inseminate), and Gary and I were worried whether they'd show. It ended up being the easiest heat detection we've ever had because the ones that weren't covered in snow were in heat.

"I remember standing out there in cowboy hats, just drooped down to our chins, laughing and having fun breeding cows."

To gather them, to sit three generations at a table, that fun is palpable.

"We don't go on vacation much, but our family's together," Anjie says.

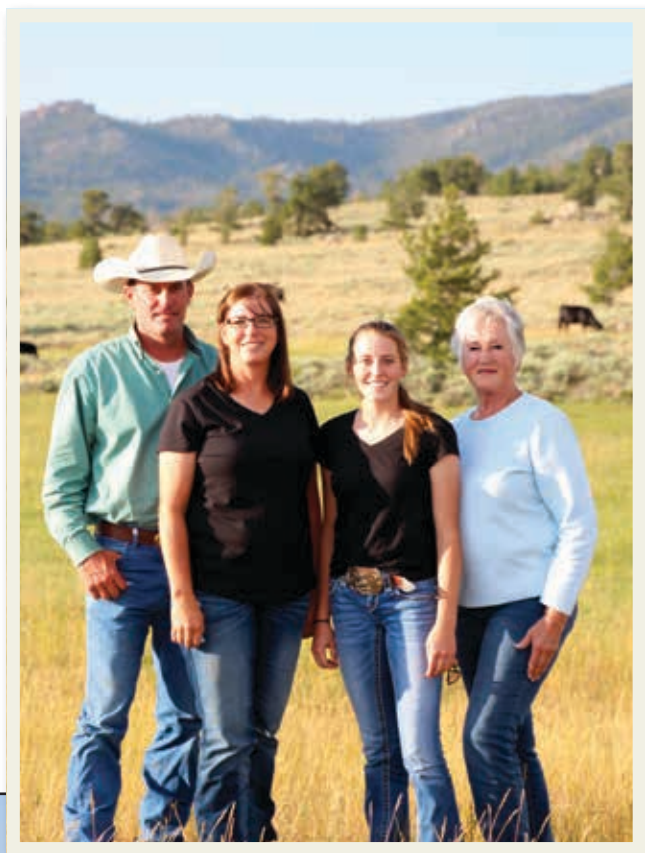
"Every day's a vacation here," Mike adds.

The Franks do their best to make it comfortable for their cattle, too.

► **Right:** Anjie McConnell joined her mother, Diane Frank, in managing Frank Ranches Inc. after her father died unexpectedly. Pictured are Mike, Anjie and Kiley McConnell and Diane Frank. "We don't go on vacation much, but our family's together," Anjie says.

"It's labor-intensive," Anjie says, hauling to summer pasture, bringing them into barns for calving, tagging at birth. The outcomes are uniform, healthy calves that put money in the Franks' pockets and draw demand from feeders.

Mid-February calving means a seven-way blackleg vaccination at birth along with iodine on the navel. If the weather permits,



they'll brand that first bunch around five weeks to get in a second set of shots.

"We wean off the mountain here," Anjie says, to avoid potential dust storms at home. They keep the heifers back for replacements, while the steers go straight to Miller Cattle & Feedyards, a 20-year tradition.

"We spend a lot of time researching and studying breeding selections for cattle that will work in our environment," Mike says. Feet and legs are crucial, followed by performance in the yard.

"If you're going to make money feeding cattle, they have to convert. We're proud of how ours perform," he says, noting a feed-to-gain ratio of 5.78:1.

For cows that won't breed back, "it's time to hit the road," Anjie says. They might have four open cattle a year in a herd of 400.

Changing demand

In addition to performance and avoiding elevation impacts, the Franks want cattle that satisfy the consumer. They look at the beef value index (\$B) and marbling expected progeny difference (EPD), and even run the HD50K genomic test on bulls from their small registered herd.

"We use the tools that are out there, available to Angus breeders, and then we try to be the best evaluators of livestock," Mike

► **Right:** Cattle production in west-central Wyoming is its own beast. A snapshot of Angus pairs, content, grazing the summer's open hills merely scratches the surface of land prone to seasonal flooding and winters below zero.

says, but in the end, "there's got to be a quality product."

In his other life as an ag teacher, he sees the need.

"Agriculture production is changing, and people have more questions about their food," he says. "With product like *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), where they can put a name and a face to it, people will buy."

"It's amazing. Ranchers are doing more and more with less cattle, but the cattle are better," Diane adds.

Seated at the kitchen table, her dark hair long since turned gray, she looks out across the ranch. She bakes strudels and hugs grandchildren these days, but the life she

chose — rather the one she fell into — fits her the same.

"The accountability for me is very important," Diane says. "My kids grew up knowing they had chores to do, and if they didn't do them something was going to suffer. I look at people who occupy the earth today who don't have animals to feed. There's nothing relying on them for existence."

For the girl from New Jersey who left in search of the days of old, that gives her all the reason to stay.

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

