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Steady. Constant. Reliable.

Montana rancher’s partnership with Nebraska feeder spans decades.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

“The old Cain place.” Years after John and Julie Riley moved to their Volborg, Mont., ranch — even after raising their three kids there — neighbors still might refer to it by the original owners’ surname.

The place has a history, as Horace and Bessy Cain homesteaded it and raised 15 kids in a one-and-a-half-story clapboard house.

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Somebody had to be the first to fight drought, hard winters, wildfire threats and all the other challenges a cattle producer faces when he’s in the middle of the open expanse of grassland that is eastern Montana.

“An old-timer once said, ‘It’s really good country when it rains and it ain’t worth a damn when it don’t,’” the cattleman recalls.

Yet amid all of that uncertainty, Riley remains steady.

In a world where change seems hard to predict, where prices are volatile and weather

is, too, it’s nice to have something constant to rely on.

That’s what Nebraska cattle feeder Terry Beller has in Riley.

“The cattle, they’re real predictable. I know how they’ll gain. I know how they’ll grade, and he’s got enough stretch in them so that if I have to play the market card for a few weeks or even a month and fight it just a little bit, his cattle will continue to grow and grade,” says the Lindsay, Neb., producer.

Spring-born calves are weaned in November and then backgrounded on the Riley Ranch, a partnership between John’s family and his brother Mike’s.

Feeding those kind of cattle

“We’re feeding them in the 70- to 80-day range. It kind of takes the bawl out of them,” Riley says. They move out the very end of January to give the rancher a few weeks before he starts feeding and calving heifers.

The key to perfecting that growing phase? Says Riley: “Time. You know, we had to learn how to feed those kind of cattle.”

Adding dried distillers’ grains (DDGs) to the home-raised hay and barley helped, too. That brought up the protein levels with a cost-competitive and palatable feedstuff.

Last year’s weaning led straight into a “big-time winter,” with consistently deep snows.

“I told Terry all the way through, ‘I’m not getting the gain. We’re going to be lighter,’” Riley says. “We got to the end, and we weren’t a dang bit different.”

He credits the DDGs for filling in the gaps. “They get in my yard, and it’s just a quick transition onto feed and away they go,” Beller says. “They don’t look back.”

For close to two decades now, Beller has purchased the Riley calves like clockwork.

“We haven’t missed a year since I started,” the feeder says. “When I find a good set, I don’t let them go.”

Part of the reason he’ll pay top of the market, or above, is because he and his brother/business partner can use data to predict their ability to make money.

“I can pretty much just plug in the cost of the cattle, and Mike can throw in previous

years' data, and it will spit out a projection on if those cattle are going to work," Beller says.

Cattle that aren't too fleshy upon arrival allow for marketing flexibility.

"He grows them calves up so nice. They grow up; they get frame," Beller says, noting that they get exercise and the rancher "stretches those calves out. When I get them in late January, they're ready to rock. They're at their prime."

Based on current prices, the feeder might alter the out-date by a month or more, usually targeting June or July harvest.

Last year 150 steers, sold in four drafts, made 92% Choice and Prime, with 43% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. They had an average daily gain (ADG) of 3.61 pounds (lb.).

Riley says they have a solid relationship with their vet, and Beller confirms they've never had any health challenges.

All that management adds to a genetic focus on cows that work on the ranch and calves that work for the next customer in line.

Genetic advantages

Riley often sources sires from the Midland Bull Test, always studying numbers like the American Angus Association's beef dollar value index (\$B) and expected progeny differences (EPDs) for docility, growth, marbling and heifer pregnancy.

"People will tell you if you chase dollar beef hard, you ruin your energy (\$EN) numbers," Riley says. "It's like anything. You've got to balance it."

He keeps a limit on milk, while looking for improvement and balance.

"All the genetic testing and stuff ... to me, you're somewhat obligated to yourself to



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explore it. That's good, solid information that you probably should be using if it's there to use," he says.

On heifers, they're so confident in today's calving ease numbers that it results in fewer checks on that once higher-maintenance group.

Riley's mom passed away this spring. When the family matriarch moved off the ranch earlier, they lost the most attentive eyes they had looking over the young females.

"We need the heifers to get the job done, because she's not there," Riley says, smiling at the times his mom would alert them to a problem. There's just not the need for many alerts today. "We have pulled a lot fewer now."

They've narrowed calving season and use ultrasound for preg-checking. That helps

them group by calving date and aids in marketing bred heifers with like due dates.

"Ultrasound has been really good," Riley says simply.

When trying something new, he draws on his own animal science education from Montana State University (MSU), and the expertise of neighbors and family members. Riley says he's got a good network.

"We should own a piece of Montana State by now," the rancher laughs, noting that he and three of his four siblings went to school in Bozeman and "something like three-quarters of the next generation" graduated from or is attending MSU. His wife works as an MSU Extension agent.

He can also rely on his cattle feeder to provide feedback.

"Terry will tell me if they don't work for him," Riley says. He gets group carcass results and has a gauge to know if his genetic decisions are on track.

Trust runs deep, so there's no need for the Bellers to be on-site to take delivery of calves, but they wouldn't miss it.

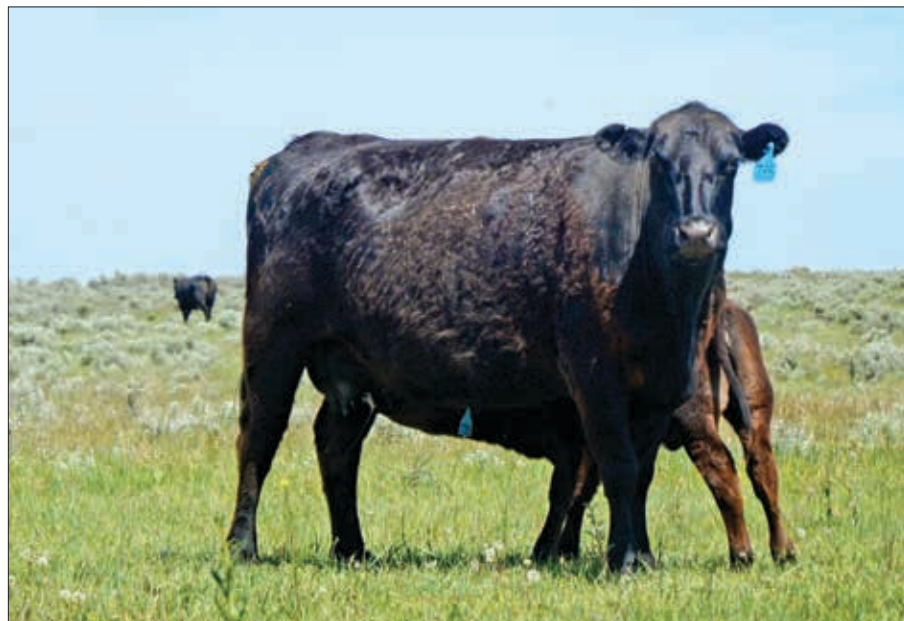
"It's gotten to be a family getaway almost," Beller says. "Our families have become close."

They'll keep up on milestone events, and say an extra prayer for each other when one's needed. Then, when it's time to get down to business, they settle on a fair price.

"Over all the years, he calls me first," Beller says. "I know when his cattle are coming. I plan on him, and he plans on me."

Steady.

"What price can you put on relationships like that?" Beller asks, and then answers, "You can't."



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Editor's Note: Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.