



Where the Windmills Are

California sheep herdsman turns to quality Angus for the best of both worlds.

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

Fifty years ago, other than a trusted family milk cow, it would have been a difficult task to find cattle grazing the hills of Solano County, Calif. For generations, its western portion of Rio Vista on the Sacramento River thrived on agriculture, but this “Gateway to the Delta” was sheep country. Today, it’s a collisional mecca where warm air from the valley blends with cold air from the Coast, a wind tunnel where heritage and history meet burgeoning infrastructure — each better off for the other.

Sheep and cattle share pasture here with four kinds of wind turbines stretching 300 feet to the clouds. Multitudes benefit from the energy these “mills” provide, but few come close enough to notice the livestock that rest in their shade below.

Those who do may think it unorthodox, mixing the two, or rather the three, but the animals pay no mind.

Neither do the Hamiltons.

A refusal to relent

Richard Hamilton was raised that way, a sheep kid who showed some cattle on the

side. As a young man in Rio Vista, the second-largest sheep-producing county in the state, his family built an empire of more than 4,000 ewes along with wheat, barley and oats. The industry was shrinking, though, and as the flock grew, so did their frustration with its lack of producer incentive to improve.

“Up until the early ’80s, we could sell our whole lamb crop in a week,” he recalls. “Guys would come in and there would be competitive bidding. Then it got to where those buyers just weren’t around.”

Sheep quality hadn’t waned. To the contrary, the Hamiltons had enhanced genetics by developing a composite that thrived in the coastal environment, but the industry had withered along with all market premiums. Committing to quality meant straying further away from where that industry was headed.

“I tell cattle guys ‘be in the sheep industry for a while, and you’ll appreciate what you have,’” Hamilton says, conviction on his brow.

A young man at the time, holding a new ag business degree from California Polytechnic State University, he watched his family bend

while neighbors broke under the pressure of the fading lamb market.

“It’s true that uniformity sells,” he says. “To survive today’s sheep market, you better bring added value; otherwise, it’ll eat you out of your house and home.”

The minor incentives for uniformity didn’t help much then, nor 30 years later.

“Quality is always going to sell. Don’t ever ruin quality or you will suppress the market,” Hamilton says. “That’s what’s happening in the sheep industry, and it’s sad.”

So the family acknowledged the value in diversification.

In cattle, they saw opportunity: the marriage of two species sharing the same space, a market that rewarded those who produce quality.

“It was an easy decision,” Hamilton says of purchasing a group of 4-year-old Angus cows from a rancher to the North. In Angus, they found the availability of strong genetics, the progressiveness of a breed, the quality of a product and value-based marketing.

“The Angus breed takes advantage of its opportunities,” he says. “Having a carrot

Angus Across



► “We’ve always been a little progressive,” says Richard Hamilton (right), pictured with wife Stacy and uncle David Hamilton. “We live by the belief that bigger isn’t always better and quality is more important than numbers.”

out there like *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) means there’s great opportunity for us if we can efficiently produce it, and we can.

“The reward, by putting a high-quality product out there that people enjoy, is tremendous. It’s so satisfying.”

Two are better than one

The Hamiltons translated what they

learned in the sheep industry and follow a similar philosophy with the cattle. Those original 4-year-olds served as the seedstock for an otherwise closed herd of 435 commercial cows that’s growing. Aside from purchased semen used to artificially inseminate (AI) heifers, and the occasional outside bull stud from operations with similar goals and closed herds, the family

hasn’t bought a cow in 27 years. Not a ewe since the late 1960s.

“We want cookie-cutter animals,” Hamilton says. “We know from experience with sheep, consumers want the same size lamb chop at every eating experience. Our cattle may have some diversity in genetics, but they look uniform when they fill a load.”

The family keeps a tight ship, culling to ensure that pattern endures.

“Things we look at are longevity of production, ease of maintenance, ease of disease resistance. The less we have to spend to keep them healthy and productive, the more it helps our bottom line.”

Some of that is due to synchronization and genetics available to those who AI.

“It gives me a set of calves that are not

related to any genetics I can get out here on the West Coast,” Hamilton says.

In 2013, they tested heifers with GeneMax[®] Advantage[™] to cull the bottom end. It helped validate cuts based on docility, too. With bulls, they run the HD50K test to track and build on successful sires.

“We’ve always been a little progressive,” Hamilton says, standing below heavily debated wind turbines circling in the breeze. “We live by the belief that bigger isn’t always better, and quality is more important than numbers. These mills, though, they’ve kept families in agriculture.”

“I’d rather have 100 acres of strawberries on the highest market than 10,000 acres of wheat,” he says. “I’d rather have 50 quality head than 500 others any day.”

That second line he borrowed from his Uncle Dave.

The youngest of three boys [Richard’s late father, Burrows, in the middle], David Hamilton was the dryland farmer, the mechanic of the trio that carried on the Hamilton Brothers name the ranch goes by today. Two generations before him had settled the ground where his own father was born and later died, where he raised his family and lost his wife to cancer, the land he now partners on with his nephew

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and Richard's wife, Stacy. He's a very spry 83.

"My brothers and I started talking about 'why aren't we in the cattle business?' the uncle recalls of conversations long ago. "People always used to say 'sheep and cattle aren't compatible.' Well, that's a bunch of hooley."

Driven by a lack of demand, sheep numbers are down, but 2,500 ewes still generate income. Growth simply belongs to the cattle. Calving takes into account lambing and labor, so instead of a late-summer start, the Hamilton herd begins Nov. 1 and ends in early February.

"We'll finish up lambing about the 10th of December, we give them a little break and then we get into heavy calving," Hamilton says.

Weaned calves are sold on the Western Livestock Auction as 600-weights. They don't get carcass data back just yet, but repeat buyers they do.

"We know that even though we sell at 600 pounds, that translates into a hanging carcass," Hamilton says. "Through the receptiveness of buyers,

we figure we must be doing something right."

Success

Committed, the family watched commingling bring success rather than defeat.

"I spend more time trying to sell sheep," Hamilton says of a still-tough market. "With cattle I can be totally focused on production. That's how I'd rather spend my days."

It has to make economic sense, he says.

"When the beef market was hitting \$1.60, \$1.70, I'd see guys getting 90¢ and putting in just as much work as we are."

The beef industry offers opportunity, he adds. If you want to go out and get it, you can get it.

"It may not be the \$2.30 market every year, but it's a whole lot better than what we've experienced in the sheep industry, and that makes it light-years ahead."



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

