

Beneath Still Waters

Story & photos by **Paul Dykstra**

The North Loup River pulls along at a seemingly lazy pace. But just like the ranches in these central Nebraska Sandhills, the outwardly docile waters are amazingly busy under the surface.

That's the way it is at Guggenmos River Ranch, home to four hard-working families and more than a few highly selected Angus cows. Walter and Ramona Guggenmos staked their claim on this productive land near Brewster, Neb., in 1943, where they still manage in partnership with their sons: Larry and his wife, Patty; along with Roger, Cindy and their school-aged children.

The management team is completed by the all-purpose expertise of George and Loretta Epp, longtime ranch hands who, although paid wages, are more like partners.

Diversity and integration keep the "to-do" list a bit stretched. The team finishes all calves in its Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot, where they have also custom-fed neighbors' finishing and breeding cattle through the years. Circles of corn and hay are required for the feedlot and cow-calf enterprises, while seasonal custom farming adds more to the schedule.

It's a lot of work, but high-quality beef pays the bills and shows what years of focused management can bring back beyond the commodity price.

Larry, who serves as CAB contact, returned to the ranch in 1986 after a successful career as a foreman in heavy construction. Perhaps that background drives his systematic approach to raising cattle.

"We tested several breeds," he says. "When I came back, we had three different breeds of cows." One of those came to the forefront.

"The guy who was buying our fed cattle saw how the Angus were grading," Larry recalls. "He suggested that we pursue the Angus avenue based on trends he noticed in meat quality at the time."

Following this advice, the ranch infused generations of carcass-oriented Angus genetics while preserving the essential right-sized, problem-free cows with docile dispositions.

High-quality beef pays the bills and shows what years of focused management can bring back beyond the commodity price.



► Larry Guggenmos (left) and top hand George Epp don't just operate an Angus cow herd and feedlot near Brewster, Neb. They also gather and analyze data on every calf, including carcass merit information on nearly all harvested progeny since 1994.

Documenting everything

Don Trimmer, director of beef programs for Accelerated Genetics, began a progeny-test relationship with the ranch 15 years ago, to evaluate some of the company's sires through artificial insemination (AI).

"Larry and George are always gathering knowledge," Trimmer says. "They document everything on large calving-barn sheets on the wall, and then follow those calves from birth all the way through harvest. They can tell you a cow's record and that of most of her progeny."

Ranch data have shown significant differences in the sires tested, and detailed carcass records have been gathered on virtually every finished calf since 1994. But carcass traits are not stand-alone selection criteria for any good cattle operation. George Epp gets much of the credit for avoiding pitfalls.

"George is the one following all of the bloodlines and pedigrees," Larry elaborates. "I don't know how he keeps it all straight, but he sure has a mind for it."

Trimmer weighs in on the selection efficacy. "Some of the sires that meet the needs of their environment were not the most popular bulls in our lineup. That's why producers need to gather data on their cow herd and progeny to truly understand which genetics fit their operation."

While environment and management style are crucial to the cow herd, fitting consumer demand is equally important when selling fed cattle on a value-based grid. Going back to the 1990s, Larry credits the meticulous data collection work of Jim and Liz Senn at the JBS-Grand Island, Neb., packing plant, and the CAB Feedlot Licensing Program (FLP) for compiling and analyzing data since 2003.

Since then, data on thousands of Guggenmos calves produced and finished show an average 40% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand-qualified carcasses; 2009 enrollments came in at 56% CAB acceptance.

Once again, those years of data revealed sire differences. In one calf crop, the ranch's favorite bull sired 96% Choice and Prime cattle, with 68% CAB acceptance. This balanced-trait bull has also consistently placed the most functional and docile females back into the herd, priming the herd for even better results.

Looking toward that future Larry says, "We'll have to work at it to identify genetics that will move us in the right direction because of the way we have already stacked the pedigrees." It's just the kind of challenge that motivates the Guggenmos and Epp families.

"Walk into their calving barn," Trimmer says in summary. "Open the records and view the documents that cover the walls. You will soon realize that these people are passionate about data and producing better cattle."

