



No Easy Route

B3R wins 2009 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence award.

Story & photos by *Miranda Reiman*

With its thick mesquite brush, constant threat of drought and the sheer size of its pastures, the southeastern Texas Panhandle is not an easy place to raise cattle. The packing industry is not an easy one to get a start in. Then again, the Bradley family has never been one to take the path of least resistance.

Perhaps that spirit was first illustrated when Minnie Lou (Ottinger) Bradley, family matriarch, headed to Oklahoma A&M (now Oklahoma State University) as the first female animal science student and member of the livestock judging team.

Decades later, daughter Mary Lou left the Bradley 3 Ranch and its Angus seedstock operation to pursue an accounting career — only to return with the tenacity and determination it takes to forge a success in the meat business. In her mid-20s, when she began as president of B3R Country Meats, the young business manager was inspired by what had been the ranch's freezer beef trade. A new packing plant was soon built in nearby Childress, Texas, and Mary Lou was traveling across

Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award

the country marketing “beef like ranchers feed their families.”

That resolve to always produce what the customer wants, from the commercial bull buyer to the consuming public, earned B3R recognition from Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) this year. Minnie Lou, along with Mary Lou and her husband James Henderson, accepted the 2009 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence award at the brand's annual conference in Scottsdale, Ariz., Sept. 18.

The family has a long history with CAB, first as American Angus Association members who ultimately own the brand and

later through B3R Country Meats. In 2004, the plant was licensed as the first *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) Natural producer, to give consumers the highest-quality choice in that niche category.

“The real customer is the person who walks by the meatcase and purchases it,” Minnie Lou says. “We like to think about the feedyards being a customer, or the yearling man or whoever, but the one who determines the price is the one at the meat counter. So we've got to have a pleasing product for them, but it's got to be profitable for every segment.”

Living off the land

Of course, the Bradley's first focus was on the commercial cow-calf producer. Shortly after they were married, Minnie Lou and Bill Bradley bought the first 3,500 acres and managed yearlings on it. In 1958 they bought their first registered Angus stock and began building toward the 12,500 acres and 400+ cows in place today.

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They describe their cattle as more moderate than some Northern genetics, but thick.

"I worked a lot of years in the meat business," James says, driving home the reason for that thickness. "There's not much that can substitute for meat."

Although he grew up on a small commercial ranch, he joined the B3R Country Meats team in 1993 and later brought his business background to the ranch.

"You don't have a customer if he's not going to make money off your product," Minnie Lou says.

"So we strive to produce that kind of bull. Not only will he have some longevity to him and know how to cover the country, but then after he gets that cow bred we want that cow to calve easily. Then we want him to just pop and start growing."

Of course, the family's experience in the meat business tells them it doesn't stop there.

"Then, we want an end point out of the feedlot where he will marble and finish up," she says.

They select for fertility by requiring the cows to rebreed in a 60-day window during January and February to fit their fall calving schedule. Heifers are artificially inseminated (AIed) once, followed by a cleanup bull. To aid in this tight breeding season, the Bradleys turned to DNA as a tool that lets them use several sires per pasture.

"Anything that's open at preg-check we ship," James says. "Pedigrees don't matter at that point. It seems everybody is so worried about quick turnover, but for a commercial guy, there's nothing that makes him more money than fertility and longevity in the cows."

James figures a normal cow's life is worth about \$1,500 per year to a commercial producer, because that's what it would cost to develop a heifer and place her into production. The fact that they lead Texas in the number of Pathfinder cows (21) in the 2009 American Angus Association report shows they're committed to fostering good females.

"It's our responsibility as a seedstock producer to absolutely bring cattle that will fit the entire industry," Minnie Lou says.

Educating customers

The family has a history of educating

their customers so they, too, will produce cattle that work for the next segment.

"Because we had so many years in the meat business and we gave people a lot of information, then drug them through the cooler and made them look at their cattle, we have real sophisticated buyers," Mary Lou says.

At the meat plant, James was in charge of sorting the individual animal data, which included everything from marbling and ribeye size to genetics and how the hides were branded.

"We had all of that data, the dollars and cents figured out for what each animal brought," he says. "Then we could go back and look at what the cow's individual return was."

There was always at least a \$300 spread in value of cattle from the same pen. Minnie Lou says one of the hardest parts was delivering bad news to ranchers.

"Honestly, a man would rather have me tell him that his kid was rotten than to tell him his cattle didn't do well," she says.

Most suppliers began to realize that the information was for their own good and made changes accordingly.

"I don't know that we had anybody who never came back, but some of them went away for two or three years," James remembers. "When they came back, they had a little different set of calves."

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► Mary Lou and James Henderson and Minnie Lou Bradley have a long history with CAB, first as American Angus Association members who ultimately own the brand and later through B3R Country Meats. In 2004, the plant was licensed as the first CAB Natural producer, to give consumers the highest-quality choice in that niche category.

"We turned that data into information," Mary Lou adds. Producers got one-page summaries and then had access to the full spreadsheet, which they sent on that era's common medium, the "floppy disc."

Although they sold the meat plant in 2002, their loyal customers still benefit from all those records.

"They still come to our sales with spreadsheets. It's probably one of the only bull sales you'll go to where there are more guys out in the pens studying the data and not just looking at the bulls visually," James says.

The Bradleys have seen lasting value from everything they learned through B3R Country Meats.

"Having been in the meat business, Mary Lou is outstanding at listening to customers and what they want. We tried to build a product that they wanted to buy," James says. "We do the same thing in the bull business."

Packing is known for its extremely tight margins, so the plant relied on meticulous records to turn a profit.

"You measured how many gallons of water you used per month, per head. You measured your productivity per man-hour per pound, per head," Mary Lou says. "You had to know all of your costs per pound, per head."

James and Mary Lou continue to focus on the numbers, James tracking cattle data and Mary Lou "paying the bills."

"We really monitor things against a budget on a monthly basis," he says. "We

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know all of our expenses, incomes and those kinds of things to know where we are in the plan for the year.”

Mary Lou honed her innate marketing skills when selling their natural beef across the country, and those serve her well in her current ranch role. She handles many of the trade shows, including advertising materials, and is known for a low tolerance of having money tied up in items that sit idle.

“If you set it down and she doesn’t see you using it in two days, she sells it,” Minnie Lou jokes. She got rid of a 20-year-old Suburban with no wheels or motor, and got the paying customer to come and pick it up, for example.

Although Minnie Lou has given up much of the physical work on the ranch, she is still very much a relationship builder.

“She can sell more bulls over the phone,” Mary Lou says.

James handles day-to-day operations and works closely with the ranch’s two hired men. When he retreats to the office, the women say he’s solving a problem with numbers.

“He slices and dices the data,” Mary Lou says.

Minnie Lou adds, “The last five or six years we’ve had more improvement than we had in the several years before that, because James and Mary Lou know what they’re doing on the computer.”

The family has always tried to produce registered cattle for nearly the same price as it costs to raise commercial animals. That is reflected in everything from the modest, historic ranch home to the shop/sale facilities.

As sale time nears, the machine shed is cleaned up, green panels are erected to hide



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the tool benches and the bleachers are pulled from the corner. All the bulls are videoed and kept in pens adjacent to the facility.

“We don’t bring in a lot of extra help,” Mary Lou explains. This system has worked for nearly 15 years and currently markets about 200 bulls annually. On occasion, females are offered private treaty.

Looking to the future, they are starting to use DNA markers to collect more data on their cattle. James predicts it will become standard procedure, but in the meantime they want to be ahead of the curve. Rain permitting, they hope to ramp up the number of bulls offered.

They will continue to place importance on all traits in balance, while being sure they

please that ultimate customer.

Production agriculture isn’t easy, but at the Bradley 3 Ranch, simple isn’t part of the vocabulary.

“I don’t think there’s any business as challenging as ranching and farming, because we really don’t control prices or government regulations or Mother Nature, so we get up every morning with all these challenges,” Minnie Lou says. “I think that’s what keeps us going.”

After 54 years of breeding cattle, she says the future offers a lot of exciting and rewarding opportunities for the ranch, combining new DNA technology with common cattle sense.



Leading by doing

The Bradley family doesn’t talk much about sharing their time and talents with the greater beef industry. They just do it.

Minnie Lou Bradley’s parents instilled in her the responsibility of serving in any organization where she might choose to be a member. Besides countless hours at the local and state levels, she served as vice chairperson of the Integrated Resource Management committee of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA). Applying those concepts to the breed led to her election in 2005 as the first female president of the American Angus Association.

“We feel it’s necessary and, even though it takes a lot of time, you should do those things,” Minnie Lou says.

In addition to formal titles, the Bradleys have enriched the beef production world through innovative use of technology. In 1986, they acquired one of the first ultrasound machines in their area and then collected carcass data on all scanned cattle, allowing for accuracy testing. Determined to bring only the best beef to consumers, they helped develop concepts for the Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) programs.

They used information feedback to orient customers toward a focus on data, 15 years ago becoming one of the first seedstock

operations to use video instead of running bulls through a salering. DNA-testing all cattle since 1997 has allowed the use of multi-sire pastures for the seedstock operation.

That sense of devotion to the industry was inherited by daughter Mary Lou. She is a member of the national Cattlemen’s Beef Board (CBB) and serves on the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) board.

James Henderson has his own list of industry involvement, including past president of the Southwest Meat Association and past director of the Texas Cattle Feeders Association. He currently chairs the NCBA Beef Production Research Committee.

The family has been recognized with dozens of prestigious awards, ranging from the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) Pioneer Award to environmental stewardship honors from TSCRA and NCBA.

“The Certified Angus Beef 2009 Commitment to Excellence award is just one more that appropriately spotlights this ranch for doing things right,” says Larry Corah, CAB vice president. “Minnie Lou and her family have provided leadership to this industry in so many valuable ways, and we’re thankful for that.”