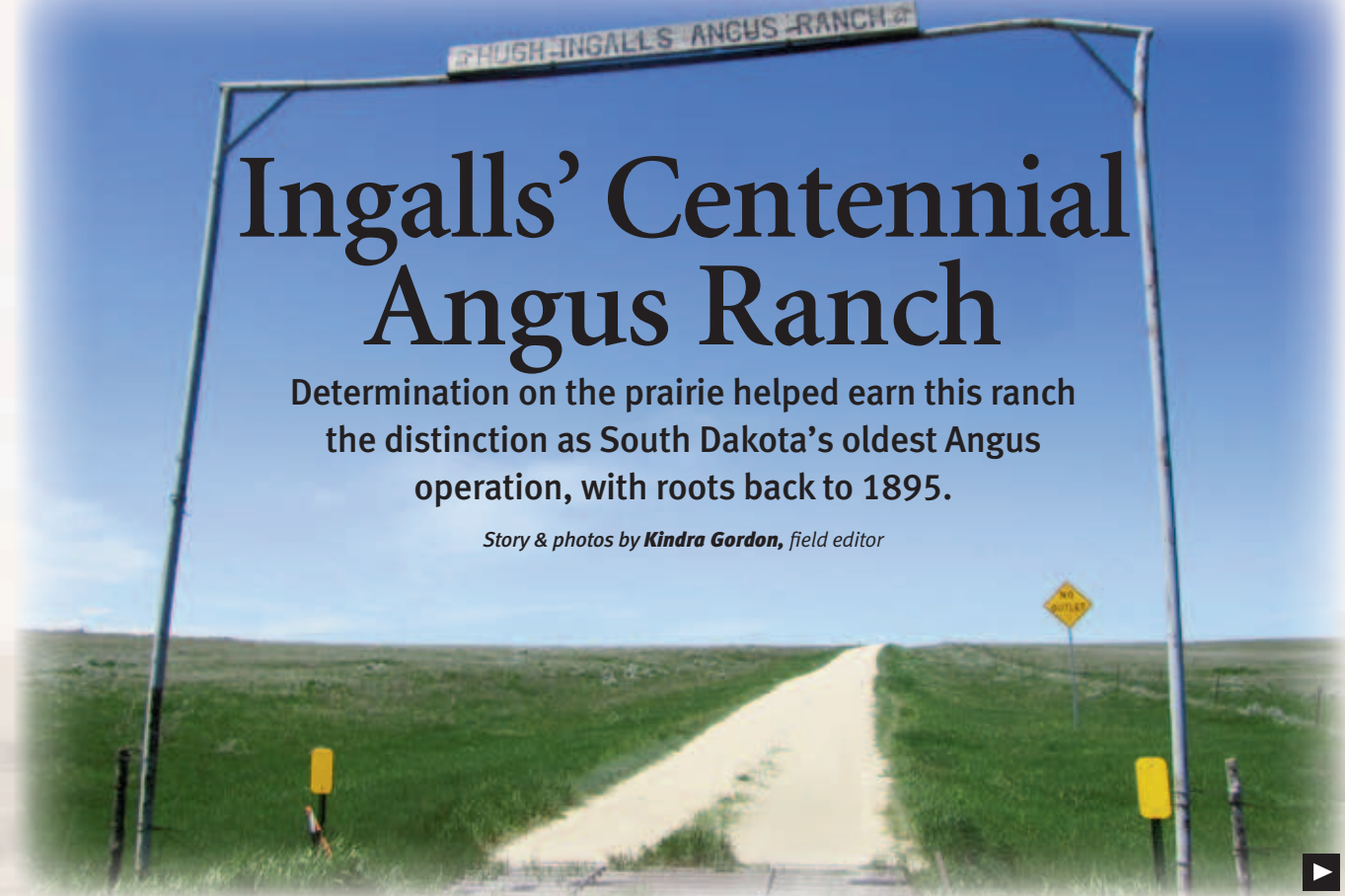


Ingalls' Centennial Angus Ranch

Determination on the prairie helped earn this ranch the distinction as South Dakota's oldest Angus operation, with roots back to 1895.

Story & photos by **Kindra Gordon**, field editor



Ingalls is a surname well-known in South Dakota. Author Laura Ingalls shared stories of her family's homesteading experiences near De Smet, S.D., through the renowned *Little House on the Prairie* book series.

In the Angus industry, another Ingalls family — a shirttail relative of the famous author — has also built a historic reputation in South Dakota. Hugh and Eleanor Ingalls have the distinction of operating what's said to be the state's oldest existing Angus herd. Located in the rolling native prairie southwest of Faith, S.D., the couple, who are now in their mid-80s, are still active in the ranch that goes back four generations.

The Ingalls' Angus story begins with James Ingalls — Hugh's great-grandfather — who was also a first cousin to Charles Ingalls, Laura's father.

On Oct. 5, 1895, James, who lived in eastern South Dakota, purchased an Angus bull in Illinois from A. Royce & Son. That bull was Ermine Prince, a registered bull born June 13, 1893. His registration number — 19975 — is neatly printed on a handwritten pedigree, of which Hugh and Eleanor still have a copy.

Biggest challenge: Weather. From drought to blizzards, Ingalls Angus has faced it all.

Hugh says he does not know the story as to what prompted James to buy that bull during a time when primarily Hereford cattle were being raised, but it was the foundation establishing the Ingalls Angus legacy that is being carried on today — 121 years later. The current operation includes nearly 500 head of Angus cattle.

Moving West

In 1908, James' son Albert Ingalls — Hugh's grandfather — moved the family and the Angus herd from Humboldt, S.D., to the

western side of the state to the ranch's present location. Albert's son Lawrence — Hugh's father — kept the Angus herd going, and in 1942 transferred a registered-Angus heifer to the family's fourth generation — Hugh. Twelve-year-old Hugh named the heifer Bessie, and he fondly remembers taking her to the Western Junior Livestock Show in Rapid City, about three hours from the ranch.

Bessie was the first black Angus to be



► **Above:** Hugh and Eleanor Ingalls were honored with the Century Award at the 2015 Angus Convention. To see a video highlighting the ranch, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WLXPdStBOVY>.

Centennial Award

shown at the show in the days when Hereford dominated. Hugh recalls being a “scared farm kid” at the event and taking a good amount of ribbing from the other exhibitors. He doesn’t recall how he placed, but a photo shows him proudly displaying his heifer with a ribbon dangling from her halter.

While Hugh relished his ranch upbringing, he also enjoyed learning. In 1947, he graduated from Sturgis High School. It was located two hours from the ranch, but he stayed in town with his grandmother during the week. He then earned a two-year agriculture degree at South Dakota State College (now University) in Brookings, S.D., and returned to the ranch full-time in 1949.

Pioneering spirit

On June 1, 1950, Hugh and Eleanor were married. She grew up near Vale and Newell, S.D., about an hour west of the ranch. They had six children in 10 years — four daughters and two sons.

Eleanor recalls those early years, when they were much like pioneers. They had a three-room house and got electricity after their second child was born. Running water arrived after the fifth child was born.

“That wasn’t unusual. Everybody, the neighbors, we were pretty much all the same, so you didn’t feel like it was unusual. ... We started out with nothing and got along with what we had, and were happy with what we had,” she says.

By 1956, the family started using production records to focus on quality in their Angus herd. In the early years, Hugh’s brother, Dale, was also involved in the operation, but now he has his own portion of the ranch. Through the years, Hugh became involved in the Angus breed on a state, regional and national level through the American Angus Association.



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Selling bulls private treaty has also been a part of the family history. Recalls Hugh, “My dad sold bulls private treaty when I was a kid.” Hugh and Eleanor have offered 120 or more bulls for sale beginning each January for the past three decades. For many years, Hugh built a name for himself by singing short jingles on the radio to promote and publicize their annual offering.

For the sale, Hugh sets a base price, with those bulls with higher weaning weight ratios commanding a higher price. If more than one buyer is interested in the same bull, a bid-off occurs.

As the years went by, Hugh and Eleanor added land to the ranch, and they were able to add on to their home twice. When the children were young, Eleanor tended to them, but as they grew older, the entire family was out working with the cattle.

“The Lord’s been good to us and given us opportunities to work with good people and good cattle,” says Hugh.

In 1995, which marked the 100th anniversary of the purchase of that first

Angus bull by the Ingalls family, they took to calling their operation Ingalls Centennial Angus Ranch.

Today, Hugh and Eleanor’s six children are grown and living lives of their own around the country. Their two sons both have Angus operations in Wyoming. Hugh and Eleanor are proud of them all, as well as their 18 grandchildren and more than two dozen great-grandchildren.

In spite of their age (Hugh is 86 and Eleanor is 85), they both still travel, and attending the National Angus Convention each fall is a highlight to which they look forward. Two hired men assist with the daily ranch work alongside Hugh. Hugh still tends to the registration records, while Eleanor handles bookkeeping for the ranch.

Both Hugh and Eleanor reflect on their lives and count their family, friends and neighbors as blessings who have helped them along the journey. They also count a good day’s work as a blessing.

Says Eleanor, “One of the reasons we’re still

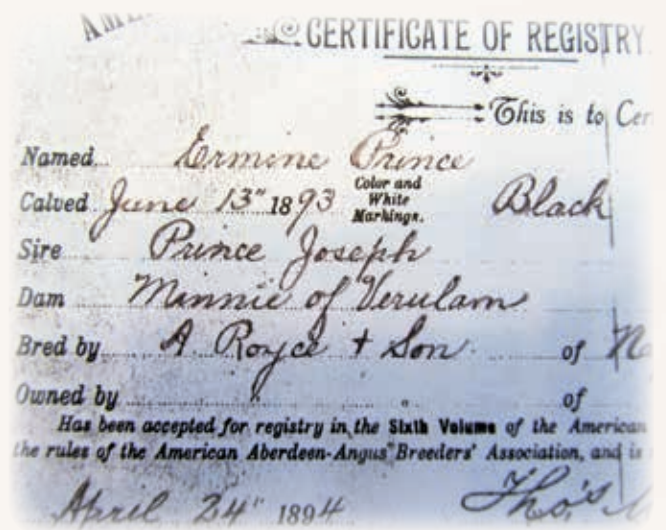
Four generations, 121 years

James Ingalls (*bought registered-Angus bull in 1895*)

Albert Ingalls
Lawrence Ingalls
Hugh Ingalls

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here is because we get up in the morning and have breakfast, and he's out of the house to go feed his cows. It's one of the biggest joys in his life — to go feed his cows and do his outside things. I love my home and still like to can peaches."

Cow sense

Through the years, Hugh has put his emphasis on building a good, balanced cow herd. With regard to maternal traits, he looks for femininity, mothering ability and milk, which he wants in double digits, but not over 30.

He says, "You've got to use good bulls, but even before that, you've got to have good cows."

When asked what he thinks of the status of the Angus breed today, Hugh says, "I

believe the breed is in a pretty good position as far as phenotype. The breed has gone through extremes both ways. We've all got to remember that generally if you select for one trait too hard, you sacrifice another. Selection has got to be balanced."

Persisting in the business for more than eight decades also brings with it some difficult life lessons. Hugh counts weather as the biggest challenge he has faced through the years. Often it is drought in their arid, western South Dakota location. In October 2013, it was an

early-season blizzard like no one had ever experienced, with 2 inches of rain followed by wind and 2-3 feet of snow. Hugh and Eleanor had nearly 200 bred cows perish in the storm. In total, western South Dakota ranchers lost nearly 30,000 head.

Of that experience, Hugh says, "When things like this happen, and they will happen if you're here long enough, it's going to happen, it's just another chapter in the book, another page in life. You got to keep on going. You got to take what comes. Buck up and do the best you can. Help your neighbors, do what you can."

That attitude is to what Hugh attributes his success. He credits his father and grandfather for much of his optimistic spirit, saying, "I guess I have a little optimism probably bred into me. If things got tough, my dad used to say, 'Never give up 'til you're dead.' One of his other sayings was, 'A wise man changes his mind. A fool never does.' I think there's a lot of truth in that."

Hugh also jokes that some of his success has come from sheer "bull-headedness," but adds, "We're an optimistic bunch, I guess, or we wouldn't be here. You need perseverance."

AY

