



# Behind the Scenes

Females play a role at Gilbert Angus Ranch, in more ways than one.

by *Carrie Stadheim*

**W**e started raising commercial Angus cattle in the 1940s. My grandfather Frank and my dad, Lloyd, raised Angus cattle when they started with cattle,” says Ray Gilbert, owner and operator of Gilbert Angus Ranch, Buffalo, S.D. But if it were not for a certain lady, the ranch wouldn’t be there.

Originally a sheep outfit, the home ranch was established through “desert claim” by Ray’s grandmother Louise after she married Frank Gilbert. Frank had homesteaded about 5 miles east. Frank’s father, Parker, the first Gilbert in the area, raised his family just west of Grandma Louise’s claim, where Gilbert Angus Ranch sits today.

The Cross J Bar brand was established in 1894, Ray says. “That brand is still used on Gilbert Angus Ranch cows.”

Frank; his brother, Ray; and brother-in-law William Fried started the town of Buffalo, the seat of Harding County, in 1909.



**Linda Gilbert**

“Grandpa Frank’s homestead was right beside the road that would later become SD Highway 85. When traffic first started coming up it, Grandpa would go stop someone traveling by and invite them in for dinner,” Ray shares. “They would be strangers, but Grandpa still thought they might be hungry.”

Ray’s father, Lloyd, went into business with Grandpa and Grandma Gilbert after finishing school. His mother and her family had homesteaded the adjoining land. After the two married in 1947, the land was managed as one outfit. Lloyd and Helga incorporated the ranch in 1962.

Ray’s sister, Helen; his father; mother; and Ray all became part of Gilbert Angus Ranch.

“Dad died at the age of 49 in 1963. I was 13 years old, and my sister was 11,” says Ray. The “gentler” gender continued to be vital to the ranch’s success. “My mother was a strong woman who took over the ranch and continued to add to the operation.”

Ray ranched with his mother until he graduated from South Dakota State University with a degree in animal science in 1971. Helga then retired to Buffalo, but she didn’t disappear. “She still liked to come out and help at busy times,” Ray says.

## A common interest

Ray married Linda Halligan in 1970. It was a natural fit. Linda grew up with Angus cattle, too. Her dad, Ken, and brother, Jim, ranched in central South Dakota and sold Angus bulls.

“She always tells me that having Angus cattle helped her decide to marry me,” Ray jokes. Soon Linda and later their two children joined the corporation.

As with the generations before them, Ray

and Linda’s daughter, Andrea, and son, Lloyd, were good hands at a young age. When something needed to be done, they did it.

“We are so blessed that our children like ranching and cattle,” Ray says.

Andrea is now the technology administrator for the city of Buffalo, Wyo., but she heads back home to help with calving and shipping.

Lloyd came back to ranch after receiving his associate’s degree from Laramie County Community College in Cheyenne, Wyo., and a stint as a professional steer wrestler. Lloyd and his wife, Patty (a practicing physician’s assistant), have blessed the ranch with the sixth generation — daughter Sawyer, 9, and son Grey, 6.

“They keep Grandma Linda and I smiling and watching the future unfold for Gilbert Angus Ranch,” Ray says.

“It seems like just yesterday we were ‘ponying’ the grandkids’ horses while we moved cattle horseback because there wasn’t anyone available to babysit in the house. We had to do our babysitting and keep right on working at the same time,” Ray recalls.

“Now, in just a few short years, the kids are already the best help we could ask for. We hire very little extra labor. The neighbors are good to help when we do need extra hands.”

## Core of the herd

Besides the ladies who ride, rope, fence and help make day-to-day decisions, there are some other females vital to the success of Gilbert Angus Ranch. The cows.

Ray says they strive for a moderate-framed maternal dam that will calve in April or May and still raise a 550- to 600-pound (lb.) calf. They look for replacements with the easy fleshing, fertile, maternal characteristics required of a Gilbert Angus Ranch cow.

According to Ray, 95% of their mature cows conceive within a 45-day bull turnout



► Grandpa and his grandkids, Grey (left) and Sawyer (right) celebrate Ray’s birthday together. Ray says Sawyer and Grey are invaluable help on the ranch, and that working cows is much more fun with this new bunch of cowhands. Both kids own Angus cows with their own brands.

## Serving the industry

It is no surprise that the matriarch of Gilbert Angus Ranch is affecting the beef and cattle industry in a big way. Nevermind the thousands of meals she's cooked for her crew, the hours she's spent as her kids' and grandkids' chauffeur, the miles she's ridden horseback moving cattle, and the hours of late-night bookkeeping. And that's not to mention the industry positions of leadership she's accepted, including board member for the South Dakota Stockgrowers Association, the Black Hills Stock Show Foundation, and active member of R-CALF USA.

Recently, Linda Gilbert has taken her knowledge and passion for the industry down a new path. Appointed to the Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB) last April, she has taken on the challenging role of caretaker of beef checkoff funds. In order to devote adequate time to this demanding endeavor, she's had to let go of some of the other positions of service.

"I am honored to have been appointed to the Cattlemen's Beef Board," Linda says. "I do not see my role as influencing the producers, but overseeing their interests in the beef checkoff. The primary responsibility a CBB board member has is to guide the planning, budgeting, implementation and evaluation of checkoff programs," she says.

"While the checkoff money is to be used to encourage promotion, research, consumer information, industry information, foreign marketing and producer communications, it is necessary that every producer feel the money is being used either by their state beef council, the contractors or the CBB for the good of the entire industry," Linda says, recognizing that with the complexity of the program, producers often feel left out of the information stream.

"The Beef Checkoff Program works hard to let producers know where their money goes," she says, inviting producers to contact her at any time to share thoughts on the beef checkoff. "I am here to be the best voice I can for you and your operation."

How does she find time to do it all?

"My family supports me," she says. "It has been a journey where I have learned to multi-task, be prepared to change plans at any given minute, always have some kind of meal ready for an unknown number of cowboys at any time, and, most of all ... have cookies ready for the riding crew — Sawyer and Grey."

Today's advances in information technology help, Linda says. "In this age of information, I can read news releases and emails on my phone while waiting for cows to gather. I can be on a conference call while making dinner and washing clothes. I can meet via Skype with board members in other states. I try to be a person always willing to learn something new every day, and we can certainly do that now.

"We try to recognize everyone's strengths on our ranch. Ray is a strong, determined man [who] is happiest when riding a good horse and working Angus cows. Lloyd has traveled the world and found he was still happiest on the ranch with his wife and children and improving the cattle and efficiency of the enterprise. Andrea is a wonderful support system because I can call her for technology information or business tactics," says Linda.

While the men may not be known as outspoken advocates of the cattle industry, they are strong believers in standing up in defense of the independent cattle producer. "So here I am, an Irish big mouth that has been allowed to be an equal partner on the ranch since the beginning, that is willing to be that voice," says Linda.

program. The heifers are synchronized and artificially inseminated, by Lloyd, then turned out with cleanup bulls for 30 days. The heifers are pregnancy-tested via ultrasound in August, which allows the ranch to capitalize on what is generally a strong late summer feeder market. Cows are ultrasounded in late October.

Making their home just 2 miles from the home place, on a ranch the corporation purchased in 1983, Lloyd, Patty and the kids calve 200 heifers and the 3-year-olds at their place. Ray and Linda oversee the remaining cow herd during calving season. A total of about 1,000 head of females calve each spring.

All of the heifer calves are weaned on a fenceline weaning system in mid-October.

"This gives us options. We can sort and sell in December or January, or keep them to breed or spay some," Ray says. Replacement-quality heifers that they don't keep are generally marketed through Belle Fourche Livestock, Belle Fourche, S.D. Buyers like them for their growth and fertility.

"We wean the calves on an impact starter and then go to bunk-feeding. This allows the heifer to grow to 800 pounds for breeding," Ray says. "They will weigh 950 to 1,000 pounds by August. The heifers will cycle at a lighter weight and continue to gain during the grazing season. They do not lose that fat when turned out on grass after breeding.

"The heifers are staying in the herd longer and still achieve the mature cow weight of

1,200 to 1,300 pounds," Ray says, noting the herd is built on LeMar Angus bloodlines. "It is actually asking a lot of a heifer to breed before she is 12 months old, but we have success with this program. I attribute it to the Angus breed and the strong maternal characteristics."

While carcass is a high priority, Ray says, the ultimate goal is to achieve balanced cattle that can survive in the tough climate of northwestern South Dakota with limited grain and then perform when they reach a feedlot.

### Adapted

Ray and Linda say they both believe strongly that one of the best decisions they have made was the one to continue raising those beloved hardy, shiny black cattle.

"Angus cattle have worked very well in our severe climate," Ray says. "The efficiency of the Angus breed is evident as we experience drought, deep snow and extreme temperatures."

Kind of like the other ladies of the ranch, the cows are expected to do their job with no drama or specialized treatment.

"Harvesting the hard grasses with cattle is the best use of the resources on this ranch," Ray says. "The development of rotational grazing on our ranch in the 1980s allowed us to triple our carrying capacity."

The 2- and 3-year-old females are started on a ration of 30% high-protein cake and hay

in December. The older cows are wintered in rough country with high-protein cake.

"If the grass is not covered up with early snows, we do not hay them until February. They rustle for feed and still maintain a desirable body condition score," Ray says.

"We have noticed the longevity of our females increased when we started developing our own replacement heifers," Ray says. "A 10- or 11-year-old cow is typical of our herd."

As with any good outfit, there is a healthy balance at Gilbert Angus Ranch. Sire selection has been a crucial piece of the puzzle for the Gilberts' herd improvements.

Ray and Lloyd, like the generations before them, are hard workers, and willing to think outside the box in order to best utilize the resources on their dry, arid, Harding County ranch. But it appears, too, that the females are there for good. They do their job. They make things run smoothly; they work behind the scenes with little or no recognition. The cows and the Gilbert ladies are important to the success of Gilbert Angus Ranch, and they work right alongside the boys.

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**— Ray Gilbert**

