



► The Strangs' ranch lies in a quiet valley a few miles east of Meeker, Colo.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BART & MARY STRANG

Point of Transition



PHOTO BY ERIC GRANT

Angus cattle propel one western Colorado family to success.

by *Eric Grant*

Colorado's White River Valley, which pushes westward beyond the Rockies, marks a point of transition. Here, the high mountains give way to oak brush hillsides and the desert country beyond. Once a hunting ground for Ute American Indians, the valley remains a productive and abundant place. Its patchwork of pastures and meadows spill beyond the north and south shoulders of the river, which sparkles beneath an open sky, and the rocky, sawtooth mountains rise abruptly from the valley floor.

Bart and Mary Strang came here from the Roaring Fork Valley 34 years ago. They'd been raising seedstock at 8,500 feet (ft.) and

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wanted a better environment for their cattle. They found the valley's isolated, productive meadows a perfect answer. Their ranch is nestled in a quiet valley a few miles east of the town of Meeker.

The Strangs had plenty of good help along the way. Their four daughters — Mary, Ellen, Lisa and Sarah — were an integral part of the business growing up and, today, Lisa and her husband, Tom Walsh, co-manage the ranch in Meeker. Mary and her husband, Greg Cunningham, run part of the family's cow herd in Kaycee, Wyo.

"We realized we weren't going to get rich, but that's not what it's all about," Mary recalls. "We love the challenges the purebred business offers, believe in what we're doing and value the people with whom we do business. It's been the sole focus of our lives for many years."

By popular demand

Traditionally a Hereford seedstock business, the family added Angus to their breeding program 14 years ago. The decision to do so marked a significant point of transition for the family, propelled in large part by increasing demand from their customers for black genetics.

The Strangs also recognized that their customers could reap the economic benefits of crossbreeding by producing black baldie cows and calves, which are ideal for the

region's high-altitude production conditions and have greater marketing flexibility.

The genetic foundation for the Strangs' Angus herd came from Thomas Angus Ranch of Baker City, Ore. Because these cattle were from a semiarid, mountainous region, they were naturally acclimated to the rugged conditions of western Colorado.

"The foundation Thomas cows were predominantly New Trend breeding, and they provided a solid base on which to build a program. We want to produce Angus cattle with a good hip, a lot of muscle," Mary says, "which will work at a high altitude. A lot of Angus cattle profile well, but they lack the quarter and thickness that we expect from our cattle. Today, our Angus are earning a reputation for thickness and muscle. We believe we're on the right track."

Formula for success

In recent years, the Strangs have quietly become one of the West's most successful

seedstock operations. They annually market more than 100 head of Angus and Hereford bulls and females through their October production sale. They claim the formula for

their long-term success is simple: Do what's right by the commercial producers, and don't chase fads.

For example, in the 1980s, before the Strangs had Angus cattle and when producers were raising bigger and taller cattle, Bart resisted temptation and held course. He could see the inefficiencies and shortcomings of exceptionally big-framed cattle. At times he felt alone in the wilderness.

When he took his bulls to compete at the National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., he didn't feel he should risk hurting the future of a breeding bull with

excessive feed. He knew he wasn't going to collect any championships with his 6- and 7-frame, leaner (but thick) cattle, but winning wasn't the goal; exposure for his breeding program and staying on course with the kind of cattle he believed in — ones which were working for his commercial customers — was the goal.

Bart notes, "Our breeding program is designed for the commercial industry. The bottom line requires that we produce functional cattle that will perform efficiently in the many climates and under the varying management practices of our diverse group of buyers. To accomplish this goal, we've built our breeding programs on cattle with a balance of traits to facilitate both calving ease and performance."

The Strangs' primary goal is to produce cattle that are muscular, long-bodied, easy-keeping and fertile. "Fertility in bulls and the ability of cows to conceive easily is our number one priority, because reproductive efficiency is fundamental to profitability," Bart says. "Our cows must milk and have neat udders with small teats in order to stay in our herd. We want balanced cattle. We haven't chased single traits because single-trait selection usually means sacrificing fertility or structural correctness."

The family also wants cattle that calve easily — but possess the right kind of dimension to ensure performance and growth. "If you select solely for calving ease,"

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Mary says, “you can see it in the cow herd. The cattle often lack performance and dimension. In our program, there is no room for herd bulls that sire outsized calves with undesirable dimension. In fact, we won’t use a herd bull who cannot be successfully mated to first-calf heifers.”

Gaining altitude

A big concern in the mountains and their high elevation is “Brisket disease,” an often-fatal heart disease that afflicts all breeds of cattle. For many decades, the disease prevented the introduction of Angus into high-country ranching conditions. But, genetic selection can greatly reduce it. The Strangs have worked hard to develop functional cattle for those who ranch at a high altitude. They try to ensure that their seedstock are resistant to Brisket disease and have low pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) scores.

They work closely with veterinarian Tim Holt of Fort Collins, Colo., who is considered an authority on PAP-testing. He PAP-tests all of the bulls they sell and every herd sire they buy. He has been helpful in guiding them away from those genetic lines known to have consistently high PAP scores.

“This is important to our many commercial customers who summer their cattle at or above 8,000 to 10,000 feet,” Mary says. “The PAP test is not an exact science, but it is the only tool the industry has in trying to avoid Brisket disease at high altitudes. An animal’s PAP is significantly affected by its genetics, environment and sometimes nutrition.”

The Strangs also use technologies and performance programs such as the American Angus Association Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program. They value expected progeny differences (EPDs), ratios, etc., but say they must be interpreted in relation to environment and management. This year they’ll begin ultrasounding their cattle to improve the carcass merit of their breeding program and



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provide their customers with improved meat quality information on their bulls and heifers.

“Ultrasounding is a new venture for us,” Mary says, “but it won’t be our sole selection criteria. We realize that if you breed for just

carcass traits, you risk losing a lot of other things that are just as important.”

In addition, the Strangs make use of artificial insemination (AI), breeding to top-quality, proven Angus bulls, although they’re careful to use sires with acceptable PAP scores only.

The fundamentals

In the end, the Strang family’s philosophy hinges on their long-held belief

that you must know your cattle before you can improve your cattle. “There is no substitute for knowing your cattle,” Bart says. “We have a lot of computerized tools at our disposal, but we have to remember that they’re just tools and not a substitute for breeding cattle.”

Another management fundamental is to

know and listen to your customers. “You need to know what’s working and what’s not,” Bart says. “You have to be ruthless sometimes.” Even if you paid thousands for a herd bull, he explains, if “he’s not working, you’d better put wheels under him. You have to cut your losses and find the genetics that will work for your program.”

For Bart and Mary, a sound breeding program ultimately is about consistency. “One of our goals is to have consistent quality from the top of our bulls to the bottom. This is critical from a commercial buyer’s standpoint. Also, we hope we have steady production sales without a big spread,” Bart says. “We want the consistency bred into our cow herd.”

“We also recognize that we’re in the food business, and this is important to us,” Mary adds. “Those of us raising ruminant animals are really marketing one of our country’s greatest renewable resources, which is grass. We’re in the business of converting grass to protein through our cattle. We’re providing a high-protein food and a lot of byproducts for consumers. Our job is to do it in an efficient and environmentally sound manner.”

