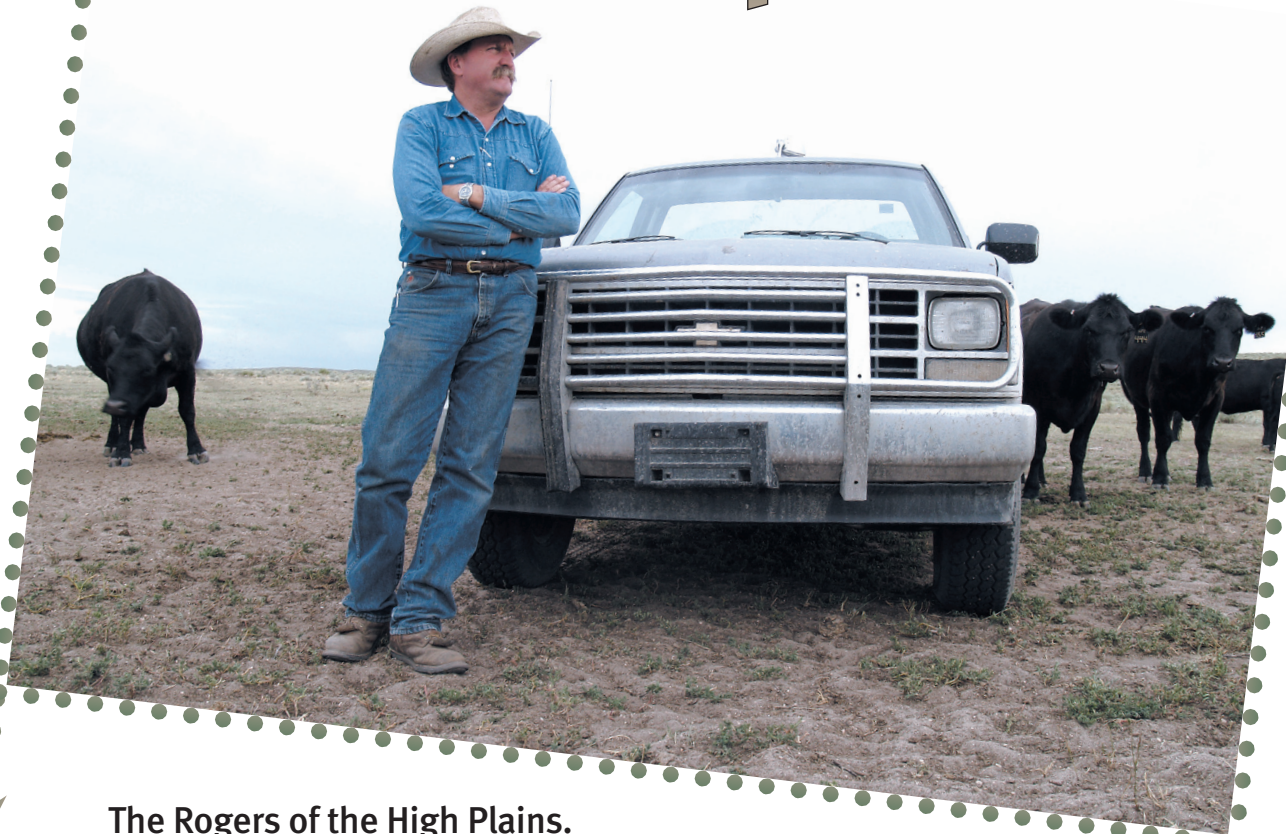


Prairie Perspectives



The Rogers of the High Plains.

Story & photos by **Eric Grant**

Driving by his parched pastures and grainfields, Kenny Rogers looks to the horizon for signs of rain. To the west, a thunderhead has risen above the prairie, its black belly blotting out the last traces of sunlight.

Curtains of virga — rain that evaporates before it reaches the ground — hold a tantalizing promise of hope. But the storm won't quench his grass or fill his dry ponds, and Kenny knows it.

"It ain't gonna happen today," he says. "But it'd sure be good to get some rain."

Rogers and his wife, Jody, returned to the prairie 16 years ago. They'd had enough of city life and decided it was time to do what he loved best — raise quality Angus seedstock.

"Independence is what I like best about ranching," Kenny reflects. "I don't have to worry about somebody firing me if I take a stand on something."

Taking a stand is precisely what the Rogers family, which has farmed and ranched near Yuma, Colo., for four generations, has done from the beginning.

They were among the first western U.S. breeders to shift from Herefords to Angus, a decision made 57 years ago. And they've stayed with the same type of cattle from the

beginning, focusing on performance and feed efficiency, the two things that really make their customers money, Kenny says.

"This is a tough business," he adds, "you've just got to learn to roll with it."

The Wagon Wheel Ranch rests in the vast emptiness of Colorado's eastern plains, just a few miles south of Yuma. The wind constantly shifts in direction, quaking the cottonwoods in the draws, and slowly but surely reshaping and resculpting the sandy hillsides that surround their home.

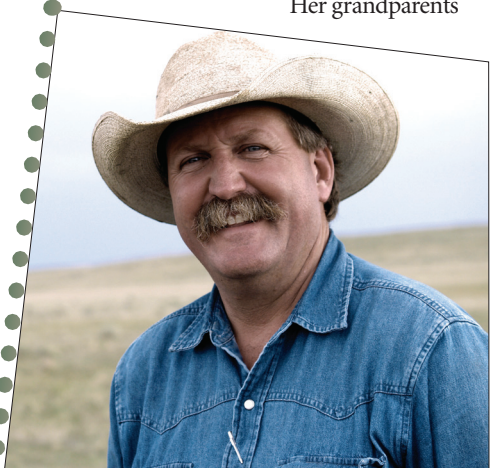
The high plains of Colorado are productive in good years, but harsh and unforgiving when it's dry or cold. It's been dry here for many years.

But if there's an advantage to ranching and farming in the same place for generations, it's historical perspective. And the Rogers have plenty of it.

Kenny's dad, Francis, 80, wanted nothing more than to "cowboy" from the time he

was a boy. Even at his age, he remains active on the ranch, spending his summer days preparing for harvest, working on machinery and checking on cattle. He grew up north of Yuma, joining the Army during World War II. Shaped by hardscrabble living during the Great Depression, he loved ranching so much, he vowed to return to the ranch when he got home.

Kenny's mother, Mary, was born in the same house where she and Francis live today. Her grandparents



► "It gets harder every year to find a level where we can continue to perform and be profitable," Kenny says. "Every year, we're changing our management and marketing practices. We're constantly looking for new ways to reduce costs and maximize revenue."

homesteaded in 1899 on 160 acres nearby. She is scrappy and articulate, pulling no punches when it comes to surviving in the cattle business.

“The whole crux of this operation is that we treat our customers as friends,” she says. “We haven’t lost any that I can think of because of bad dealings. We’ve always tried to make things right.”

The Rogers began raising Angus cattle in 1949, when Mary convinced Francis to do so. It wasn’t an easy decision for him. Back then, just about everyone in the county raised Herefords, and black-hided cattle of any kind were considered a marketing pariah.

But Francis relented and soon discovered he liked the fact that there were no horns to remove, no chapped teats in the winter, and few cancer eyes to treat.

“Mary took the cowboy out of me,” Francis recalls. “But it was the best decision we ever made.”

100 years of ranching

The family recently received recognition as a “Centennial Ranch” from the state of Colorado for its 100 years of existence.

There are parts of the ranch that remain pristine, its soil unbroken by plow. Sagebrush and buffalo grass spread from the valley bottoms to the far hillsides. Windmills still toil in the wind, recharging ponds and tanks. Cows and calves gather nearby on hot summer days.

Looking at his cattle, Kenny drags his toil through the sandy soil. “This will never be a turnkey deal,” he says. “No matter how much advancement there is in technology, no matter how much change there is, you’ll never be able to shut the door and go home like you can with a business in town. The cows have to have water, and the sprinklers have to run.”

All told, the Rogers raise about 425 head of registered Angus cows. On a wet year, they can run as many

► “Independence is what I like best about ranching,” Kenny Rogers reflects. “I don’t have to worry about somebody firing me if I take a stand on something.”

as 500 head, but the drought this summer has forced them to scale back their cow herd. They also raise wheat and corn. Their business hinges on a one-day bull sale held in March each year.

“We try to raise the kind of cattle that our customers want,” Francis says. “We buy bulls on their functionality, not just on their numbers. Buying bulls on just EPDs (expected progeny differences) is just like marrying a woman in a sack dress. You don’t know what you’ve got until you get her home.”

Their breeding program has placed emphasis on growth and feed efficiency, making extensive use of Hoff Scotch Cap and Rishel Angus genetics. “We want high feed efficiency and high gain,” Kenny says. “We’re not afraid to use the knife on a big number of calves. We ship a lot more steers than we do bulls. We get rid of them if we don’t like them. We’ve always been brutally honest with people. We tell them upfront if there’s a problem, or we flat won’t offer the animal for sale.

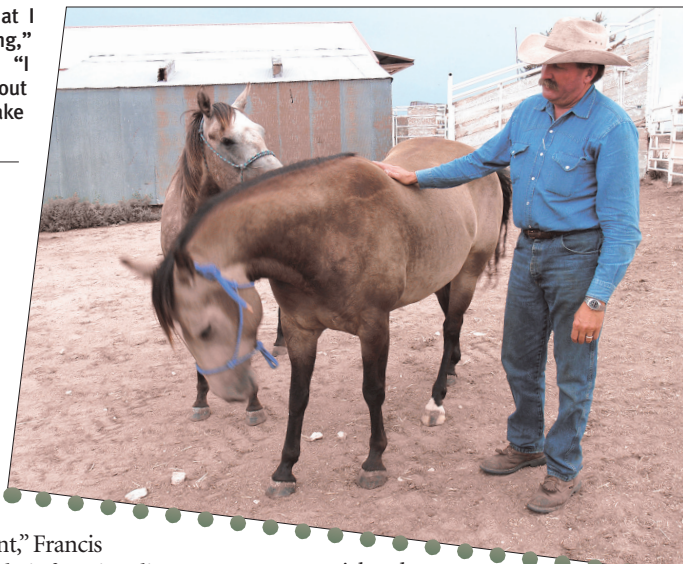
“About 60% of our customers are within 100 miles of our ranch,” he adds. “They typically have 60 to 100 cows. The other 40% of our customers are larger ranchers, and they might buy as many as four or five bulls. Many of our customers have been buying from us for so many years that they will buy a bull sight-unseen. They know if they don’t like the bull, they don’t own it.”

The Rogers make extensive use of artificial insemination (AI), Ailing the entire cow herd to top bulls. Then they turn out breeding groups with individual bulls into 11 separate pastures.

Economic realities

The economic realities of ranching have forced the Rogers to change their production and marketing practices throughout the years. When Kenny and Jody returned to the ranch in the early 1990s, the family shifted from both

► Francis Rogers wanted nothing more than to “cowboy” from the time he was a boy. He and his wife, Mary, live in the same house in which Mary was born.



commercial and purebred Angus production to primarily purebred. They cash-rent more of their farmland and farm fewer acres than they once did, which provides them with some shelter against fluctuating grain prices.

The Rogers also work hard at extracting more dollars from everything they produce. “When we market something, we try to add value to it,” Kenny says. “It’s one way for us to hold ground in the commodity business. We own stock in Mountain View Harvest Cooperative and Gerard’s Bakery, because we sell out wheat to them. We work hard at marketing our cull cattle when seasonal prices are higher. And we’re finding ways to sell commercial cattle — replacement heifers and feedlot cattle — through special sales to add value to our customers’ cattle.

“It gets harder every year to find a level where we can continue to perform and be profitable,” Kenny says. “Every year, we’re changing our management and marketing practices. We’re constantly looking for new ways to reduce costs and maximize revenue.”

The family also moved away from exclusively private treaty sales of their bulls and heifers — something that was no longer time- and cost-effective — to a one-day production sale that takes place in March. They believe selling bulls into a competitive bidding system not only has helped provide buyers with access to all their sale cattle, but has also increased the sales prices for their bulls and heifers.

“With private treaty, you can spend all day with one person before he decides what bull he wants to buy,” Francis says. “With the sale, we sell everything on one day. It focuses our efforts and energy, and it allows our customers to have a fair shot at all the cattle we have for sale.”

The Rogers hosted their first production sale in 1999 at the ranch. Before that they’d





► The high plains of Colorado are productive in good years, but harsh and unforgiving when it's dry or cold. It's been dry here for many years.

always sold their cattle private treaty. They continue to use the National Western Stock Show (NWSS), where they've displayed cattle in the yards for 52 years, as their primary marketing mechanism.

Kenny says the tradition of the NWSS is so ingrained in Francis that every year after Christmas it's hard to keep him focused on the ranch.

"You spin him around like a compass on January 1, and he points toward Denver," Kenny says.

When Francis and Mary first took cattle to Denver, it was still a bustling marketplace for livestock. Cattle and sheep, loaded in train cars, poured in from the mountains

and plains. Whistles blew marking the arrival of locomotives. Nearby packinghouses churned with steam. Buyers, sellers and traders flowed down the long alleys, peering through the slats into

pens stuffed full of cattle.

"The best years at [the] Stock Show were the early ones," Francis recalls. "Our deal at the stock show is that we meet a lot of new buyers, as well as the old buyers. We talk to them all to try to drum up business for our sale."

At one time, the Rogers sold most of their bulls there. Now, laments Mary, "It's just show and tell."

Perhaps most of all, their annual pilgrimage to Denver reminds them of how much the business is changing, and how much it will continue to change.

**"The whole crux
of this operation
is that we treat
our customers
as friends."**

— Mary Rogers

And ironically, they also recognize that key to economic survival — and to ensuring they remain in the Angus business for another 50 years — is embracing what got them here in the first place.

"We don't go gung ho," Francis says. "We just plug along. We don't sell real high-priced cattle, because our customers are real-world ranchers. We want to keep going at the same pace, keep raising the kind of cattle that will make the cowman money."

Asked when he might retire, Francis responds, "When I'm six feet under."

Mary interjects, "We're too stubborn to quit. Ranching is all we know."

