

Real-World Cowboy

Holding the reins as president, Bill Davis has guided the American Angus Association with an optimism based on a fundamental understanding of breed assets.

Story & photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*

With a twinkle in his eye and an impish grin, American Angus Association President Bill Davis invites a person to sit down and share a story or two. If you take him up on the offer, be ready to blush, but also be ready to be won over by his good-natured spirit and serious commitment to the land, the cattle, the Association and the people who make the Angus business what it is today.

“Bill has an eternal optimism for the Angus breed,” says former Board member Mark Gardiner of Ashland, Kan., calling the Sidney, Mont., cattleman one of the great American Angus ambassadors. “He enjoys visiting and teasing with everyone, and his enthusiasm — for cattle, for people, but most of all for life — is contagious.”

“When you are positive and proactive and looking at the good things, you make those happen. That’s all there is to it,” says Bill, a former bull dogger and cancer survivor. “You have to have that kind of an attitude. When you do, hell, you like to be around yourself. When it’s the other way around, nobody wants to be around you, including yourself.”

It was with that mind-set in Louisville last year that he challenged members somewhat deflated from dealing with genetic defects, financial recession and fee increases to see the positives and move forward.

“The time and the climate in the industry and in the breed itself are right. We need to get all on one page, and we need to pull in one direction ...
and we can

do that, and market the marketability of Angus,” Bill said as he accepted the gavel last fall. “It’s as simple as A-B-C. We’ve got the Association, the Breeders and the Cattle.”

It’s a mantra he’s continued all year, touting the attributes of the breed, the breeders, and the programs and services of the Association. In his good-humored way, he’s started reviving the spirit of the breed by reminding us that even in a down year, we are the envy of the cattle industry and we have what we need to stay that way if we’re willing to be positive and proactive and to take the steps we need to take.

That optimism originates at home.

Living the dream

Travel the Lewis & Clark Trail from Saint Joseph, Mo., up the Missouri River and down the Yellowstone about 25 miles and Bill Davis will welcome you to a spot he calls Realtors’ Point. As the third-generation cattleman pauses to drink in the landscape, you can feel the symbiotic relationship of man and environment. The Yellowstone might as well be the artery to his

CONTINUED ON PAGE 40

► “There’s no situation that can’t be improved with a little levity,” says American Angus Association President Bill Davis, making light of conversations about some heavy issues facing the membership today. He recalls only two where he wasn’t able to reach common ground and some understanding.

“It was that ability to communicate with people from all walks of life and all types of Angus producers — as well as his real-world experience in producing Angus cattle, emphasizing the qualities that make the breed relevant to beef production — that led his peers to select him for the leadership role,” notes former Association President Jot Hartley of Vinita, Okla.

Real-World Cowboy CONTINUED FROM PAGE 39

heart; the breaks of the river, the veins that feed every muscle.

Since the time he was a kid, Bill says, he always dreamed of having his own ranch. This qualifies.

"There's three different looks to this place," he says as he describes the 10×10-

mile patch of ground he and wife Jennifer have called home since 1993. "We have the rolling hills with the elm draws; the breaks, which are really rough; and the river bottom."

Cocking his head and tilting forward like he's got a secret to share, Bill grins. "Contrary

to what people think, Eastern Montana is not all flat," he confides.

"It's horseback country here, and of course we love to ride," Bill says. "One of the neatest things about this ranch is you can ride one direction and turn around and ride back in the same footprints and swear you are in different country."

The land is full of surprises for those interested in looking beyond its surface — like the old lantern, coffee pot and cot Bill found a few years back in a little cave.

"Just when you think you've covered every inch, you find something new," Bill says, pondering the possibilities that could have led someone to hide out there.

"There's a lot of history in this country," he shares. The last known Indian battle waged in Montana was fought on Shadwell Creek just over the bluff.

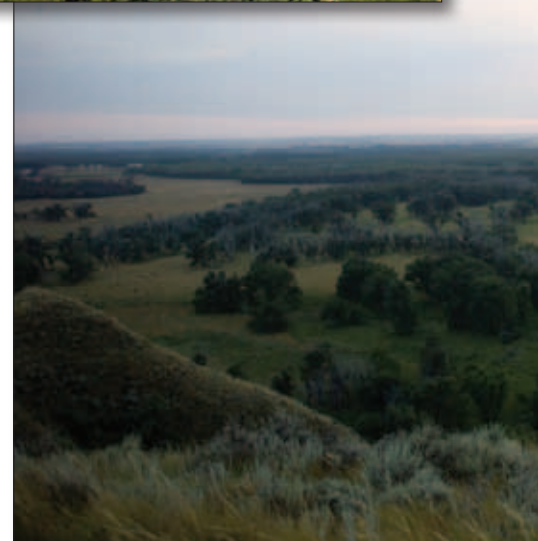
Nine cavalymen guarding a load of guns and ammunition were found massacred, but the guns and ammunition never were.

"They swear up and down that the guns

►Of the three landscapes on Rollin' Rock Angus, the rolling hills and elm draws provide a gentler terrain for single-sire breeding pastures that can cover a section.



►Right and below: "There's some places you don't want to fall off in here," Bill chides, pointing to the magnificence of the southern face of the breaks. "You'd probably starve to death before you hit bottom." The view from the North is quite different, revealing an abundance of grass that the Davises have been able to better utilize through cross-fencing and developing water sites, including 13 artesian wells.



are buried out here,” Bill says, gesturing to the breaks. “I’d love to find them.”

Down on the bottom, on land leased from Buckmasters Ltd. founder Jackie Bushman, “if everything’s just right” you can still see the outline of the corral that inspired the writing of “The Strawberry Roan.” There’s an involved story — best told by the storyteller himself — about just how the horse with the Bar 44 on his hip became immortalized by Marty Robbins and others.

“It makes a hell of a story,” Bill says fondly.

When you love something this much, you take care of it, and Bill and Jennifer have.

“We’ve worked real hard at trying to keep the grass. We use alternate season use, and we can rest-rotate pastures. We’ve cross-fenced and developed water so we can get better utilization.”

Participants took notice during the Montana Ag Lenders Range School hosted on the ranch. “The organizer said in all the years he’d been doing the range school, he’d never seen the range in as good a condition,” Bill says.

As the range flourishes, so does the wildlife — whitetail and mule deer, wild turkey, quail and mountain sheep.

The result is a ranch that is functional as well as breathtaking, providing the Davises ample opportunity to be ambassadors for the role cattlemen play as environmentalists. The landscape has been featured in *Montana the Magazine*, *The American Rancher*, and regularly on the *Buckmasters* TV series.

“We love it when people come here,” Bill says. “We love to share it.”

► Looking out over the Yellowstone from Realtors’ Point, one can imagine William Clark rowing up the river to meet with Meriwether Lewis at the Fort Union Trading Post where the Yellowstone converges with the Missouri. The river bottom provides a more sheltered area for calving and irrigated hay land.



► “Don’t worry about getting ears in the picture. That’s part of this deal,” Bill assures. Ranching to the Davises is more than a way to make a living; it’s a way to live.



But while many would pay thousands to come stay in the bunkhouse Jennifer keeps ready for guests and to ride with the Davises, don’t think for a minute that this is a dude ranch. This is the real world, and the Davises pride themselves on raising real-world cattle for real-world cattlemen.

Working ranch

At Rollin’ Rock Angus, Bill and Jennifer calve about 600 cows a year in the 60-day stretch from mid-February through mid-April. The ranch headquarters on the river bottom provides some natural protection, as well as access to two barns with a total of 14 calving stalls and facilities for an artificial insemination (AI) program. With calving dates predicted by ultrasound, they can haze those close to calving into springer pastures.

Fifty-eight-degree water from an artesian well flows through the floor of one of the barns, providing a more temperate environment in a landscape of extremes, Bill explains. “When it’s 40 below zero, it’s 52° in that shop; and when it’s 100 above, it’s 72°.” Constantly moving in an open system, the water flows through the floor into a manifold that feeds a water tank before being directed back to the river.

After calving, pairs are divided into breeding herds by dam age and calf gender.

“We’ll heat detect at night and again in the morning. After we feed, we’ll get horseback every morning and gather those in heat and those in heat the night before,” Bill explains, acknowledging the added bonus of an excuse to ride. “You can darn sure get a colt broke, and the cattle learn to respect and understand and move for the horse.”

After a 20- to 25-day AI program, the cows are turned into single-sire breeding pastures that often span a section of the

rolling hills and elm draws. They’ll remain there until mid-August.

As soon as cows are preg-tested, pairs are turned into the breaks to graze their northern slopes until weaning. At weaning, cows that are open will get a ride to town, as the Davises have no tolerance for cattle that won’t perform in their environment. Cows in calf will go back out into the breaks until weather dictates the start of winter feeding. If the weather’s right, hard grass that’ll maintain 7%-8% protein will let them graze till mid-January. Last year, they began feeding in November.

Selection is based on within herd performance. It takes a good set of feet and legs to make it in this country. Cows have to function within the environment, and the end product has to satisfy the consumer. As far as milk and growth performance, Bill says, “I’ll take all the environment will allow.”

Developed at Dynneson Feedlot north of Sidney, heifers are synchronized and AI’ed before the keepers are brought back to the ranch.

Bull calves are wintered at Howard Rambur’s backgrounding lot near Sidney, 20 miles north of the ranch. There, they are divided into about six pens as they go on feed after weaning in September. Fed to gain about 3 pounds (lb.) per day, they’ll stay within their contemporary groups through sale day in April. True to their real-world philosophy, bulls are not fitted or groomed before the sale, though Bill compliments Rambur’s management, bedding the bulls to keep them comfortable and clean.

The Davises sell about 300 bulls in their April bull sale. Including bulls from the 200 cows they partner on in South Dakota and a fall-calving herd in Nebraska, they’ll sell a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 42

total of about 450 bulls a year, selling the remainder private treaty. Bulls that don't pass muster are sold as locker beef or eaten at home.

The Davises constantly monitor their customers' cattle to ensure their genetics are hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) target, earning Rollin' Rock the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award in 2005.

"We've got whole-herd closeouts on nearly 30,000 head of cattle from our customers," says Bill, referring to what he calls their real-world summary. "We're at 85% Choice or better; 9% Prime and 42% *Certified Angus Beef*."

Bill's fascination with analyzing data comes naturally. You might even find it to be a heritable trait.

Performance leaders

While both sets of grandparents were into ranching, it was Bill's parents, Dale and Betty Davis, who in 1956 started Rollin' Rock Angus near Belgrade, Mont., naming the ranch for the bears that would roll boulders over to get to the ants and grubs beneath.

Just a decade earlier, researchers at the Fort Keogh Livestock and Range Research

Laboratory (LRRL) in Miles City, Mont., computed the first heritability estimates in beef cattle and began to separate the influences of environment and genetics on individual performance.

Bill says he can remember Paul Orcutt, the first executive secretary of the Montana Beef Performance Association (MBPA), and the LRRL's N.A. Jacobson discussing the concept of heritability estimates with his dad, explaining that selection pressure can be applied to any trait of economic relevance that is genetically heritable.

Dale was active in MBPA and served as its president, a position Bill would later assume. The nonprofit was organized to give progressive cattlemen a way to select for improved genetics. It began as a simple recordkeeping center, but transitioned into the pioneer of performance programs used by breed associations today.

Dale brought that penchant for performance with him as he served on the Board of the American Angus Association from 1973 to 1979, during which time the Association published its first *Angus Sire Evaluation Report*, established Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR[®] introduced in 1958) as the basis of national cattle evaluation (NCE), established estimated

breeding values (EBVs) for maternal traits and launched the Pathfinder[®] Program.

Growing up at Rollin' Rock, Bill — who dreamed of being a cowboy and having his own ranch — found he had a natural eye for cattle. And, whether due to genetics or environment, he also carries that same focus on performance.

Bill got his chance to take the reins at Rollin' Rock in 1973. His mother had died a year earlier and Dale was ready to sell the cows. So, with an ag business degree from Montana State University and four years of experience managing a ranch in California, Bill came back to his boyhood home, buying Rollin' Rock in 1977.

Two weeks after he retired, Dale came out of retirement, purchasing Rollin' Rock females to start PAPA Angus Ranch with his second wife, Carol, and Bill's sister, Patti.

Losing two pasture leases to development within a couple weeks of turnout, Bill and Jennifer decided to look for a new home for their 150-cow herd. He made 13 trips to see the ranch advertised in the *Western Livestock Journal Properties* magazine before purchasing the ranch of their dreams in 1993.

"We're close enough to North Dakota, I can tell stories twice," Bill observes.

Peer Review

During their tenure on the Board, Directors of the American Angus Association interact closely with each other and staff as they discuss the issues and conduct the business of the world's premier beef cattle breed registry. In doing so, they get to know each other on a unique level. We asked Bill Davis's contemporaries to share their insights about him as a director and officer of the Association.

"Whether he's helping people set up an Angus industry in Russia; talking beef with retailers and restaurateurs in South Beach, Fla.; or discussing industry issues with the boys at the local cattlemen's meeting, he's an excellent communicator. He's been a great ambassador for the Angus breed." — **Bryce Schumann**

"Bill is probably the most popular member of the AAA. He always has a good time and he genuinely loves people. This comes through in his dealing with the staff, the membership and the Board. His tenure will be marked as a time that we turned the corner on genetic defects and faced tough challenges that, while very painful now, will allow the Angus breed to maintain its dominant market position." — **Jarold Callahan**

"Bill has a genuine concern for the Angus breed and the Angus Association. His actions as an officer have reflected his desire to be proactive in our Board decisions. He is a great ambassador for

Angus. I have seen him give great answers to spontaneous questions by the media, always putting the Association and CAB in a positive light." — **Steve Olson**

"Bill Davis is viewed by the membership as 'one of the good old boys,' and his keen sense of humor is really appreciated. He has a great understanding of all issues facing the Angus breed and, due to his strong leadership abilities, he has led the Board to develop a positive policy regarding genetic defects and advanced the use of DNA testing to improve the breed." — **Norman Garton**

"Our Board deals with many important, intense issues. Bill always managed to relieve the stress, and yet he never lost sight of our job and mission. He creates an environment of inclusiveness. He is willing to hear the ideas and thoughts of all Board members. After the previous two years of dealing with other issues, during the past year Bill steered our Board toward marketing the Angus breed. He recognized the importance of relaying to our customers the positive message about the strengths of Angus." — **Cathy Watkins**

"Bill will be remembered as the best emissary from ranch to licensee that CAB has ever known. Bill's smile and sense of humor wins friends, converts adversaries and promotes healthy debate and resolution. He is a great copilot and navigator, in the air and on the Board." — **Bob Norton**

Moving the cow herd east from a more mountainous elevation of 4,500 feet with 18 inches of annual rainfall to what Bill says may be the lowest spot in Montana, at an elevation of 2,000 feet with 12 in. of moisture, Bill and Jennifer have gained an even greater appreciation for the adaptability and functionality of the Angus cow.

With the ranch situation in hand and son Justin and daughter Julie grown and starting their own families, Bill decided it was his time to give back.

After watching his dad deal with some of what history reflects upon as the most controversial decisions in the history of the American Angus Association, Bill says he thought he was prepared to help the Association go through some issues of the day. It's ironic that many of the subjects discussed by the Board are similar, but the level at which the Association operates today is quite different.

As Dale, who died in 2005, voted to continue the CAB Program at a critical juncture in 1977, "not in his wildest dreams" would he have anticipated that Bill would serve as chairman of that same organization as the program — now an LLC with a \$17 million budget — celebrated reaching annual sales of 775 million lb.



►A positive and proactive attitude — and the support of a large Angus family — helped Bill and Jennifer through the discovery of prostate cancer in fall 2008.

Nor would Dale and his fellow board members, as they established AHIR as the foundation of the Association's NCE, have envisioned the genomic-enhanced expected progeny differences (EPDs) made available to the Angus membership during Bill's tenure.

"It has been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that I'll never forget," Bill says, reflecting on his time on the Board. "I can't reiterate enough about the people that you

get to meet, and that's what it is about.

"This is Angus: The Business Breed," he continues. "There isn't any doubt in my mind that that old mama cow is the best thing out there, and she has been forever. But so are the people who raise her, the membership, the people who are out there and who are involved in this business. I know that sounds corny as hell, but it's real."



"Bill has a unique ability to make his point using humor to both gain one's attention and to give emphasis to the point of the statement or story. His storytelling ability is legendary, but one would be mistaken to think that his jester-like qualities are indicative of his true analytical capacity." — **Jot Hartley**

"Bill Davis has a heart as big as Montana. Most folks think of him as a big guy, which he is, but he has great passion for everything he does. Bill has a great way of talking to people, which in and of itself makes him a special person." — **Phil Trowbridge**

"Bill has a complete and in-depth understanding of our Association and the issues it deals with. He takes the issues seriously, but not himself. He has been helpful in how to handle situations and people to have smooth discussion. In 50 years, history will look upon this past year as a time when we faced forward and looked to open new possibilities." — **Arlen Sawyer**

"As a new Board member, he has been very helpful in a lot of ways. He went the extra mile to make me feel comfortable and welcome. He was very good at explaining what to expect. If there were any surprises, he would certainly explain why that happened, too." — **Charlie Boyd**

"Bill said he would make himself visible to the membership, and he's done that 110%. He has the ability to converse with anyone and would never turn away from a question. Bill has encouraged me to make sure my voice is heard, and he's always been very supportive." — **Doug Schroeder**

"Besides his incredible sense of humor, Bill's positive attitude and passion as an Angus breeder first and foremost, propelled him to always consider and pursue what he believed was best for the Angus breed. He has an unwavering belief in the future of farming and ranching, the Angus breed, the value of the American Angus Association's database, and the wide array of invaluable services and benefits available to our members through the Association and its entities. He has consistently conveyed that message." — **Milford Jenkins**

"Bill was one of the first to welcome me on the board and has remained a friend through thick and thin. There is a serious side that goes past his humor. He cares about the betterment of the Angus breed." — **Jim Rentz**

"Bill has a great sense of humor, is always out front, and fun to be around. He is a positive and sound thinker, always does his homework and is well-versed. Bill looked at things pretty accurately, and was a good Board member for his fellow breeders." — **Jay King**