

Setting Precedent



Floridian finds balance in law and cattle.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**,
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Near Marianna, Fla., atop one the highest hills in the state, a Spanish Colonial house stands out like it was dropped there from some old Western movie. In reality, Herman and Charlotte Laramore designed the whole thing, relocating fixtures from Albuquerque and Santa Fe 22 years ago.

From its expansive deck, Herman watches his second loves graze under blankets of oak and pine. He stands alone and contemplates selling the place. Cancer stole his first love just months before, and he doesn't need the big house any longer.

Then a cell phone rings. The familiar sound buzzes from Laramore's pocket, and, depending on the urgency, the lifetime Floridian will plan his day and likely his dress.

Suit or cowboy hat, jeans or loafers, this morning's obligations require a bit of both. After 47 years of combining passions, he's learned you can mix more than just careers. Turns out, boots go well with any outfit.

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► Herman Laramore is the elected public defender for the 14th Judicial Circuit of the state of Florida, and he's a cowman.

Florida, and he's a cowman to boot. Ask him how he's managed to find equilibrium between two demanding lifestyles and he'll credit it to good people who work really hard on both sides.

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you fenced the cattle out,
you didn't fence them in."**

— Herman Laramore

As rancher and defender, his days rest in true conflict. On one side there is life, growth and productivity; on the other, death, ill will and heinous acts by man. In the balance he finds variety and an escape from the status quo.

"Well, that's what makes life interesting. It's not the same ol' same ol'. You mix it up," he says. With that, his cell phone rings again.

Laramore grew up on a 40-acre plot just north of where he stands to take his calls. As a boy, his family and those around him roamed woods with "Cracker cows" that were later introduced to Brahman bulls, long before Angus dominated the herd.

"Listen, when I was a kid, you fenced the cattle out, you didn't fence them in," he proclaims.

Today, one could wonder if there's need for fence at all as advancements in the Angus breed and selection for docility leave Bar L Ranch calves calm and capable. Yet, that was then, and this is now.

"I probably should have stopped and smelled the roses more," he says of the abruptness of it all. "All I've acquired, I'd give it all up to have her. Life's too short, and it's gone too fast."

Getting started

The land that was his father's original 40 acres, now shared with older brother Gordon, connects to the house on the hill. Together and separately — it really makes no difference to the two — the brothers purchased surrounding acreage, adding space and work to their already busy lives.

"This was almost all woods," he says, looking across the land that spans 4 miles. "I wore out two bulldozers on this place." Not to mention the hours spent piling roots by hand.

"Oh, but we were young — and tough. Hell, you couldn't have hurt us with a baseball bat. Now I'm 74, and I wish I was younger, but I'm not."

What age declares as fact is hard to believe standing next to Laramore. He's tall, with a John Wayne presence about him, though he says he's more often mistaken for Walter Matthau.

"We started cattle in the mid '60s," he says. "We just bought a small little herd of 25 head. We had land that wasn't suitable for row crops, so we ran cattle on it."

That's not to say cattle weren't a priority for the young entrepreneur. He'd grown fond of them as a child and wanted them in his life, but he also wanted good ones and land for them to roam, and that would require cash.

"I always liked the cattle, but when you're starting out and wanting to grow, you have to have a subsidized livelihood. I knew if I was ever going to have anything, I was going to have to work to get it. I wasn't going to inherit it."

So the young man went to law school. There he watched friends and colleagues struggle through bills and loans, and yet never seem to miss a Sunday golf game. Laramore missed plenty.

"I'd come in on a Friday night from Florida State University, and I would plow all night. Then Gordon [who worked full-time as a branch manager for a financial company] would take the next morning and disk all day. I'd work Saturday night, sleep and then drive back to Tallahassee ready for school on Monday," Laramore says.

"I might spend money, but I was also taking the chance that I could make money. I was building something of value."

That something turned into a herd of 1,100 commercial cows — all Angus.

"I read all the time. When I didn't have to read law books, I picked up books and

magazines about agriculture," he says. "Angus was so far ahead of everybody else. It was a no-brainer when you looked at what was being done."

What appeared the path to an easy A for the avid learner was not necessarily the one most traveled when it came to other cattlemen in the area, but that bothered Laramore none.

"I was getting docked for eared cattle," and after working with the University of Florida on synchronization techniques, "I found those Angus cattle to be just as easy keepers as the Brahman cows."

To those who would point out a lack of and need for heterosis, the attorney is quick to quote his friend and marketing partner, Paul Hill of Champion Hill, Bidwell, Ohio. "If you get good Angus, you don't need heterosis."

What the cowman did need were good genetics that he captured by way of artificial insemination (AI) and embryo transfer (ET).

"I raise my own bulls through embryos I get from Champion Hill using Schaff genetics," he says. That would be Schaff Angus Valley of Saint Anthony, N.D. Aside from the younger first- and second-calf females, Laramore sticks to AI and uses ET bulls for cleanup.

When selecting for genotype, he looks first and foremost at birth weight.

"I'm a believer that if a heifer can't have a 75- to 80-lb. calf, you've made a mistake. You haven't developed her right. I don't want any 50- to 60-lb. calves.

"Milk is critical to your weaning weights, but without the right nutrition program it can be your downfall," the rancher says of his next priority. "You'll wean a big calf that first year, but the second year you won't have a calf. She'll have converted all of the food to milk."

Next is frame score.

"I look for a bull that's a 5½ or 6," he says. "You want him deep, you want him wide, but that air underneath him doesn't weigh anything when he goes on the scale."

For cows he looks for thickness and depth, the ability to take in moisture and convert to dry-matter intake before he culls at 11.

Laramore gained his advantage through applying years of technology at a rapid pace — 125 head can be Aled in two hours — but he'd never give phenotype a free pass.

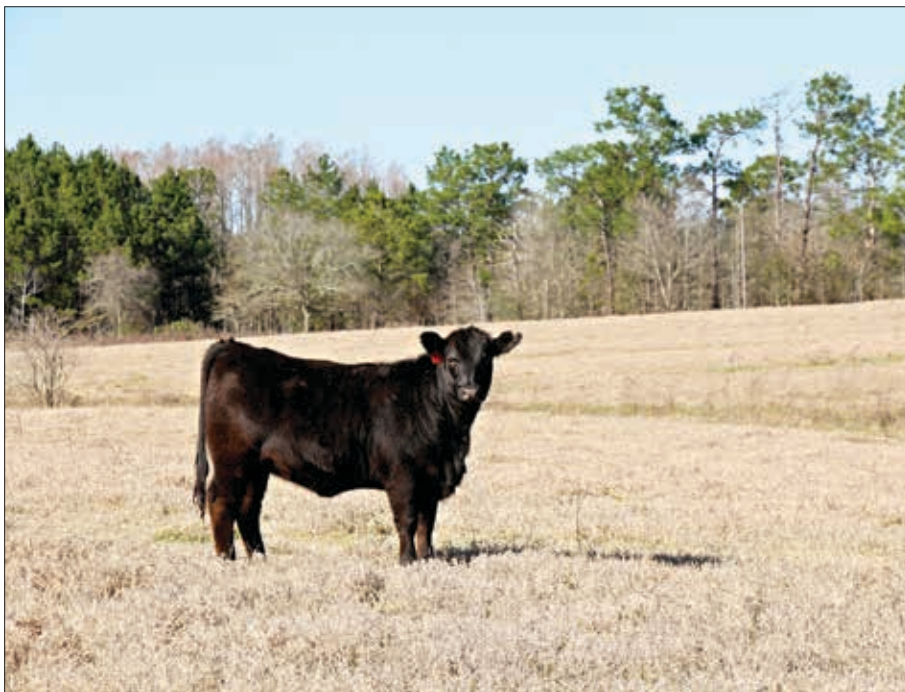
"I don't care if she's from the top bull in the whole wide world," he says. "Half of the pleasure of having cattle is having something that looks good."

By selecting bulls at the top of the Angus breed, Laramore moves with confidence

CONTINUED ON PAGE 78

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Setting Precedent CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77

that his calves will contribute to the industry when it comes to consumer demand.

Moving forward

A decade's worth of data sit in his desk drawer from the years he spent feeding cattle in Texas and Kansas. He'll credit those days to jumpstarting his preconditioning program, perfecting his vaccination protocol and removing the "ear" influence from his herd.

"I just wanted to get better at what I was doing, and it taught me," he says. "The education, the hidden costs you learn to avoid, it led me in the right direction."

These days, however, the man of many talents says it's time to slow down a bit. A year

ago, he downsized his herd to 600 head and says by the end of this year he'll retire from the position to which he was elected six times, never with an opponent.

"It's time for me to come back out here," he says. "Charlotte and I talked about downsizing, and all of a sudden she was gone.

"We were married, we were kids, and we were broke," he says as he walks back in from that big deck. The sun bids farewell and dances through the canopy of pines as he pulls a picture from the table and looks at the woman who held his hand for 54 years, with whom he shares daughter Scarlet and son Ryder. "She was a beautiful woman. Boy, was she good looking."

"It's been a challenge. This is a real

challenging industry," he says, looking out over his cattle like a case he's studied, toiled over and won. "But it's always been my golf game, my tennis game. Gordon and I, we've spent a lifetime together on this place. Working with my family, in particular my brother and my nephew, Blane, that's been the most rewarding thing.

"I'm ready to slow down some, spend a lot of time with my grandkids," he says, walking through the archways and wooden doors of their dreams, "but I've got a cabin on a lake over there that's just gorgeous."



Editor's Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*