

A Family Affair

Werner Family Angus has several different operations to involve multiple generations.

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Ninety-eight percent of farms and ranches in the United States are family-operated, according to the 2007 USDA Agriculture Census. However, few of those can probably boast three generations with all four of the adult children and their spouses involved in the family operation in various capacities, let alone full family meals twice a week.

Werner Family Angus Inc. is centered on family and quality Angus cattle, and comprises three different companies — Werner Family Angus, Werner Family Land and Werner Feed Efficiency. While parents Jim and Ann Werner focus on a seedstock operation, Craig and Becky (Werner) Hays

both own ultrasound scanning and imaging companies, respectively; Will and Bonnie (Werner) Larson own a commercial cow herd and buy their bulls from Jim and Ann, in addition to owning part of and working with Craig's ultrasound business; and Joe and Clint Werner operate the feed-efficiency test and a custom-breeding operation.

Cattle operations

Ann Werner's home operation has had Angus cattle since 1928. Her father, Wayne Lacock, Farmhamville, Iowa, was always a seedstock breeder. Ann says she grew up marketing bulls to commercial breeders private treaty, selling about 70 bulls a year.

She and Jim met on a blind date and got married three months later. Jim jokes that he saw Ann's cow herd, she saw his land and they knew it was love. That may actually be solid dating criteria, because they have been married for 37 years.

They bought a few yearling heifers in 1977, and then a few bred cows from Lacock. Since then, they have bought only



► The feed-efficiency testing center was built five years ago to measure residual feed intake. About one-third of the barn has Werner cattle. The rest is filled with customer cattle from the local area.



two cows and have maintained a closed herd for 30 years to prioritize consistency in their 400-cow herd.

They do artificially inseminate (AI) their yearling heifers and 4-year-old and older cows, says Clint, noting they pick bulls with high calving-ease for first-calf heifers. They haven't had high conception rates with AI in their second-calf cows, so they are bred naturally with their 12-15 herd bulls. After that second calf, older cows are bred by AI again. All cows must calve out on pasture without assistance.

Ann plans most of the breedings, and she aims for calving ease for first-calf heifers and for moderate frame and balanced expected progeny differences (EPDs).

Jim adds that they don't do a lot of "number chasing." They look for balance and avoid using bulls "if the numbers are too good."

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► All members of the Werner family are involved in the operations. From left are Ashtyn Werner, Clint Werner, Jessica Hays, Becky Hays, Craig Hays, Cody Hays, Lindsay Hays, Matt Larson, Bonnie Larson, Abby Larson, Rhett Larson, Will Larson, Heather Werner holding Ty Werner, Joe Werner, Ann Werner and Jim Werner.

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— Joe Werner

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They emphasize self-sufficient cows, says Jim, explaining his background. “I didn’t have cows growing up. Dad always had feeder calves. I had a neighbor who farmed about a section, and he had about 30 head of cows, and he never did a thing with them. Never made any hay, never fed them — they were self-sufficient. That looked pretty good to me.

“Cows are on their own out here,” he continues. “We calve about 100 head of heifers every year in the spring and fall, and we don’t treat them any different. They act like cows. They have the opportunity to perform, but they don’t stay around very long if they don’t.”

The cows are able to perform because the

seedstock operation has a total of 3,000 acres among the family members.

“Traditionally, we’ve sold quite a lot of hay. We stockpile a lot of forage so we don’t have to feed much hay to the cow herd,” Jim says. Grinning, he adds, “The cows are on full feed — because they can eat whatever they can find.”

Cows will work through 2 feet of snow to get to stockpiled forage if they learn to graze well as calves, he says.

The Werners do not creep feed. Calves are weaned early, averaging about 130 days of age at weaning. After being brought home and processed, they are commingled in a 10-acre weaning pasture of stockpiled grass, which is adjacent to the pens holding the cows. On the second day, they are started on hay and a little grain placed in feedbunks positioned near the cow lots.

Even the four show heifers that they take to the Iowa Beef Expo each year turn into cows effortlessly as soon as they get home. These hardy cattle have garnered many repeat buyers.



► **Above and right:** All animals have an electronic identification (eID) tag in their ear. When they put their head in the bunk, a computer records the weight of the feed eaten, explains Joe Werner.

► **Below:** Cattle are fed a high-roughage mixture composed of ground hay, silage, cracked corn and modified gluten that they mix themselves, says Joe. They feed the bulls to gain 3-3.5 pounds (lb.) per day and heifers to gain 2 lb. per day.



Annually, the Werners sell about 150-200 bulls — including yearlings, 18-month-olds from the fall-calving herd and 2-year-olds — all private treaty. Clint says they are mostly sold to customers within 50 miles of the operation, and a few bred females are sold, too. They are developing two bull lines specifically that have performed well in Joe and Clint’s feed-efficiency test.

While the Werners don’t put too much emphasis on EPDs, they do put emphasis on performance, and the family’s younger generation is leading

the charge with new ideas and technology to enhance the cattle operations.

Bringing in technology

Both Joe and Clint left the ranch for school, but knew they wanted to come back. Clint graduated from Indian Hills Community College with a degree in diesel mechanics and spent about three years working in a mechanic shop. He’s the go-to guy for mechanical issues on the ranch, which is convenient with the maintenance of technical feed-efficiency equipment, as some of it is homemade.

Joe graduated from Southwestern Community College (SWCC) with a degree in ag business, and interned with Thomas Angus Ranch in Oregon while at school.



They both acknowledge that one of the biggest challenges to starting in production agriculture is the amount of capital to buy ground and get everything up and running. Luckily, the family operation gave them an opportunity for something different.

With ever-increasing feed-input costs, feed efficiency is an important selection tool. Five years ago, Becky and Craig decided to build a feed-efficiency test barn to measure residual feed intake.

Becky says they think feed efficiency is at a turning point, much like ultrasound was 15 years ago. “We knew we wanted it for our cattle, but other people wanted it, too. There was more interest than we expected.”

This interest led to enough demand to keep the barn full. About one-third of the cattle are Werner cattle, but the rest are on test for customers.

Craig travels about half the year as an ultrasound technician, and Becky owns one of the three ultrasound labs that interpret images, so the couple moved to Maryville, Mo., to concentrate more on their ultrasound businesses. Bonnie and Will bought the feed-efficiency center, and Joe and Clint found their opportunity to form their own niche in production ag to run the feed-efficiency test.

Joe and Clint have managed the feed-efficiency center for a year. Groups of cattle come in every 90 days, and the groups rotate within the barn every 70 days. Joe says they have about three turns every year.

All animals have an electronic identification (eID) tag in their ear. When one animal sticks its head in the bunk, a blue light will come on and the computer reads the corresponding ID on the tag. Each bunk has its own “brain box,” and there are 16 bunks to one scale head.

A weigh bar underneath the free-floating bunk measures how much feed is put in, Joe explains. When an animal sticks its head in and eats the feed, it measures how much was eaten by that animal. When it leaves and another comes in, it resets to the next animal.

The smaller pens can hold 25 head of cattle and have four bunks. Larger pens can hold 50 head and have eight bunks. All pens give each animal about 75 square feet of space. Each of the pens is well-bedded and has access to a dry run outside the barn. Bonnie notes that access to the

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runs doesn’t skew any data because the whole contemporary group has the same access.

Cattle are fed a high-roughage mixture composed of ground hay, silage, cracked corn and modified gluten that they mix themselves, says Joe. They feed the bulls to gain 3-3.5 pounds (lb.) per day and heifers to gain 2 lb. per day.

Because of their location, Clint adds, all their needed commodities are close, so feedstuffs are easy to obtain.

They keep the rations at around 52% dry matter so the ration is consistent and the calves can’t sort through it. Clint asserts that even though pens get an inevitable pecking order, the ration has to be the same for the first calf at the bunk and the last.

Data are compiled at the testing barn office and then sent to Iowa State University to analyze. The Werners send the data back to the producers and also to breed associations to use in residual feed intake EPDs. Some

breed associations don’t have a use for it yet, but producers will always get data back from Iowa State, says Bonnie.

The cattle go through the facility for data collection on test six times, and additional data is taken to be compiled onsite. Family members and a local Amish man (generally two people each time) take weights, hip heights, scrotal measurements, yearling weights and ultrasound data.

Since the cattle are handled so often, docility is a must. In building the facility, Craig worked with Tom Noffsinger, a Bud Williams protégé, to ensure low-stress handling was evident in the design. Ann says quiet handling has always been part of their operation, but within the last 10 years, it’s really been a focus. This could have to do with the fact that grandchildren help now.

“Everyone is involved, even the little ones. You should see the cattle drives,” adds Ann.

The longest distance that the cattle are driven is about 5 miles, but the grandkids, the oldest of which is 11, get to help on horseback. Bonnie notes that most times it takes longer to saddle up than to move the cattle.

The variety of operations — seedstock, commercial, feed-efficiency test or ultrasound — offer different specialties for each family member. On the other hand, it also offers a chance for family members to have time apart.

“The biggest pro and con to coming back to production ag is working with family,” Joe quips.

Ann emphasizes, “The cattle have been good to us. God has been good to us. We’ve just been blessed all the way around.”

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— Ann Werner

