

Family Tradition



► On the Jim Lee Ranch, Valentine, Neb., everyone knows how to work together to build on a tradition of raising high-quality Angus cattle.

PHOTO BY MIRANDA REIMAN

The Lees rely on Angus genetics to increase quality, profitability.

by Robyn Werk

In this ever-changing industry, hard work and family may be two things that stay the same. The ties that bind can also make a successful ranch, depending on how each partner plays his or her part. On the Jim Lee Ranch, Valentine, Neb., everyone knows how to work together to build on a tradition of raising high-quality Angus cattle.

For Jim Lee II, wife Ginny, and sons Rob (Jim Lee III) and Ron, just keeping up is not enough. They have learned to keep consistency in their herd while remaining flexible.

“We had Herefords originally,” Jim explains. “Then I came home from college and talked my dad into buying some Angus bulls for his first-calf heifers. We did that to create hybrid vigor and black-white-faces.”

A generation later, by the time Rob had graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the ranch had made the full transition to Angus.

Herd management

The Lees have both spring- and fall-calving programs for their 1,200-cow herd. “We start the first of March and then the first of August with each calf crop,” Jim says. The practice has allowed for more marketing opportunities, especially with the fall group.

During the past four years, the Lees have

integrated artificial insemination (AI) into their program. “We started doing it to use better bulls, and it’s cheaper,” Rob says.

Heat synchronization has proven effective. Using CIDR®s on the cows and melengestrol acetate (MGA) on the heifers, “last year we were able to reach a 70% pregnancy rate in their first breeding group,” he says. “We AI all

our spring cows and the same with heifers in the fall.”

Fall cows run with Angus bulls that the Lees co-own with neighbors. “We use them in the fall and also semen-collect them for AI use,” he says.

Encouraged by the first results of AI, the Lees look now to focus on specific traits.

“We are selecting for a lot of carcass traits, growth and disposition,” Rob says. “Next year, we may start linebreeding certain cows to certain types of bulls.”

Of course, selection entails balance. “If they have the growth numbers that I like and the other traits that I like, I’ll use them,” he



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says. "I don't think you ought to just lock yourself into one EPD [expected progeny difference]."

Weaning and marketing

The Lees use different programs for weaning fall and spring calves.

"With the spring calves, we start creep-feeding three weeks before we wean," Rob says. Feeding a Purina Mills, LLC, intake-limiting Accuration® helps reduce stress during weaning and makes the transition to the feedlot a lot easier, he says.

Fall calves are weaned in late December. "The cows are fed silage and hay," Rob says. "When the calves get to eating on that, they're pretty easy to wean."

The Lees have found marketing success through several outlets. "We take a lot of the calves to the Valentine Livestock Auction," he says. "We also finish some at the ranch and in years past have fed at a custom feedlot."

Their location plays into those decisions. "The market in Valentine and calf prices in this area are generally pretty good," Rob says. "We are way above the national average, so it's often silly for us to take the risk and finish our cattle."

However, carcass data analysis and value-based grid marketing help increase quality and premium potential.

"About five or six years ago, our cattle were around 74% Choice," Rob explains. "This year, we finished some heifers the end of December and they ranged from 94% to 95% Choice with a 45% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) acceptance rate."

They credit the improvement to genetic selection and feeding practices that have been modified through the years.

Challenges

Like any operation, the Lees have faced some challenges. Dry conditions have called for some modifications in grazing and haying.

"Years ago we used to have a lake in every pasture, but a lot of the lakes have dried up in the last few years," Jim explains.

They have grazed cattle on National Wildlife Refuge land near the ranch since the 1930s. However, the 90,000-acre range only allows grazing for about two and a half months during the summer.

Although fortunate to be located in an area with numerous meadows, the ranch has struggled to find enough hay. That's because seven years of drought-like conditions have only made one cutting per summer.

"Our unique terrain helps because in wet years we go up higher in the hills and in dry

years we go into the meadows to get our hay crop," Ginny explains.

Responsibilities and plans

Although everyone on the ranch helps when and where needed, responsibilities are divided to fit each individual's area of expertise. Rob has taken over most responsibilities as the herd manager. "He really does close to all the cow work," Ginny says. "He knows the genetics, he's really good at that, and it seems to work well."

Ron is most active in the operation as the head mechanic, also in charge of wells, fences, moving cattle and swathing hay. While their parents begin to move into retirement, both sons have stepped up to the plate, with additional help hired as needed.

It helps to have assigned areas, Rob says. "We don't have a slow time," he explains. "We are either calving, breeding, weaning or haying, so it's important to know who is going to be doing what."

The sixth generation of the Lee family, the brothers plan to continue building on the strong foundation. With its focus on Angus genetics, marketing and productivity, the Jim Lee Ranch should be in good hands.

