

Where the Heart Is

With Angus cattle, Wyoming's Willis family stands ready for the future.

Story by
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Wyoming's Roland Willis is a man of quiet conviction. He prefers the peace of the pasture, draws on his inner strength when the snow blows in, and makes clear distinctions between what's right and what's wrong. Born in the mountains of Utah, his parents reared him on the family's sheep ranch where he learned the value of hard work and gained a great love for the value of family sticking it out together.

But Willis was a cowman in sheep's clothing, not a sheepman to the core. So when he bought out his then-retiring father in the late 1960s, it was cows, not sheep, that would shape his future.

"Roland loves the cows," recalls his wife, Linda. "That's where his heart is."

The couple's heart is also in their 1,000-acre ranch, located just south of Cokeville, Wyo., near the Idaho border. It's good country in which to raise cows. Its hay fields and pastures spread from both banks of the Bear River, where the family has plentiful irrigating water for raising hay and good summer range on the mountains to the east.

Roland and Linda have five children, most of whom have grown to adulthood: Linda; James; Teresa and her husband, Danny (who have two kids, Dalyn and Megan); Trudy and her husband, Jason; Jed; and Jordan.

Over the years, the Willises have instilled a clear sense of direction in their children and developed their own for their cows and land. Their land is well-managed, uncluttered and productive. (They put up 6,000 tons of hay a year.) Their 1,200 cows are uniform, deep-bodied and functional, possessing rock-hard feet, the kind necessary to make it in the mountains. And their calves weigh like lead.

Incorporating Angus

The family turned to Angus genetics in the mid-1970s, when they bought their first set of Angus bulls and bred them to their predominantly Hereford cow herd.

"When we first started using Angus, we figured that we'd use them on our heifers," Roland says. "But we found they were better cattle than we expected, that the Angus-cross calves were heavier. So



Roland Willis and his family have gone to strict Angus straightbreeding. They believe that gives them uniformity and quality without losing performance. [PHOTOS BY ERIC GRANT]

we kept on going more to blacks all the time."

Unlike many commercial cattle producers, the Willis family has since gone the path of strictly straightbreeding, believing straightbred Angus give them the uniformity and quality they need without sacrificing performance. Even as their straightbreeding has intensified the last five years, they've increased weaning weights by nearly 150 pounds (lb.) during the same time period.

"The main reason we moved away from crossbreeding is that you get cattle that are wilder than if they're straight black," Roland says. "We're also getting more uniformity with straight black. The Angus female is also a good mother. We've done away with bad udders and bad eyes. The biggest thing I like is that when you sort them, they look even. The breed has good eye appeal."

The family's cattle also excel in the feedlot and the packing plant. Last year, they retained ownership of 725 head of calves at Sandhills Feeders, Bassett, Neb. Of those, nearly 90% graded Choice or Prime. The carcass quality and feedlot performance were so good that the Willises will feed out more calves in the future.

"From a cash-flow standpoint, the first year we retained ownership was pretty tough because we didn't sell our calves in the fall like we'd done in the past," Linda says. "But it turned out to be a profitable move for us in the end. It worked out well. We realized more per head by finishing them ourselves than we would have done had we sold the calves at weaning."

Roland adds: "You look at the money we've put into buying good bulls over the years, and we figured we really weren't getting out of the market what we thought our calves were worth. Retained ownership has been a way for us to get more money for the added quality we put into them."

A secondary benefit to retaining ownership is information. The Willises believe that in the near future the marketplace will demand greater amounts of information on past performance of cattle.

"A person is going to have to have data to back his cattle up," Linda says. "So we're working to have some things in place to show what our cattle have done."

A formula for success

The Willises' formula for breeding good cattle — cattle that work well in their environment and produce desirable

products for consumers — is simple. First, identify the type of cattle that work well in your environment. Second, study up on where the marketplace is headed in terms of quality. Third, define what you need to do to hit those targets. And finally, buy good bulls to make those objectives possible.

This year alone the family averaged \$6,000 for every bull they bought (10 total). The extra money — more than twice that of the national average paid by commercial producers for bulls — is worth it because Roland believes higher-priced bulls normally possess the added quality and the added performance boost he wants.

“When we first started out, I didn’t think I could afford to buy the better bulls,” Roland says. “After about two years of that, I realized I was making a mistake, so I started buying the top bulls. I enjoy doing that because I know it pays. I enjoy going to a good bull sale and picking out what I think is the top.”

But it’s more than just paying good money. It’s seeing value in a sale offering, then being willing to go the extra mile to pay for it.

Willis selects his bulls on a number of criteria. They must have good feet and legs. They can’t be overfed, but he likes bulls in good physical condition with good muscle, ready to go to work on his rugged rangeland.

“We look for high weaning and yearling weight EPDs (expected progeny differences), and we look for good EPDs for marbling and ribeye,” Roland says. “We like a lot of depth and length in our cattle. And we like bulls that will improve our cow herd’s uniformity, not hurt it.”

Knowledge of the Willis cow herd has resulted in other ranchers’ wanting to buy replacement females from the family. So

last year the Willis began offering a few select females for sale. They sold about 70 head of heifers through the Adams Acres Angus production sale in Blackfoot, Idaho. The event was so successful that they plan to tap that market again.

“We’d also like to sell some heifers private treaty right off the ranch,” Roland says.

Environmental edge

One of the primary considerations for selecting bulls and keeping replacement females is ensuring they’ll survive Wyoming’s hot, dry summers and extremely cold winters.

The family’s summer range, for instance, encompasses about 160 square miles of ground leased from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). It is a mountainous and rugged place to keep cattle. They must be functionally sound, free movers and easy keepers.

One of the unexpected benefits to using Angus cattle is that they tend to make better use of the rangeland grasses, Roland says. In other words, the cattle scatter across the land rather than congregate in environmentally sensitive areas where they can damage streambanks (riparian areas) or meadows. This grazing behavior, in turn, helps the family ensure they’re making optimum use of all of the resource, not just select areas.

The Willis call upon Dan Skinner, who serves as the family’s range rider, to take care of their cows in the summer. “He keeps the BLM happy,” Linda says. “He looks after the cattle, making sure they don’t stay in any single area for too long.”

Roland adds: “Fifteen or 20 years ago, we worked with the BLM to put in place a rest-rotation pasture system on our allotment. Since then we’ve held the cows

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off places that got hit hard before we leased this land, such as the riparian areas, and that’s helped the grasses a lot.

“A lot of these places had washed out, but now the grasses and trees are starting to come back. The BLM has been really impressed with the way we’ve worked to take care of it. They say it’s improved a lot.”

While the BLM hasn’t increased the numbers of cattle on the allotment, they haven’t cut back the family’s numbers, either. That’s counter to trends in many places throughout the West where public rangelands have become battlefields between ranchers and government agencies that seek reductions in livestock numbers.

“We’re working hard to improve the land because we know it’s our future” Linda says.

A commitment to family

It’s interesting how the Willis have spread responsibilities among their children. The daughters — who don’t live on the ranch but come back often to help — enjoy the riding and the cow work. While the daughters are riding in the mountains, the sons concentrate on cutting, baling and stacking hay. James even owns his own potbelly truck, and he spends a great deal of his time on the road, hauling cattle to feedlots or auction barns.

Of utmost importance to the Willis is keeping the ranch in the family for gen-



Keeping the ranch in the family is of utmost importance to Roland and Linda Willis, shown with sons James (left) and Jed. “We want to keep our children involved and our family here at home,” Linda says.



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erations to come. "We want to keep our children involved and our family here at home," Linda says. "We want to help them get started and see this ranch passed off to the next generation."

Key to making this happen, Linda says, is producing top-quality cattle that can secure profit and market acceptance.

"The American Angus Association and Certified Angus Beef [LLC] (CAB) are helping individual producers like us a lot by building market demand for Angus cattle," Roland adds. "The way it looks, there could be a much larger difference in the future, too. CAB is something we want to keep working with, maybe even get more involved in."

He adds that one reason they've retained ownership is to determine exactly

what their cattle are doing, where to improve, and how to make the right decisions for the future.

For Roland, the greatest satisfaction of ranching is watching his kids grow and his cattle improve. "I love the spring," he says. "I'm always anxious to see the new-born calves."

He pauses for a moment, then reflects: "This is a great way to live. We'll never be rich, but we've raised a family here, worked together, never had to wonder what to do. We've gotten a lot of enjoyment out of being together. We've worked with the kids every day. That's what I think is really important."

