

Discovering Black Gold

Using Angus genetics, the Murrers have been rewarded for improved management and genetic decisions.

Story and photos by
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In 1848 families loaded up their belongings and headed west toward California. The word was out: There was gold in the hills there, and people flocked to stake their claims. They dreamed of wealth and success, and they knew they would find it in California.

California natives John and Shirley Murrer are dreamers, too. They dream of rewards for their efforts in producing a value-added product — Angus-sired calves.

“You can actually do something with genetics,” John says. “Some producers laugh at me when I say that, but it’s true. You can’t just have an average cow and calf anymore and hope to survive.”

John and Shirley are the third generation of Murrers to ranch in northern California near Susanville. “Dad had Herefords for a long time,” John says. When John joined the family business in 1973, he added Shorthorn bulls to the breeding program.

He and his father tried many breeds, including exotics, searching for that *perfect* genetic package.

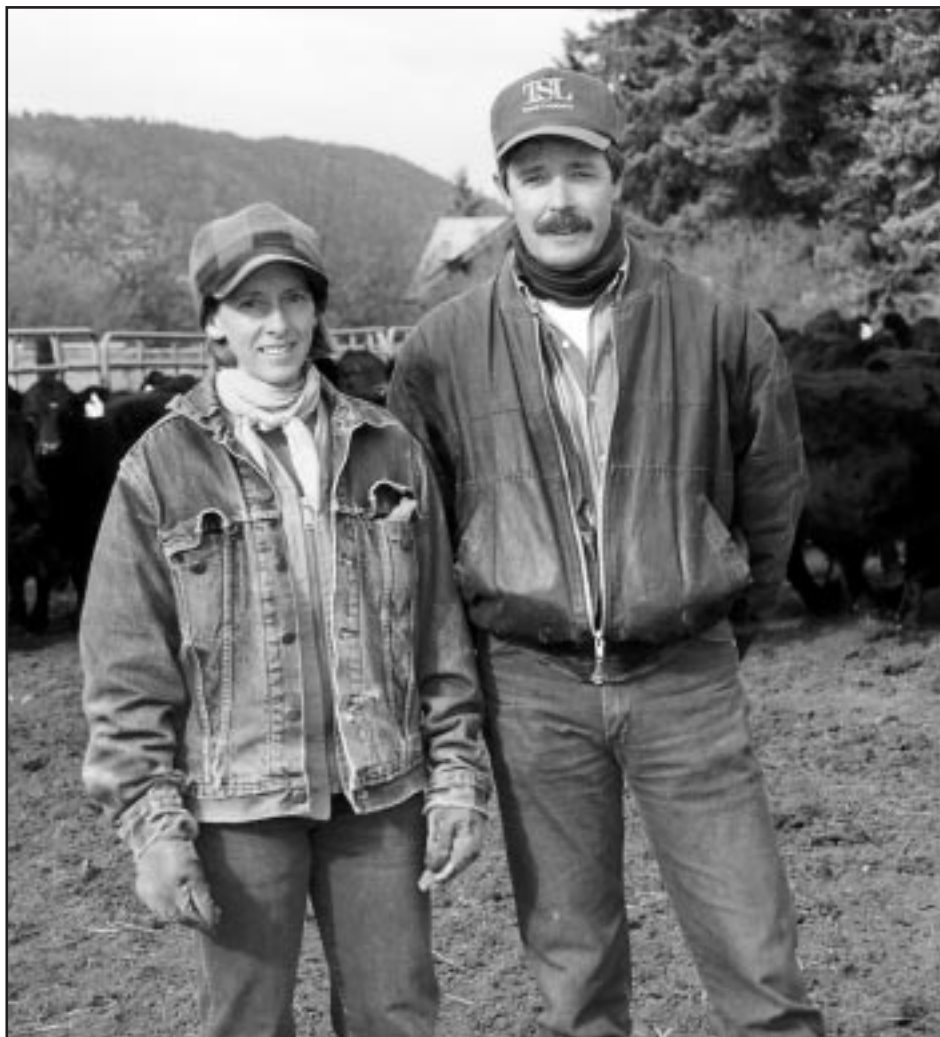
“We tried different breeds, but they didn’t work for us,” John explains.

After his father passed away, John and Shirley took over the management of the operation and were determined to succeed as cattle ranchers in the Willow Creek Valley. They updated their management scheme and started focusing on the cow herd, with the goal of increasing their herd from 250 to 375 or more cows. The only farming they planned to do was putting up enough hay to feed their herd during the winter months.

Introduction to Angus

In the mid-1980s Jim Quinlan, an order buyer who had been buying the Murrer calves for several years, suggested that John and Shirley try a different breed of bulls. Quinlan suggested they switch to Angus to improve the feed conversion and marbling ability of their herd.

The couple decided if they wanted to



Third-generation ranchers **John and Shirley Murrer** have been using Angus bulls for nearly a decade to produce a high-quality product that will perform in all aspects of beef production. “You can no longer create a product that you don’t know what it is or how it will perform,” John says. (PHOTOS BY ANGIE STUMP DENTON)

continue in the cattle business they had to make a change. In 1986 they bought their first Angus bull, and they continue to buy only Angus bulls today.

Angus results

John and Shirley agree that adding Angus to their breeding program was a wise decision. “Angus cows fit our grass conditions and climate here,” Shirley says. “It can be tough conditions here at calving time, and those Angus calves have more vigor — they fight to get up and nurse no matter how cold it is.”

John says using Angus bulls has decreased his time devoted to managing the herd by decreasing calving difficulty and the need to help calves nurse.

He also says the Angus bulls are more

aggressive in the breeding pasture and get the job done better compared to bulls of other breeds. “We liked how the Angus bulls worked and the cows that resulted,” he adds. The duo credits switching to Angus for decreasing their herd’s breeding season; 76% of the herd now calves in the first month.

The fact they were being paid more for their calves also made the change to Angus attractive. “Ever since *black* has become popular, we’ve gotten \$5/hundred-weight (cwt.) more than other producers,” John says.

He also credits the breed with increasing weaning weights (see Table 1) and improving the carcass characteristics of his herd.

The Murrers have continually in-

INSIGHT:

What is the WRB?

In October 1996 cattle ranchers in the West who were looking to find new marketing alternatives joined together and formed the Western Ranchers Beef (WRB) Cooperative.

"The goal of the cooperative is to help producers market a value-added product for a premium," says Dennis Smith, CEO and manager of WRB.

In order to achieve its goal, the cooperative encourages members to enroll their cattle in Certified Premium Feeders, a certified calf-management program.

"Management is the first focus," Smith says. "It's the biggest stumbling block to producing a quality product." He also encourages producers to work on the genetics of their herds.

The cooperative is made up of members from California, Oregon, Nevada, Idaho and New Mexico. Smith says the membership is currently comprised of more than 130 producers, and the cooperative certifies more than 8,000 calves each year.

Cattle producers interested in becoming a member of WRB pay a life membership fee of \$300. If they want to participate in the Certified Premium Feeders program, it is an additional \$3/head fee.

Program requirements

Calves enrolled in the Certified Premium Feeders program must meet all of the health and backgrounding requirements established by the cooperative before certification. Smith says the program requirements were developed from the Texas Ranch to Rail Program. "The requirements were established so the cattle can fit in any marketing program, increasing the cooperators' marketing options," he explains.

The minimum health program requires calves to be vaccinated twice for seven- or eight-way blackleg and for four-way viral (IBR, PI3, BRSV and BVD) diseases. The first shots are to be given at or before weaning with booster shots within 30 days. At least one of the viral shots must be modified-live. All injections are to be given in accord with quality assurance guidelines. At weaning, certified calves are bunk-broke and backgrounded for at least 45 days. The feeder cattle are never fed antibiotics nor implanted.

After the calves have met all of the requirements of the management program, the cooperator signs an affidavit guaranteeing they have. Each calf that meets the program's requirements is then tagged with the WRB™ tag.

The tags include the cooperative's brand and the calves' identification numbers. Smith says the cooperative has the only registered trademark that is used on live cattle — WRB.

According to Smith, buyers can be confident that, when they pur-

chase WRB certified calves, they'll arrive healthy and ready to perform. Buyers also receive a certificate of record, guaranteeing the calves have completed the program.

Benefits of membership

Membership in the cooperative and in the WR-B Certified Premium Feeders program has many benefits. Smith says the co-operative spends a lot of money on marketing enrolled cattle and the feeder program.

The program also advertises calves that are enrolled but have yet to meet all the requirements to be certified, but with the producer guaranteeing to fulfill all the requirements before the calves are delivered to the buyer. This option benefits producers who market their calves prior to weaning.

Participants in the certified program also get an advisor who explains program details and helps cooperators find ways to market their calves. The advisor signs the affidavit guaranteeing the cattle met the program requirements.

Marketing options

Smith says the foundation of the cooperative's marketing program is getting a premium by selling via video or satellite auction. According to Smith, calves certified in the program topped all major video auctions in the West in 1998.

"The cooperative has done a good job educating its members of how to precondition and prepare their cattle for sale," says Andy Peak of the Shasta Livestock Auction, where many cooperative members sell their calves via satellite in July and September. "The cattle are consistently bringing more money because they're properly managed and preconditioned."

The health and management program was established so calves could fit in any branded beef program, including natural beef.

Members of the cooperative receive red tags to identify calves that are given antibiotics and won't qualify for natural programs. "If you need to treat an animal, we want you to treat it," Smith explains.

Using that management plan, cooperating herds have been able to send their calves to Texas to feed out and harvest in the B3R Natural Beef Plant. In 1997-98 cooperative members sent 640 head — 560 steers and 80 heifers. The cattle were fed at eight different times. The total premium earned on the 640 head was \$37,248.

creased herd numbers while increasing the percentage of Angus genetics. Their herd currently consists of 375 commercial cows, mostly Angus-based with some Hereford and Shorthorn breeding remaining in the pedigree. The couple plans to continue using only Angus bulls and building a 100% commercial Angus herd.

Marketing niche

For years the Murrer family sold their cattle private treaty off the farm. Five years ago, looking to receive more value for their cattle, they started consigning their calves to the Shasta Livestock satellite auction.

"It has worked well for us," John explains, crediting the success to more competition and competitive bidding. "[Con-

signing to the satellite auction] you get a lot more exposure and feedback.

"If the same guy shows up at your place in July each year and says he'll give you X amount for your calves and you take it," John says, you'll never really know how much your cattle are worth. "If you have a product somebody wants, there's a possibility to get a couple more cents," he adds.



After calves meet the requirements established by the Western Ranchers Beef Cooperative for its Certified Premium Feeders program, the calves are tagged with the program's WR-B™ tags. Producers use red tags to identify treated calves so if buyers want to sell the calves to a natural market, they know which ones will not fit the program.

Table 1: Average calf weaning weights, by year

Year born	Average weaning weight (steers)	Average weaning weight (heifers)
1986 ¹	469 lb.	436 lb.
1996 ²	504 lb.	469 lb.
1998 ³	545 lb.	521 lb.

¹ Calves were born in February and weaned in October. Calves were sired by Shorthorn, Chianina, Beefmaster and Hereford bulls.

² Calves were born in early March and weaned in October. Calves were sired by Angus bulls.

³ Calves were born in late February to mid-March and were weaned in October. Calves were sired by Angus bulls.

The Murrers typically sell their calves in September just prior to weaning. This past year they decided to try the July market. They received \$80/cwt. for their steer calves, a premium of \$5/cwt. compared to other 500-lb. calves at that time.

Andy Peak of Shasta Livestock Auction says the Murrers always consign a nice group of cattle that top their satellite auction. He credits their success to using Angus genetics and their management and health program.

Joining a cooperative

Always searching for better ways to market their calves, the Murrers decided in 1996 to join with other Western producers in developing a marketing cooperative — Western Ranchers Beef (WRB).

“We weren’t satisfied with what we were getting paid. We thought if a bunch of us got together we could change that,” Shirley explains. “We are working to develop a better product to try to meet what the consumer wants or needs.”

One marketing option the group is targeting is natural beef. Using this management plan, the Murrers have been

able to send their calves to Childress, Texas, to participate in the B3R™ All Natural Premium Beef program.

“At this point we are not seeing a big return for our efforts,” Shirley says. “We hope if we continue to do it and advertise the fact, our efforts will pay off in the end, especially if we change our marketing strategy to retain ownership in the future.”

To get more of a premium in the marketplace, the cooperative has developed a uniform health and management program and a certification process known as Certified Premium Feeders. The program includes a minimum vaccination and management program.

Focus on females

John and Shirley’s management philosophy is simple: If you take care of your cows, they’ll take care of you.

“Our land only supports so many calves, so our goal is quality instead of quantity,” Shirley explains. For the last decade the Murrers have been working to improve the genetics of their cow herd.

“About 10 years ago we realized we

just had an average cow herd and we needed to work to improve it,” John says.

“We spend a lot of time looking at the maternal side,” he says. “You’ve got to have a strong maternal foundation. Today our females are almost making as much money as our steers in the marketplace.”

As many producers have turned their selection criteria to focus on carcass traits, the Murrers have continued to focus on the importance of maternal traits and the efficiency of a cow herd.

John says he wants a tight-bred cow herd with less than 10% open each year. He says a female that weighs 1,200 pounds (lb.) best fits his program.

The Murrers have found in their environment it works best to improve genetics by keeping their own females and buying superior bulls. John says it is hard for them to buy females because of foothill abortion (epizootic bovine abortion, or EBV). An infectious disease resulting in abortion or weak calves at birth, EBV is carried by the soft-shelled pajaruelo tick and is found in the foothills of California, Nevada and southern Oregon. According to John, if he buys a group of 50 females with no immunity to EBV, within two years all of them will abort or give birth to a weak, unviable calf.

The Murrers want to keep a young cow herd, so they retain 30-50 heifers/year. When selecting replacement females, they look for growthy heifers with eye appeal. They also use pelvic measurements in their decisions.

Working to improve the quality of their herd, the Murrers have started keeping records on each cow and her offspring. Each calf’s number matches its mother’s. The cows are double-numbered to be sure they can be identified.

To help in culling decisions and recordkeeping, Shirley keeps a card catalog of each cow and her progeny. They cull females based on calf performance, udder and attitude. If she fails in one of those categories, she’s shipped.

As the Murrers have worked to improve the management of the herd, they have decreased their breeding season to 60 days and moved their calving dates 21 days, from February to mid-March.

John says they hope to have a young, good-producing cow herd when the cattle cycle peaks again.

Buying bulls

To keep their herd bull battery young and viable, the Murrers buy two to three bulls per year. John is not hesitant to pay a premium for bulls that will perform in his environment and that will help him



Since 1992 only Angus bulls have grazed the lands managed by John and Shirley Murrer near Susanville, Calif.

meet his genetic goals.

"When you start buying good bulls, it seems like you spend a lot of time and money and don't get any reward," John says. "Maybe you're not getting premiums now for your efforts, but you will in the future."

Before going to a bull sale John dissects the sale catalog, evaluating expected progeny differences (EPDs), and notes the bulls that will work in his breeding program. He looks particularly at weaning and milk EPDs.

"Our goal is to use EPDs to select the genetics that will help increase the milk production of our cow herd, increase weaning weights, produce bigger ribeyes and more marbling," John explains.

Low maintenance is another selection criteria for the two-person management of the commercial outfit. "One of the reasons why I buy the bulls I do is because of labor," John explains. "I want a bull I can trust and not have to worry about during the breeding season."

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— John Murrer

Performing on the rail

John says his family always wondered how their calves performed after they sold as weanlings. In 1995 they decided to try retaining ownership of a few calves to see how they would perform in the feedlot and on the rail. The couple sent six steers to the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program's Value Discovery Program (VDP) in Kansas. The results were not what they had hoped — only three grad-

ed Choice, three Select and none met the *Certified Angus Beef*[™] product specifications.

"We found out our cattle didn't have much marbling and had small ribeyes," John says. The experience proved to the Murrers they needed to consider carcass traits in their selection decisions.

Although the Murrers turned their attention to carcass traits, they didn't want to ruin the maternal foundation of their herd. "We didn't want to build a terminal-cross Angus herd," John explains.

In three short years the Murrers have been able to see the results of their selection emphasis. This past year they sent 10 steers to a feedlot near McLean, Texas, and on to the B3R plant in Childress to be harvested. (WRB is an alliance partner with B3R.)

Here's how the 10 steers performed:

- Average daily gain (ADG), 3.27 pounds (lb.);
- Average cost of gain, 47¢/lb.;
- 100% graded Choice;
- Avg. Yield Grade (YG), 2.47;
- Avg. dress, 63.1%;
- Premium per head over market, \$63.99; and
- Six carcasses would have qualified under *Certified Angus Beef* specifications.

Future plans

Wanting to continue to track the success of their calves in the feedlot and on the rail, the Murrers decided to send another set of steers to Texas this year. John says in the next few years they may change their marketing program and retain ownership of all their calves instead of selling them as weanlings.

Other future plans for the Murrers include implementing an artificial insemination (AI) program. The program may include breeding replacement females and selling them in their seedstock source's annual production sale.

No matter which marketing venture

INSIGHT:

WRB honors Murrers

John and Shirley Murrer were named the Western Ranchers Beef (WRB) Cooperative's Producer of the Year at the cooperative's annual beef producers' profit conference.

"Members of Western Ranchers Beef are proving that producers can add market value to their cattle in the WRB Certified Premium Feeders Program," says Richard Eiguren, Jordan Valley, Ore., president of the group. "But our program is just half of the story. The other half is good ranch management, good cattle and determination to succeed in the cattle business.

"This year's recipient is a true ranch family. In their lives and in their heritage ... they exemplify the ranch family and a way of life we [as an industry] struggle to help protect."

He adds that if hard work, good management, watching expenses and an excellent set of cows with good genetics is what it takes to survive in ranching, this young couple, third-generation Lassen County ranchers, has it made.

Dennis Smith, CEO and manager of WRB, says the Murrers have done a consistent job managing their herd, and they've made a long-haul commitment to improve the genetics of their herd. Because of that commitment they have built a reputation for quality and have many repeat customers wanting their calves.

"If you can build your program so customers are looking for your product, that goes a long way toward getting a premium," Smith says.

they choose — selling calves as feeders, retaining ownership or selling replacement females — the Murrers will continue trying to produce products that will fill the needs of their customers, whether it's an order buyer, feedlot owner, packer, consumer or commercial producer.

The Murrers have found gold in California using Angus genetics and focusing on the quality of the product they produce.