

HOME-RAISED ANGUS

Business breed brightens future for Bootleg (Texas) Bradleys.

Story & photos by Maeley Herring, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Farm-to-Market Route 1058 crosses Texas Highway 214 at a little place called Bootleg on the staked plains 30 miles west of Hereford, half that far from the New Mexico line.

It's an arid place, where cattleman Tod Bradley grew to his teens on a ranch his family leased while buying parcels of their own. After moving back to Dimmitt, where granddad Dent Bradley had opened the first grower yard in the 1940s, he wasn't surprised when dryland farmers began signing up for USDA's 10-year Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) in the late 1990s.

"You knew what you were going to get," says Bradley. He quotes a local saying: "When the good Lord flooded the world, we got just a shower out here."

An occasional blizzard or 4-inch rain can break the pattern, but not for long. Still, the Bradleys love the land and stay for the opportunity land and cattle provide.

Family business

Recently, that involved expiring CRP land north of Bootleg, which led to trying cow-calf pairs.

Today, three generations of the family manage three cattle enterprises — the cows here, an expanded backgrounding yard at Dimmitt, and finishing at Tulia, Texas. Maternal granddad G.L.

Willis pioneered the large-scale feedyard initiatives.

Bradley oversees those operations with help from his dad, Gene, and son, Beau. Brother Zay raises the wheat and corn on irrigated farmland that goes to feed the cattle.

Cow enterprise

"We are mainly feedyard and stocker people," Bradley says. "But when all the CRP grass started coming out, I couldn't make those yearlings do very good on it."

Cows could do better than stockers on the coarse, Old World bluestem — making a living on 15 acres, less than half that needed on the native short grass. He began with "hodgepodge cows of every shape and size."

Soon seeing promise, but with a need for more uniform quality, the cattleman sold the trial herd and bought some Angus-base cows

out of Wyoming and the Dakotas. The herd now produces 500 Angus-sired calves each spring.

"Angus get such big premiums on their grade and yield compared to other breeds, and they're pretty tough for this country," Bradley reasons.

"I've tried a few Charolais bulls, trying to get a little more yield out of them," he admits, but the crossbreds pick up little dressed yield and "just 1 pound (lb.) more carcass weight."

That's not worth the trade for predictability.

Bradley buys registered bulls from the Knoll family's 2 Bar

Angus at Hereford, Texas, because they meet performance goals at each phase — from Bootleg's CRP pastures to the stocker, feedyard and packer grid.

"We never sell our calves; [we] feed them all," Bradley says.

Home-raised calves wean into grass traps for 45 days. The bigger half then goes on to the finishing yard, while the rest of the calves grow to six-weights on wheat pasture first.

They finish at 16 months, at least 85% grade Choice or better, with an increasing share making the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand, including Prime.

A check of pen performance last summer found an average daily



Tod and Beau Bradley operate the family's vertically integrated Angus cow herd in the West Texas Panhandle, where they select for growth, marbling and maternal traits. After weaning in grass traps, half the calves go straight to their finishing yard. The others graze wheat pasture first, or go to replacement heifer development.



gain of 4.65 lb., Bradley says. Ironically, that's almost too fast.

"If we don't get them on feed by the time they weigh 650 pounds," he says, "we struggle to get enough days on them to grade before they get too heavy, and we risk losing all our premiums on the grid."

Staying flexible

Last year's market disruptions meant selling cash cattle as the only deal available, typically giving up \$7-\$10 per hundredweight (cwt.) for awhile. Meanwhile, some of the 2020 calves had to be weaned early because of drought.

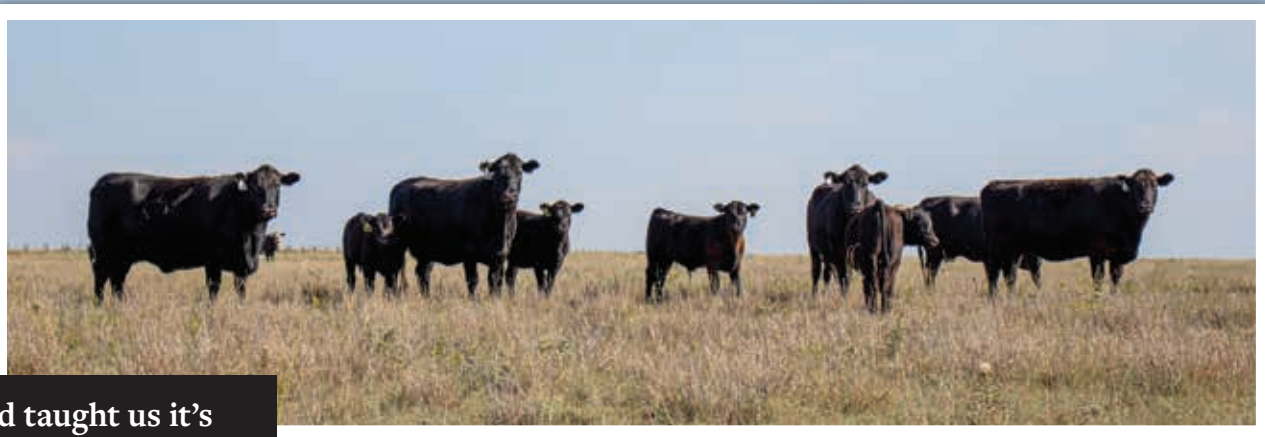
They handled the adjustments well.

Shifting cattle and plans is a constant theme, but all part of Bradley's master plan that is staying flexible and keeping up with new ideas. Genetics play a key role.

"The cowman can try to get a better calf-crop percentage, or a feeder can get his calves to marble faster and weigh more on less feed or lesser-quality feed," he says.

The bulls bought a few years ago "are nearly obsolete" to those he uses today, Bradley says. "When you look at their performance numbers — like dollar beef [\$B, one of the American Angus Association's dollar value indexes (\$Values)], 200 was unheard of four or five years ago, but they are out there now, and Steve (Knoll) has them."

More than advanced genetics, he says, Knoll understands his needs and helps find solutions for any issues that come along.



Above: Rolling with changes sometimes means weaning calves early because of drought conditions.

Below: The Bradleys use bulls from Steve Knoll because they have advanced genetics for a higher calf-crop percentage, more marbling and faster gain.

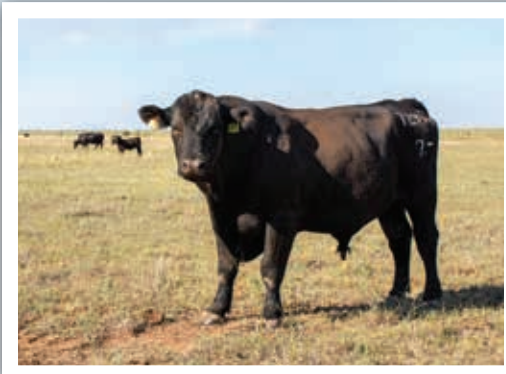
"Dad taught us it's about family more than just the work. Now we have three generations working together, and Mom (Shari) still cooks lunch at her house every day."

— *Tod Bradley*

Family tradition

That's important with West Texas scale and risk, buying thousands of cattle from Mexico to fill the finishing yard and graze the 6,000 acres of wheat alongside family-raised

calves. It often means long days from before dawn till dark, but generations of Bradleys wouldn't have it any other way. Daughters



The Bradleys appreciate their own high-quality genetics as they feed their cattle along thousands of cattle from Mexico to fill the finishing yard and graze available wheat.

Raynee and Taylor worked in feedyard offices, and wife Cindy does, too.

"Horses, roping and cattle — by the time we could walk, we could ride — and the people out here — we just love it every day," Bradley says. "Dad taught us it's about family more than just the work. Now we have three generations working together, and Mom (Shari) still cooks lunch at her house every day."

Underlying all is the land, "what my family has made a living off of, what we take care of so it will take care of us," the seasoned cattleman says. "You have to be willing to endure the extra expense and effort to shuffle cattle around and protect the forage and soil."

Granddaughter Carter Sue, going on 3, is blazing a trail for the next generation. Well-accustomed to riding a horse, she likes getting a heifer for a birthday present and already puts in long days learning and living a legacy with her family.

"This lifestyle is all I've ever known, and it's something I am proud to pass along," Bradley says. |

Editor's note: Maeley Herring was the 2020 CAB producer communications intern.