

SPENDING TIME TO



Colorado producers take a wide view of industry, raise value-added calves.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

Pat and Robin Karney's banker didn't mean to jinx them, but it may have felt that way in hindsight.

They were selling their family feed business, had leased some ranches and owned a small one, but they were trying to put together something more complete. A customer had his own ranch up for sale and suggested the family make an offer.

It was a C corporation, and there were some extra logistics to work out because it couldn't be converted out of that.

"It was like buying a store. We had equipment. We had cows. We even had money in the bank," Robin says. "We're both accountants, so we said, 'We can figure this out.'"

It was a big leap of faith and an investment, but their banker told them, "It'll be just fine if you don't have a drought."

Pat thinks about that "if" differently now.

"The next year is 2002, and we have the worst drought in this part of the world — ever," Pat remembers. "We have to sell off all of our cows; we got down to 50 head. I got a job in town and worked nights to keep it together and make payments ..."

Before Pat finishes, Robin lightens the mood: "The only good thing was there was no irrigation water either, so I didn't have to learn to irrigate."

The purchased ranch had a fair bit of

row-crop ground, and neither considers themselves a farmer.

"My dad came from an irrigated farm, and he always said the shovel didn't fit his hand," Pat laughs. "I guess I'm the same way. It doesn't fit my energy."

Cows do.

A ranch to call home

That's how it's been going for 35 years of marriage — good times mixed with the hard, lots of elbow grease, and plenty of laughs together.

When Pat and Robin got married in 1987, they always had some cows, but their main business was selling cubed supplement across

the entire southern part of the state from their base at La Junta, Colo. Four children — Ashley, Tyler, Erin and Bo — added to the growing labor force. When the time felt right, they bought land and moved out to the ranch north of Las Animas.

Bo was in fourth grade and Erin in seventh when they switched schools. The ranch straddled two school districts, but the advantage went to the one that would give them more time at home.

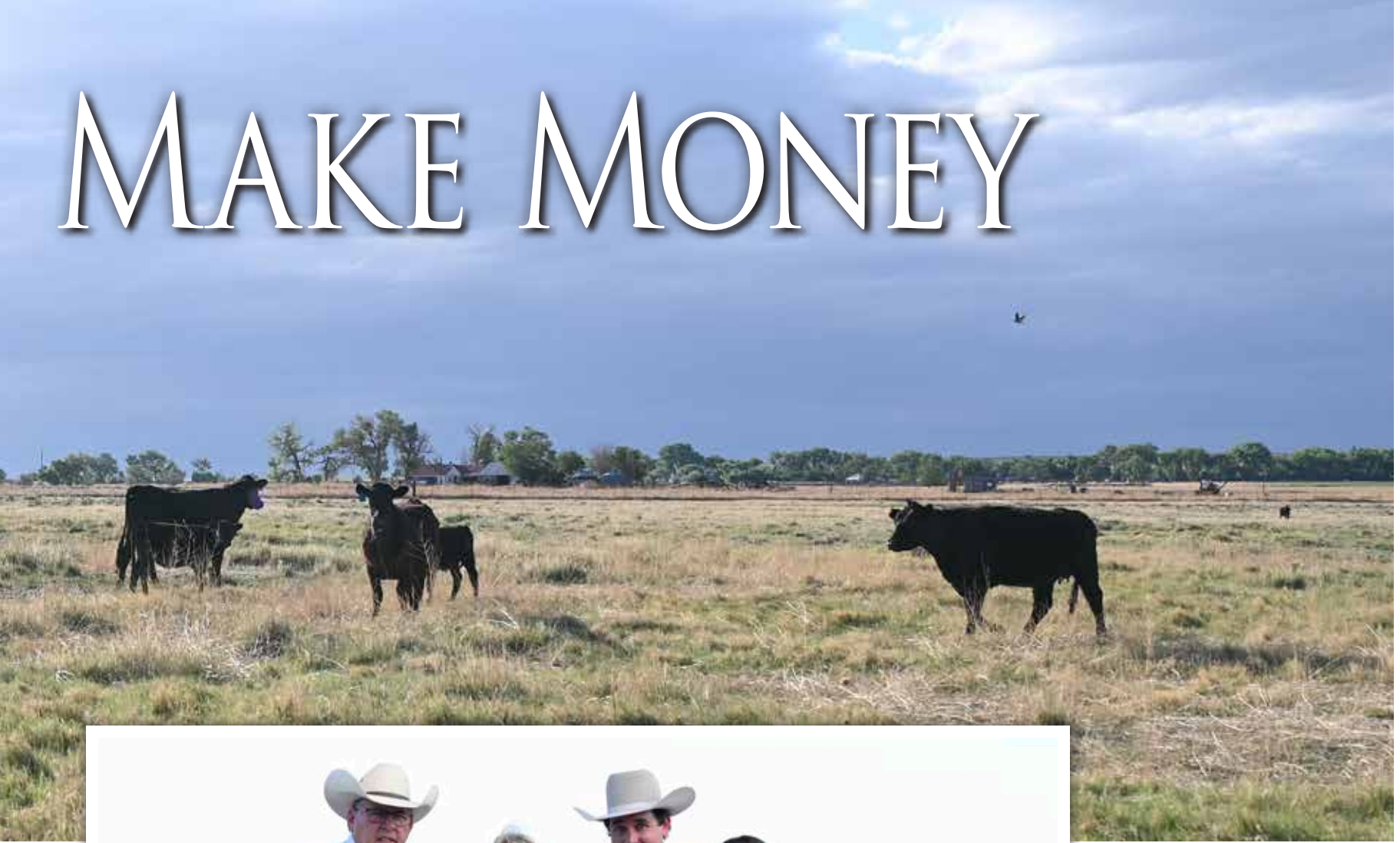
"McClave school had four-day weeks, and we needed all the help we could get," Pat says. "Bo was roping and doctoring with his older brother when he wasn't very old."

The older two had already graduated, but came home from college often to pitch in. In two years' time, Pat quit that warehouse supervisor job, and it rained.

The family took in yearlings to build income, but the cattle broke with sickness, the weather got terribly hot, and the animals just didn't perform.

"Hopefully our kids don't have to learn all the stuff we had to." — Robin Karney

MAKE MONEY



Pat and Robin Karney (left) operate the main ranch with their son Bo, daughter-in-law Abbie and grandson Briggs on a nearby lease. In July, granddaughter Renlie joined the family, becoming the eighth member of that eighth generation of Colorado ranchers. .

“We learned lots,” Pat says. They can laugh about it now. “Hopefully our kids don’t have to learn all the stuff we had to,” Robin adds.

The cows that stayed

In 2005 they started rebuilding.

By the time the 2011 drought hit, they had a new plan, partly because their ranch ownership wasn’t so new, but mostly because they didn’t want to sell what they’d created.

They hauled pairs to Wyoming, and sold the calves before they

moved the cows back home later in the year.

“We came home with every cow and about 99% of the calves got sold up there. But we were up there quite a bit during the summer, and it wasn’t easy,” Pat says. “We had started our cow herd by ’11, and

we didn’t want to sell them and go backwards.”

What started as a Hereford base eventually saw Brangus and Salers, but by the time they decided to start raising their own replacements and calving out heifers, they turned to Angus.

“We thought that was the way to go, and it has been. We calved out 125 heifers this spring, and we didn’t touch one,” Pat notes.

That’s the first part of the equation, but the Karneys are also looking for calves that do well after weaning. They typically precondition and sell in load lots on Superior Livestock Auction, but they’ll feed any heifers that don’t make it into the herd.

Credit the source

They’ve gotten carcass data back that shows up to 75% Prime, which they credit as much to their genetic supplier as to their management.

For the past 12 years, they’ve been buying their bulls from Baldridge Performance Angus near

Continued on page 16

North Platte, Neb. To keep the herd uniform, they synchronize and artificially inseminate (AI) all of their heifer calves to Baldridge bulls.

“They have the phenotype, but they have the EPDs (expected progeny differences), performance plus the carcass. They have everything, and that’s what Jud tries to do — make them all-around,” Pat says.

Over the years they’ve become good friends.

“They’re a very progressive family, very involved with all facets of the industry,” says Jud Baldridge. Their business experience gives them a bigger-picture view, and that shows in their selection decisions, he notes.

“They’re pretty aware of performance and value differences of cattle on the rail,” Baldridge says.

Getting paid for paperwork

Early on the Karneys were interested in value-added marketing, selling in special breed sales at the auction market and being early adopters of preconditioning.

For the past two years, they’ve been using AngusLinkSM.

“If we’re going to buy the genetics, we might as well brag about it,” Pat says.

They also use the program to claim non-hormone treated cattle (NHTC) and Global Animal Partnership (GAP).

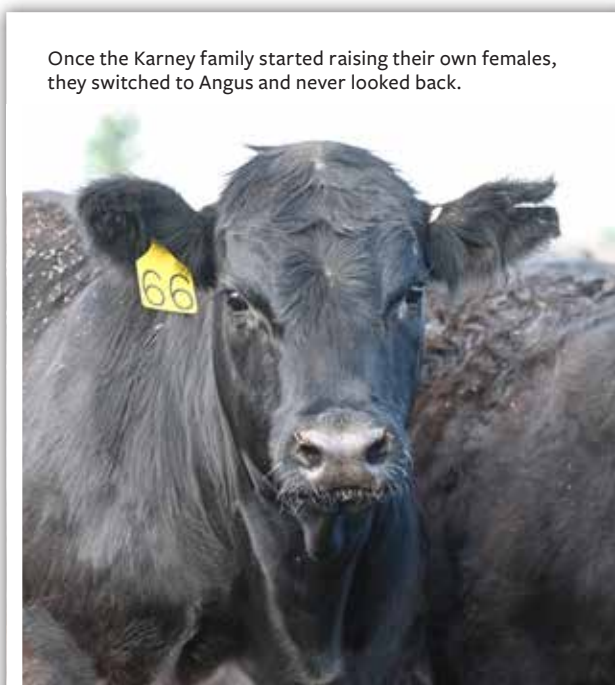
“We try to hit all the boxes,” Pat says. “It’s a moneymaker, and we’re all about making money, because that’s what keeps us in business.”

The programs do require more paperwork, but Robin says they have the patience and attention to detail to do it. Their

college training, coupled with recordkeeping know-how from their feed business, set them up well.

Most ranchers don’t really want more time in the office, Pat admits, but it is what makes sense for their bottom line. It’s worth it.

“We have to do the things we’re good at and find help where we’re not good at something,” he explains. “I think it’s like being a baseball or a football coach. You have to put people in the right



Once the Karney family started raising their own females, they switched to Angus and never looked back.

“If we’re going to buy the genetics, we might as well brag about it.” — *Pat Karney*

spot, and you have to put yourself in the right spot, and that’s why we can do those programs, because we’re good at recordkeeping. We’re not so good at being farmers or mechanics.”

They get more for their calves,

so they can hire a mechanic, Pat jokes.

“I had a business policy class in college in my senior year, and I think the one thing I got out of that class is you got to be outside the box and be always thinking how you can better your business — and no matter what the business is,” he says.

The American dream

Baldridge says he appreciates that the Karneys are such good

ranchers, but it’s really who they are as people that sets them apart.

“Their positive, can-do attitude makes them a pleasure to work with,” Baldridge says. “They all pull together and make progress.”

Tyler feeds cattle for them; Ashley’s children come for the weekend; and Bo is managing the herd on their leased ranch. Erin recently took the helm as executive director of the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association.

When Pat and Robin look back on what they’ve built, there’s satisfaction in knowing their family didn’t watch what it took and want out.

“We’re close to retiring, and to be able to do what we’ve done with what we wanted to do, it’s the American dream. We raised four kids here. We’ve done what we wanted, and without my wife, Robin, and the kids working together, it wouldn’t have happened,” Pat says.

This year is another drought. The supply of the 48-hour allotment of irrigation water they get periodically throughout the growing season doesn’t last long enough, and they’re hoping the hay will. It’s not anything they haven’t been through before. Pat is a sixth-generation Colorado rancher, with his eight grandkids making up the eighth.

The youngest granddaughter arrived in the middle of July, the latest sign that even when Mother Nature doesn’t deliver, blessings still arrive, jinx or not.

“You think there’s better places, and we’ve seen places, but then our ancestors came here 150 years ago, and we’ve all survived here,” Pat says. “For us to say we bought a ranch and to say we got to do it on our own, it’s a pretty good feeling.”



All of the couple’s grandchildren live in Colorado and are involved in agriculture. The older ones help out at the ranch and the younger ones are watching and learning.