



Lois (left) and Don Hough, Joseph, Ore., are partners in marriage as well as business. "She's been the best partner I could ever have," Don says. "She does everything," which includes helping Don calve all first-calf heifers.

# Working Every Angle

*This Northwest couple takes advantage of Angus genetics, including their cattle's ability to hit the CAB® target.*

Story & photos by  
**KIM KANZLER HOLT**

Don and Lois Hough just might be in the minority of Northwest commercial cow-calf producers. Using Angus genetics, they work their operation from several angles, utilizing various resources and segments to get the most profit from their cows.

They invest in similar, solid genetics year after year, wean top-of-the-market calves, and follow them through to *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-acceptance rates of 30%-40%. While maintaining balance and diversification in their often-challenging northeast Oregon environment, they also market their own genetics through bred replacement heifers.

Like many in agriculture, Don and Lois have worked hard to maintain their chosen vocation.

Born in the eastern Colorado plains region, Don and his family were forced during the depression and drought of the 1930s to move to Denver, where his father found work as a John Deere mechanic. Starting out on a small acreage, Don's father bought land piece by piece, amassing a dairy, a wheat farm and some beef cows.

Don bought his first cow when he was 12 years old and has added to his herd ever since. He met Lois, an Iowa native, while attending Colorado State University (CSU). It was the start of a lifelong partnership — in marriage and in business.

After college, Don and Lois rented land from Don's father and then bought their own place, where they farmed and grazed 100 cows. Don taught high school biology in Castle Rock, while Lois worked as a county Extension agent, eventually teaching third grade for nine years in Parker. As time passed, Don decided he had to teach full time or ranch full time. They lived close to Denver and wanted to expand.

"But the city was just moving out," Don recalls. So they started looking for an agricultural community out West — one beyond the influence of the city.

## Similar, solid genetics

In 1971, Don and Lois sold their cows in Colorado and moved to Oregon. They started over in the cattle business with a herd they had acquired with their ranch.

"That's where we got started in the Angus [business]," Don explains. "We started good. They were way above average cattle. They knew and were acclimated to the ranch. That was very positive."

Although northeast Oregon's Wallowa Valley is a beautiful place to ranch — especially during summers of abundant grazing — it takes dedication, determination and the right kind of cattle to be proficient in some six months of winter-like conditions. Even though the Houghs raise 80% of their own hay, the long, cold winters equal long feeding seasons, which are tough on the business.

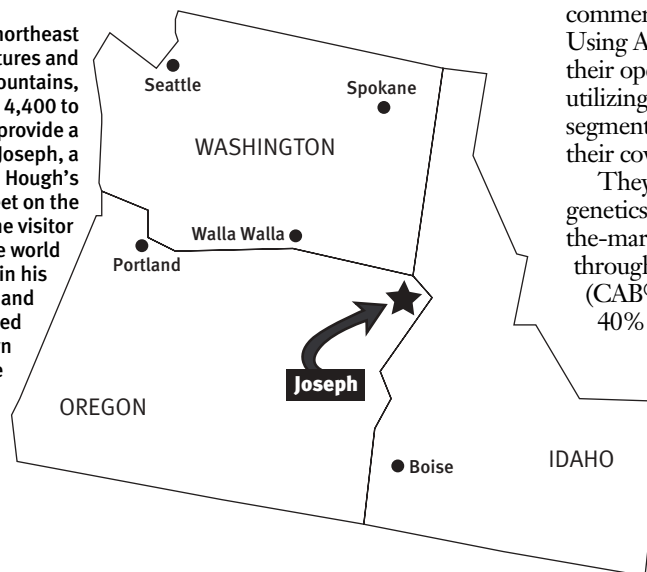
Also tough, initially, was the weak bull power that came with their Angus herd. Unimpressed with their first weaned calf crop, Don replaced about nine of the existing bulls within the first year. Artificial insemination (AI) doesn't fit their ranch's resources, so he acquired new genetics for their herd from several Northwest breeders, including Thomas Angus Ranch of Baker City, Ore.

Don went to the Thomas' first sale in 1973 to take a look at what they had. He bought four bulls then and has nearly every year since. In fact, Don is their only customer who hasn't missed a sale in 30 years.

"It's kind of a tradition with me — that's something I just don't miss," he says.

Don's bull-buying pattern hasn't varied much during the last 30 years. To date, he estimates that about 80% of their bull purchases have come from the Thomas herd. And, too, Don isn't afraid to spend a little more to get a particular bull. His

The Wallowa Valley in northeast Oregon boasts beautiful pastures and fields of hay. The Wallowa Mountains, with peaks rising up from 4,400 to 10,000 feet in elevation, provide a backdrop for the region. Joseph, a tourist destination and the Hough's nearest town, sits at 4,100 feet on the bank of Wallowa Lake. As one visitor put it, "There is a corner of the world that Charles Kerault missed in his quest for beautiful and interesting places in the United States. It is the charming town of Joseph, Ore., set in the cradle of the Wallowa Mountains, a place that is largely undiscovered but by the people that live nearby."



The Houghs raise 80% of their hay in flood-irrigated meadows. The grass and grass-alfalfa mix is piled into stacks that resemble bread loaves that are fed with a Stackhand. Not many producers stack hay anymore; however, the Houghs find it an easy way to feed, and all hay is fed on their place, not sold. The 20% of hay they do buy is in large-bale form and fed the same way. Typically, they feed mid-December through mid-May.



The Houghs keep about 70% of their replacements for their own use or to sell as bred heifers. Tracing back to Thomas Angus Ranch genetics, these heifers are bred for 42 days and start calving March 1. The Houghs calve in March and April due to the region's extended winter weather.

buying habits haven't changed because of the good results he and Lois achieve from their own herd.

"We have to have everything here," Don explains. "We need mothering ability, that cow has to be fertile and breed back, she has to milk, and she has to last nine or 10 years. And then, of course, you go to the carcass thing and the performance of the cattle — the gain, conversion and grading. We're getting the results all the way through with these cattle, and that's why we keep going back to Thomas Angus genetics."

Lois also points out that these results are one of the reasons Don has remained ranching, instead of retiring. "That's probably true," Don says. "I'm 70 years old, and I should have retired 10 years ago. But you just keep going. I want to see how these next ones do."

And rightly so. Their steers and heifers post consistently high marks. The heifers that aren't retained or sold as replacements grade 90%-100% USDA Choice or better; the steers 80% Choice or better. Their CAB-acceptance rate — which tops at 40% — is about double the national average.

"Our cattle do grade pretty well, and we want to take advantage of that," Don says.

#### **Value-based rewards**

Don and Lois have consistently retained 100% ownership in their calves for the last 10 years. Before doing so, however, they experienced frustrations similar to other cattle producers. "We could never get any information back from the feedyard when we sold them," Don says. "They just wouldn't feed it back to you. So it gives you nothing to work with on your breeding program.

"We weren't being rewarded for the quality of our cattle," he says.

They got started with retained ownership when they placed their calves in a feedlot owned by one buyer who consistently gave more for their calves. "We discovered they perform pretty well," Don explains. "They gain well. They'll come in anywhere from 3.7 to 4.0 pounds (lb.) per day. They convert from 5.0 to 5.5 lb.

"We should have done that a long time before we did," Don comments. "That's why I tell young people starting out in this business, send some of your cattle to the feedyard and see how they do. This will tell you where you are and where you need to go in your breeding program."

Lois adds, "Somebody who wants to be in [the cattle business] for a long time has to make some plans."

The bottom line — Do you want to get rewarded for your genetics?

The Houghs have a feeding relationship with Oregon-based Beef Northwest Feeders. They gained a great deal of confidence in the now former manager at the Boardman, Ore., yard, who Don described as a "straight-shooter" extremely capable of sorting market-ready cattle.

When working with a feedyard, Don believes you need to know who is doing the marketing. "This is really key when

you select a feedyard." Feeding is important, but so is the person who sorts the fat cattle.

He explains, "We sell them on the grid. That's the way we like to sell them." So it's important their cattle are sorted often and sent to the packer when a high percentage are Choice, Yield Grade (YG) 3s or better. "Those YG 4s just tear your head off."

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Young females with big calves at side are the cornerstones of the Hough herd. The Houghs fit their feeding and grazing resources to the ages of their cattle. Older pairs are bred on and graze dryland native pastures, while first- and second-calvers are sorted off for better care. "We can do that because we run a lot of our cattle on irrigated pasture," Don explains.

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Beef Northwest supplies Don and Lois with group feed performance and carcass data. The Houghs then share this information verbally with Bob, Rob and Lori Thomas, Thomas Angus Ranch owners.

"It's good advertisement for them," Don says.

**Female focused**

Although Don and Lois haven't tracked feed and carcass performance back to individual cows, they do have 30 years worth of production records on their herd.

All calves are ear-tagged at birth and weighed. Steer calves are weaned in fall and backgrounded for 30-45 days before going to Beef Northwest lots in Nyssa or Boardman, Ore.

Don selects sires for a balance of traits and studies the expected progeny differences (EPDs) of his purchases. He selects bulls that are less than +5.0 for birth weight EPD (BW EPD). For the weaning weight EPD (WW EPD), he wants one as high as he can get, usually around +30 to +40. Yearling weight EPDs (YW EPDs) need to be at least +70. He looks for a milk EPD of at least a +10.

Regarding carcass quality, he's looking for at least a +0.10 or better for marbling, and certainly no negatives.

Don pays special attention to his herd's mothering ability. He won't tolerate poor mothers. Cows are culled on mothering ability, performance and longevity.

He and Lois keep about 70% of their replacements for their own use or for sale. Instead of selling their heifer calves, the Houghs keep extras for bred heifers because the market for heifer calves is sometimes 8¢ to 10¢ less than steers. "And we don't think that's justified," Don says. "We've fed heifers, and our heifers perform very well. They gain almost as well as the steers, and they always grade better."

The Houghs have sold bred heifers for a number of years, with most staying in the Northwest. Even though they have some repeat business, Don finds the bred heifer market "very fickle."

He's not alone in this observation. Rod Wesselman, American Angus Association regional manager, says this is a definite trend for bred heifers. "It's like the light switch is on and everyone's ready, and then you can't find any. Or it's just the opposite," he says.

The Houghs breed all heifers that come in heat during a 42-day window. Sale heifers are sorted into uniform groups for added marketability. Don always points out to prospective buyers how well his cattle perform in the feedlot — in fact, one of this year's buyers was tipped off by Beef Northwest. Wesselman, who's seen the Houghs' bred heifers, adds, "The Houghs heifers are as good as you can find for commercial heifers out of Angus and bred to Angus." Another benefit is the Houghs' ability to track the backgrounds of these heifers back to a leading Angus seedstock source.

Although Don and Lois have crossbred in the past, all but 5% of their present-day herd is straight black. Don realizes the benefits of hybrid vigor, but also knows that "Angus are superior mothers. The black cow is superior in these cold climates."

Lois adds, "They get up and lick their calves right away. It seems as though if we had disposition or other problems, it was with a crossbred cow over 50% of the time."

"And Angus cattle just grade better, that's all, than most of the crossbred cattle," Don says. "I just think the whole program all the way through is why we decided not to crossbreed anymore."

Whether in the cold climate or the feedyard, the Houghs know their straight-Angus cattle are reliable from pasture to plate — a definite benefit of working different angles in the cattle business to find success.