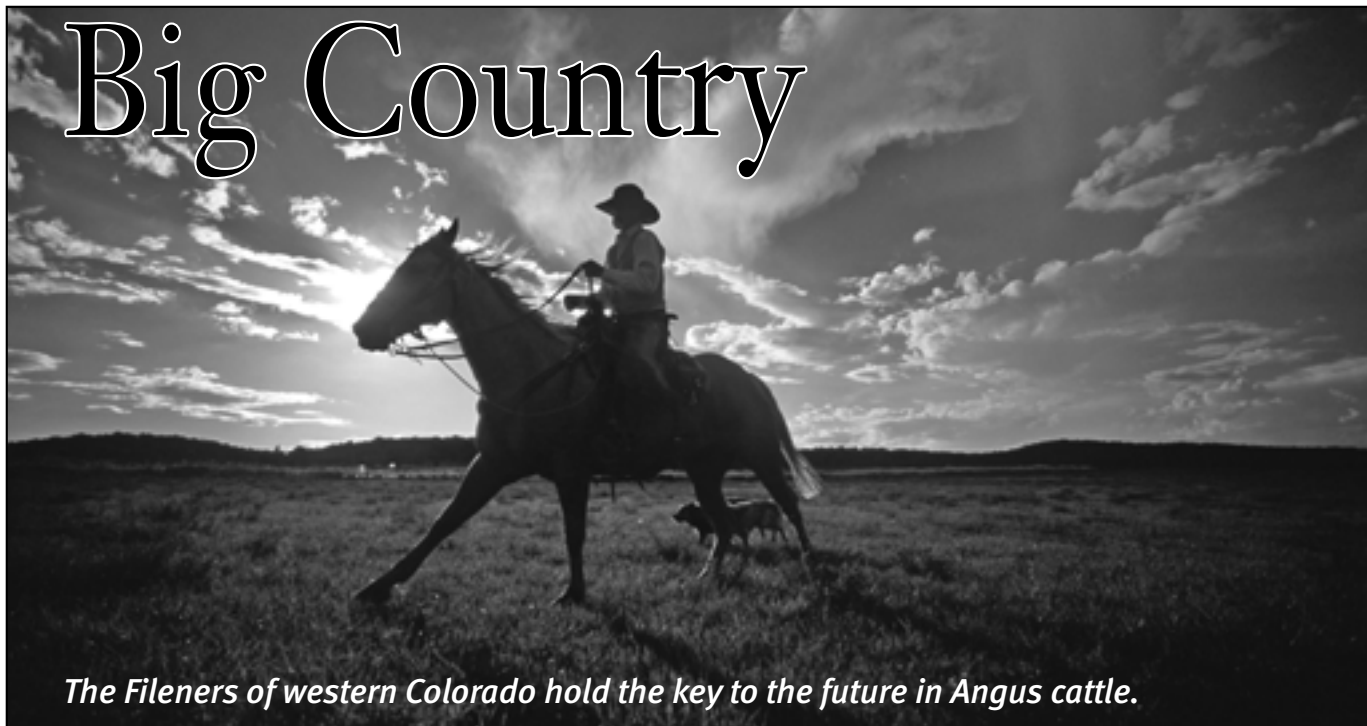


Big Country



The Fileners of western Colorado hold the key to the future in Angus cattle.

Story & photos by
ERIC GRANT

Shinn Park Ranch rests in the heart of a broad basin rimmed by rocky ridges. It's a quiet, productive place, where bluebirds still sing, and



John Filener, a fourth-generation cattleman near Montrose, Colo., says many of the area's ranchers are giving up and leaving the field. "They simply can't make a living any longer by just raising cattle," he says.

deer find refuge along the edges of the pastures. Located in the mountains east of Montrose, Colo., the ranch produces abundant hay and good commercial cattle, most of which are Angus-cross cows and calves.

Owners John and Adele Filener, whose families came to the basin in the late 1800s, are like many other mountain ranchers who broke with tradition and switched to Angus bulls. They believe the decision to do so brought their breeding program into greater consumer orientation, and the genetics they have in place today will bolster their economic position in the future.

"The western slope of Colorado is under siege by investors, developers and commercial growth. Many of these old ranches are being bought up and then broken into smaller parcels," John says. "Many ranchers are simply giving up and leaving the field. They simply can't make a living any longer by just raising cattle. We still believe there's opportunity here, but the realities of this business have changed, and we have to be more focused on the consumer than we ever were before."

A lifelong resident of western Colorado, John is a fourth-generation rancher. He's known as an exceptional cowman who has a natural way with horses. Adele, whose family played a key role in the settlement of western Colorado (two towns near their ranch are either named for or by her grandfathers) fell in love with the cattle business when she was young. After a two-decade career outside of ranching, she finally returned to the cattle business in 1993.

"In 1998, I met John, who was running cattle for another ranch," she recalls. "I had a few head but nowhere to run them in the summer. So, John pastured them for me with the cattle from the ranch he managed."

Their friendship grew into a love affair, and John and Adele married in 1999. "We never had a date. We simply spent time together working cattle, doing what we both loved."

Tradition and innovation

Today, the Fileners own nearly 300 head of cows. Their ranch is a typical western ranching operation. It's a rugged and big-shouldered place, with piñon hillsides and pine-covered mountains that rise to the east. It also claims good grass and productive hayfields.

The Fileners calve in March near home. In June, they trail their cattle into the mountains, where they leave them until they gather in the fall. During the course of the year, the Fileners' cattle will graze from elevations of 7,000 feet (ft.) up to 10,000 ft.

While many of their production practices are based on tradition, the Fileners also recognize that ranching depends on innovation to survive the coming century. A big part of that recognition is realizing their business needs income diversification. So, in recent years, they've moved into leasing their lands for guiding and hunting, which is a booming business across the country. Their ranch is home to some of the best big-game hunting in the country, with everything from elk, mule deer, bears and mountain lions.

The Fileners also recently added a herd of Corriente cattle to tap the growing market for recreational roping. John gentles and trains Quarter Horses for ranchers and neighbors, something he enjoys immensely.

And, they've also made significant strides in genetic improvement by using artificial insemination (AI) and purchasing industry-leading genetics from top breeding programs.

The critical role that good genetics play became apparent to Adele in the early 1990s, when she learned one of the most important lessons about raising cattle — it pays to start with good genetics. But instead of buying quality cattle from proven programs, she purchased secondhand cows with little to no information about their backgrounds.

"John pointed out that I should have spent our money on some great heifers instead of on other people's rejects," Adele recalls. "That was an important lesson. You live and learn in this business. Since then, John took that herd and turned it around and created a quality program of black baldies."

Breeding for balance

The Fileners also aggressively AIed to top Angus bulls for several years, something that leap-frogged their program ahead dramatically. Their cow herd became more uniform and consistent, and the quality of their calves improved immensely.

Today, the Fileners have moved away from widespread use of AI, preferring instead to buy top-quality bulls that are sired by proven

AI bulls. Each year they purchase bulls from as far away as Montana and Kentucky. They want cattle with structural soundness and doability, cattle that can take care of themselves on the ranch's rugged rangeland, John says.

"We look for long, fleshy bulls with moderate birth weights and good dispositions," he says. "EPDs (expected progeny differences) play a big role in our bull selection. We select for low birth weight combined with fast growth. Our bulls also have got to have a balance of maternal traits and genetics for milk."

Perhaps most importantly, the Fileners conduct a pulmonary arterial pressure (PAP) test on all of their bulls prior to bringing them into the breeding program. This is critical for ranches in the mountains, where cattle brought in from other regions of the country can suffer from high-altitude disease, an often-fatal heart ailment.

"We've found this test is critical in our selection pressure. High-altitude disease is really dangerous to some breeds of cattle, including Angus. But, we've found if we select against it, we can control it," John says.

The Fileners raise all of their replacement heifers and hope eventually to sell high-quality replacement heifers to producers in the region or across the country. Most of their feeder cattle wind up in Colorado feedlots.

"We sell our feeder cattle to local feeders, and they in turn provide us feedback on the performance of the cattle clear to the rail," Adele says. "The feeders have been pleased with the overall performance of our cattle and the quality of their carcasses."

The Fileners also recognize that their future success depends on information management and becoming lower-cost, highly efficient producers. They've invested heavily in new cattle-working facilities, with a state-of-the-art calving barn and a hydraulic chute. This facility can easily be upgraded to include technology for electronic identification (EID), something the Fileners believe will be critical to them as the industry moves toward greater source and process verification.

"We believe a national animal ID program will be a big key to economic survival on the western slope and elsewhere," Adele says. "We need to be able to track cattle to safeguard our investment against things like BSE (bovine spongiform encephalopathy) and to encourage the general population to recognize the quality of locally raised beef."

John adds, "The animal ID program will be a big key to economic survival on the western slope and elsewhere. This business is more than just ranching, and we believe the future depends on traditional hard work and the better use of technology.

"We need to be able to track cattle," he continues. "It will safeguard our product against things like mad cow disease. Then we need to take what we know about our cattle and encourage

the general population to eat American beef, because we can document through these systems that our product has much stricter guidelines for raising quality beef. This will play a key role for ranches like ours to continue to survive in this business."

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