

# Middle of Nowhere?



PHOTOS BY STEVE SUTHER

## Montana Angus ranchers work to make the best of it.

Story by  
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**Above:** Jim Collins says he wants to raise cattle that will feed the best and produce the best beef possible, but it starts with improving upon what they already have.

“U-Lazy-3,” is the brand, but the two who run the ranch could best be described as the complete opposite of that “L” word.

Jim Collins and his dad, Neil, own and manage 450 commercial Angus cows on 16,000 acres near Biddle, Mont. Their only outside help is a friend who likes swathing, baling or working cows as a “vacation” from his job in Wyoming and the

occasional labor sharing with Neil’s brother and nephew.

Last spring brought three blizzards in little more than three weeks, taking a toll on calves and stressing ranchers across a wide area. But the Collins men aren’t complaining.

“I certainly don’t have to be slapped in the face to know I’ve been granted an opportunity to live a pretty good lifestyle,” Jim says. “The middle of nowhere is a pretty good spot to be.”

The ranch is near the Little Powder River headwaters in

southeastern Montana, in an area that’s just starting to see outside land buyers and traffic from hunting enthusiasts. But being in a remote place doesn’t mean they’re out of touch with what’s going on in the market or what consumers are demanding.

“My goal is to raise cattle that will feed out the best and produce the best beef we possibly can,” Jim says. He looks to the option of retained ownership some day, but has a more immediate goal: “We just want to improve on what we have now on the ranch.”

That has been helped along by a consistent relationship with Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed partner Beller Feedlot, of Lindsay, Neb. Owner/manager Terry Beller and his crew have worked with the Collins cattle and returned information to the family for the past three years.

“One reason we went with Terry is because he promises all the results will be shared with us,” Neil says, noting they use performance and carcass data as a benchmark.

“The information that we’ve been getting back has helped us make more conscientious decisions, to strive for perfection,” Jim says. “In today’s economy, you’ve got to run more and more and you’ve got to be more efficient. It’s probably pushing us to produce a product that’s superior in more and more ways.”

Last year one harvest group went 90% Choice and 25% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand and Prime, already far above industry averages.

They continue to cull cows for poor production and invest in the “right” genetics. Since 2001, most of the bull battery has come from Whitestone-Krebs, of Gordon, Neb.

“That’s the thing about Jim. He’s not scared to spend a little money to get things right, and that’s good. You’ve got to buy the better bulls,” Neil says. “It pays off.”

Although they might not see the direct dividends in terms of grid premiums, the Collins family knows that’s why Beller comes back to bid each year.

“As a rancher, I want the premiums when they’re good, but I don’t want the losses or the discounts,” Jim says with a laugh. But selling them via the auction barn or video sale hasn’t been a great fit, either.

“When you find somebody you can trust and you like and do business with them, like with Terry, then I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that,” he says.

That’s part of the reason they keep up their health program, which includes modified-live, anti-viral vaccines at branding, with fall boosters.

“One of the best things we can do is to give every calf every possible opportunity to be the best they can



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be,” Jim says. “That starts with a strong vaccination program.”

Building on that value-added calf idea, they have enrolled in the AngusSource® program for the past three years.

Ranch work is mostly focused on the cows, but they do get one or two cuttings from their alfalfa ground that keeps them busy in early summer. Jim takes advantage of the local scenery, serving as a guide for hunters with his own company, Butte Creek Outfitters, and working toward

photography that showcases the West and his way of life.

Perhaps the brand that was registered in 1910 was inspired by a different family, because when Jim’s grandpa bought it in 1945 he surely knew that a “lazy three” wouldn’t survive long in the cow business. The Collins folks know raising quality beef takes focus, dedication and a get-to-it attitude.

