



Tom Revier is realizing his dream of a 10,000-head-capacity feedlot. "It's \$130-a-head spread between the Choice and Select, so we're going for grade," he says.

# Master Plan Realized

*High-tech, high-quality makeover feeding Angus cattle.*

*Story & photos by*  
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The 1976 aerial picture looks like many other Minnesota farms. The original green house is a classic box design with a white porch. There's a chicken coop, a granary, a small bin, a few sheds and, of course, a red barn. Cornfields surround the slice of Americana.

That's pretty much what it looked like when Tom Revier came back to the family farm near Olivia in 1990 after earning degrees in accounting and political science from Concordia College up the road at Moorhead.

He passed on opportunities to work at Twin Cities firms, because, he says, "Who wouldn't want to farm?" It would take a heavy dose of that optimism and passion for agriculture to make a go of the career choice.

Today, visitors follow the farm office's cherry-wood staircase up to that framed photograph, and a

conference room that overlooks a very different scene. A glance out the picture windows shows five cattle-finishing barns, corn-holding facilities, covered lagoons and adjacent pastures full of cattle. Angus cattle.

Revier says he may have passed on all that — he could very well be in an urban finance role — if he'd have known how the story would begin.

Just out of college, he went to secure his first operating note.

"My dad asked how it went at the bank and I said, 'Not very good. You didn't tell me you're broke,'" he recalls.

The 1980s had not been kind to the senior Revier's budget, and when he offered his son use of his equipment and free diesel to get his start, the lender knew he wouldn't be able to provide it.

Revier did odd jobs and helped out on the farm for half a year before returning to the bank with a new proposal: custom cattle feeding.

## Use what you have

"I've always loved cattle," he says,



Visitors follow the farm office's cherry-wood staircase up to a framed aerial photograph showing the original farmhouse, a chicken coop, a granary, a small bin, a few sheds and, of course, a red barn. Looking out the conference room windows, they see a very different scene.

and he had seen a nearby uncle's success in the finishing business.

The young man started out custom feeding 4,500 head on the home place and eventually farming ground well to the north. For nine years that continued, until the demands of marriage and a young family led him to rethink the spread-out nature of his operation.

"I needed to be in one location," Revier says. He decided to switch from custom feeding to owning all the cattle through the yard. "Rather than running a hotel, I started focusing on profitability and efficiencies."

One path to maximizing both was

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to get his operations up to the 10,000 head the infrastructure was built to handle.

“We had this huge commodity building, this huge shop, these huge bunkers all in place, and now an office and a scale, but yet only 4,500-head capacity,” he says. “We wanted to finish our goals, but before we started toward that, we needed to lock down our environment to be the best stewards we could be.”

He poured concrete in all pens, which slope toward the center. The solids stay on top and rainwater that falls on the pen is collected with less than 1% solids through underground piping.

“It’s like a city sewer system,” Revier says. “We’ve curbed it all and contain all the water. Our yard was designed so that no matter what — sunny or rainy — you can get out in your street shoes and walk around.”

That water is used to irrigate the pastures that run in between the feedlot and the county pavement.

“We did an environmental assessment, internally,” he says. “What do we have that we’d like to fix or make better?”

Once that list was complete, he felt ready to tackle the expansion challenge.

**Expansion**

It is extremely difficult to obtain permits for large-scale animal facilities in Minnesota, he explains. “It took a year to design what we wanted and a year and a half to permit it, and it took a lot of money.”

The county set a 2,000-animal-unit cap that he needed a variance on, but state-level approval was the first hurdle. Bundles of paperwork, assessments and on-site visits later, followed by a tense county commissioners meeting, he received approval in 2008.

“We got our permit in June and we

proceeded to secure financing — we were going to be owning the cattle and building the facilities — and then in September, Lehman [Bros. Holdings Inc.] failed,” he said. “Our global finance came to a

standstill. We’d chosen a bank and were running down that path, so that put our plans on hold for about two years.”

Today, there’s no way to tell that everything didn’t go exactly according to the master design. The barns are immaculate, equipment well-kept, and uniform black Angus cattle fill the pens.

“Genetics are important to us. We’re feeding our cattle for a very high-end market,” Revier says. “We value Prime and Choice, so we not only want black Angus cattle, but ranchers that are really

striving to produce the best carcass-quality cattle.”

He first focused on black-hided animals because “it became difficult to sell the rest,” he says, noting that he and “an old family friend” buy all of the cattle that enter the yard.

“At the time we were more interested in black cattle and not paying attention to whose cattle we were buying or the genetics. They just had to be visually appealing. We found that all black cattle don’t do the same.”

“Then we focused on the breeding and bull used by ranchers and what they were producing,” he says.

Why? Simple economics. “It’s \$130-a-head spread between the Choice and Select, so we’re going for grade,” Revier says, but he knows routinely hitting a target is not just about getting the right cattle.

**Management decisions**

The feeding program centers around crops raised in the family’s farming

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— Tom Revier



Water collected from the feedlots drainage system is used to irrigate pastures that run in between the feedlot and the county pavement.

operations, and ethanol byproducts. A large building provides on-farm storage and grain drying, and just down from there, a large vat holds a million gallons of corn syrup.

“It’s the least valuable of their byproducts, and it’s the most inconsistent,” he says. “About the only way to feed it is to hold large quantities and let it average the nutrients.”

Easy access to cheaper feedstuffs is an advantage to raising cattle in Minnesota. Winter weather is not.

“One of the risks inherent to cattle feeding is Mother Nature, so we’ve eliminated that risk,” Revier says. “Our facilities are more expensive, but it’s like an insurance premium.”

Four pens remain outside, and after a hot, humid summer in 2011, Revier installed shades, but even those little details are always up for evaluation and constant improvement.

“I’m not real happy with them

aesthetically,” he says. “I got to thinking, ‘What is the best shade structure in the world?’ We’re going to knock out concrete and plant cottonwood trees.”

He’ll fence around them and watch them grow.

Every week the feedyard moves about 500 head of cattle — getting that number in and selling the same amount. While Revier is sourcing cattle, marketing the finished animals and developing the business, he relies on two feedlot supervisors who split the remaining details from health plans to logistics.

Several office workers handle everything from accounts receivable to data management.

“We do have great employees,” he says. “Not everybody wants to do this as their life’s work, but the people who do, we value them.”

He offers retirement and health plans

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**Getting into the registered business**

Maybe it’s his training in business, but even a hobby for Tom Revier doesn’t stay that way for long. In 2007 he got into the registered-Angus business, starting with a base from Schiefelbein Farms and Thomas Angus Ranch.

“I wanted it to be fun for me and my family and to play around and develop really, extremely high beef-carcass genetics,” he says.

It grew quickly, up to 300 head of registered animals just a few years ago, but then an expansion at his Olivia, Minn., feedyard was increasingly taking time.

“And then it was not so fun,” he says. “I’m great at feeding, but the registered business was new to me. I was learning as I was going, while I was running a pretty large operation.”

So he scaled back, retaining embryos and allowing for a rebuilding later on.

Revier’s ultimate goal is to take genetics that could fetch a higher price in the marketplace and offer them at a discount to his feeder-calf suppliers.

“We want to improve the genetics that we’re getting from our ranch suppliers by offering very high-quality bulls,” he says.



Four pens remain outside. After a hot, humid summer in 2011, Revier installed shades. Not completely happy with their aesthetics, he intends to “knock out concrete and plant cottonwood trees.”

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that rival any large corporation.

“We wanted them to be rewarded and be able to support a family as well,” Revier says. That fuels high retention.

The core of the business is a series of these symbiotic relationships.

“I noticed early on that manure is a very valuable resource and we’d been selling it to neighbors for a lower cost, applied, than it cost us to get it to them and apply it,” Revier says. “It kept nagging at me that we could better utilize this manure ourselves and capture the full value if we were only farming more land.”

Eventually he built up that base. Today that’s become an important asset, so he treats it as such.

“We want to maintain its quality and extract the most nutrients out of it that we can,” he says.

The dried separated solids are blended with pen manure before spreading. The holding lagoons sport large floating tarps and torches burn off the methane trapped below. Someday soon that gas may provide its own value, but for now the cover helps keep odors and emissions to a minimum. That, combined with the sewer system, makes rolling down a pickup window in the feedyard no doubt the same as doing it in that 1976 farm photo.

“I have much better air quality than even I ever dreamed I would,” Revier says as he takes a deep breath in. He and wife Libby and their two children will soon be enjoying that every day. They’re finishing up a new house they’ve built just 100 yards away from where the original stood.

“I’ve always wanted to live here,” Revier says. His dreams received a bit of a makeover along the way, but that core has never changed.



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