

Creative with Quality

**Sweet Grass,
Big Timber,
Crazy Mountains
and great cattle.**

Story & photos by
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Some people are born with creativity. Others are forced to think innovatively by circumstance or career choice. For Rick Jarrett, a Big Timber, Mont., cattleman, it may be a little bit of both. Creativity has been that little extra he needed to get through the hard times to more prosperous ones at Crazy Mountain Cattle Co.

Like many in Sweet Grass County, he is a fifth-generation rancher, grazing cattle and sheep on land that got its start with the latter.

His father brought in their first bovines — Herefords that were later crossed with Shorthorns. That was the base when Jarrett came back in 1971, after attending college at Montana State University.

“I did not come home to raise cattle or sheep. I came home to raise kids,” he says with a proud smile. “I don’t know how I managed, but I’m still here.” Today he says his “greatest joy” is that his grandchildren are still involved with enterprises on the ranch.

Perseverance

It probably had more to do with



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Part of Rick Jarrett’s management plan for Crazy Mountain Cattle Co., Big Timber, Mont., included changing up the breeding plan. “The decision to make them Angus was mothering ability and pinkeye resistance,” says Jarrett.

inventive perseverance than it did chance, though, as oftentimes luck seemed to work against Jarrett.

Four years after he returned to the family business, his father died in a car accident. The family estate plan was just a verbal agreement, and it took him the next several decades to buy the land from his grandmother, mother and siblings.

Jarrett made adjustments. When the banker said “no more,” he brought in an absentee partner from California.

“I produce cattle, and I manage her investment and mine just the same,” he says. “It has worked out

well. I’d rather have a piece of the pie than no pie at all.”

Part of that management included changing up the breeding plan.

“The decision to make them Angus was mothering ability and pinkeye resistance,” Jarrett says. At the time he made the switch, he was trucking some of the herd 110 miles each summer to U.S. Forest Service leases. Good maternal function was increasingly important, but still wasn’t enough to mitigate the ill effects of predators.

“The wolves were managing my cattle. They told them where they could and couldn’t be, and my cattle wouldn’t go where the wolves were,” he says. Jarrett lost some and had to pay a cowboy to transition from a part-time rider to a full-time commitment. At the same time, diesel prices shot up and the arrangement got more expensive.

“I let the allotments go because I couldn’t make them work anymore,” he says.

Luck just wasn’t on his side.

Lessons in feeding

This lack of luck was much like the first time Jarrett tried feeding cattle. A drought left him short on grass, so Jarrett sent his cattle to the feedlot. Instead of stocking his own yearlings like Jarrett did most years, he figured he’d have to buy some cattle to run on grass when the rain came. He decided to lock in a price with a futures contract.

“I went to Billings and got my futures contract, and the next day the dairy herd buyout was announced,” Jarrett says. That was 1986. “I lost a big pile of money, and that kind

of cured me on feeding cattle for a while.”

That unfortunate timing didn’t keep him from thinking about feeding cattle again, however.

“I have always kept my eye toward the end product, wanting to make sure that we were raising stuff that would have carcass quality,” Jarrett says.

It was not just a noble goal, but part of an ultimate business strategy. Jarrett had dreams of his own branded-beef business, a way to own the cattle all the way from birth to the restaurant. Yet he knew he couldn’t do it with just average genetics.

“With that in mind, I started feeding the cattle, and I enjoyed seeing how the cattle did,” Jarrett says. He sent cattle to various yards, including Chappell Feedlot, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner yard in western Nebraska. “It made me concentrate a little harder on carcass quality, but it also validated what we’d been doing for the last 20 years,” he says.

In four years of feeding at Chappell, they improved from a 31% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand acceptance to 56.4%.

Vertical integration in the beef business never took hold as Jarrett had expected, and lately he’s sold cattle private treaty.

“I’ve never had a hard time selling my calves, and I have never sold by auction,” he says. “I think I can sell them [directly] for a higher price, and there is less risk.”

Consumer focus

Those repeat buyers are part of the motivation to continue to focus



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on the end product in tandem with maternal traits.

“I started out creating this herd to raise beef for people,” he says, noting that quality beef is not a goal producers can pick up one year and quit doing the next. To see progress, it must remain constant. “When there were choices to be made, I always chose something with marbling ability.”

He still gets his fair share of consumer interaction. As a founding partner in Montana Natural Lamb, Jarrett’s 200-head flock of sheep is oriented toward the upscale market. It’s a cooperative project with five ranches that sell directly to chefs.

It’s also another example of Jarrett finding a way to make a profit in what is a low-margin business.

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That’s why Jarrett helped start Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations, a booking service for working-ranch vacations. Several area ranches are part of the cooperative that gives people an authentic production experience. Jarrett doesn’t take on as many guests as he used to,

but he enjoys the experience when he does.

“Talk about neat people you meet from all over the world,” he says. “My goal was not necessarily to make a lot of money, but it was the education. It was fun to bring those people here to show them the environmental issues, the weed issues, the economic issues, the predator issues and all of those things that it takes for us to succeed.”

It seems that the end product, besides high-quality beef, includes innovation and education to please more consumers while keeping more ranch families on the land.



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