

ANGUS

BEEF BULLETIN®

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Volume 34, Number 2 • February 2016

Brought to you by

ANGUS MEDIA

3201 Frederick Ave.; Saint Joseph, Mo. 64506

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The Best Rise From Ashes

Cousins build cow herd and families together.

Story & photos by **MIRANDA REIMAN,**
Certified Angus Beef LLC

Snip, snap.

They got back on their horses and rode to the next fence, desperately trying to save their animals, the fire quickly

roaring over the south hills behind them and closing in fast. In that moment, cousins Kirk and Brandon Evert likely didn't have a chance to feel the gut-wrenching emotions that come when any natural disaster strikes a cow herd.

Snip, snap.

The work continued. The ranchers,

along with other family members and friends, covered eight sections of deep canyons and tree-filled draws in an hour. Then the weary horses collapsed in recline as the riders surveyed the situation.

All told, the August 2002 fire burned
(Continued on page 2)

The Best Rise From Ashes *(from cover)*

nearly 30,000 acres in the area and left the Evert family with just 200 acres unburnt — not nearly enough for their almost 500 cows. Another 500 or more neighbors' cattle crowded into a 40- or 50-acre clearing where they fed square bales and began sorting things out.

That was two weeks before Brandon married his then-fiancé Virginia Fox.

"We didn't run cows here the whole next year," says Brandon, who was not only in need of grass, but suddenly found himself without a house to bring his new bride home to after the honeymoon. It, too, burned in the fire. "Dad and I talked and he said, 'If she doesn't leave you at the altar now, she never will.'"

What could have been an operation-ending event (and perhaps relationship-ending, too) was just the opposite.

"Right after the fire it was hectic finding grass for cows, and we decided to pull the calves to background," Kirk says. "We were just trying to save as much of the herd as we could."

They reduced numbers to around a quarter of what they started that year carrying.

"We had to rent ground the whole next year," Brandon says. There were 26 miles of fence to rebuild and grass that needed to recover. Today, if the wind is just right, the cedar tree skeletons still catch in the fence like tumbleweeds.

Paradise

The family already knew a bit about determination. Their ranch started with a purchase by brothers John and Lew Evert, Brandon and Kirk's dads. The men had grown up in the cattle business, but had careers in construction and public education. Never ones to back down from work, they set out to put together something to pass down to their children someday.

The first piece of ground near Brady, Neb., was dubbed "Paradise" by a mutual friend, who saw it on an autumn day when the ash tree line was the perfect shade of goldenrod. The name stuck, and it soon became the place where they might go trail ride or enjoy the cabin they built.

Lew and John each had 13 bred heifers the first year and began purchasing more to stock the pastures.



"We've gotten to where every cow that's on the ranch now has been born on the ranch," says Brandon Evert.

"We've gotten to where every cow that's on the ranch now has been born on the ranch," Brandon says.

The founding principles are still ever-important: the value of treating neighbors like neighbors, helping each other out and, above all, doing the very best they can.

Yet, a few clues give away the fact that the plan is not executed in exactly the same way today. A princess

(Continued on page 4)



"They gentled the cattle down, and that's benefited the cattle and the health. The way they're handled has a lot to do with how they respond to vaccines," says veterinarian Randy Burge, who has worked with the Everts for 17 years.

Founded March 1985

ANGUS BEEF BULLETIN

"The Commercial Cattleman's Angus Connection"

Produced and published five times per year by Angus Productions Inc. in cooperation with the American Angus Association and Certified Angus Beef LLC.

3201 Frederick Ave. • Saint Joseph, MO 64506-2997
phone: 816-383-5200 • fax: 816-233-6575
office hours: (M-F) 8 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (Central time)
web site: www.angusbeefbulletin.com

Staff are listed by name, phone extension and email prefix. All direct phone numbers are "816-383-5..."; all email addresses are "...@angusjournal.com"

General manager – Eric Grant, 118, egrant

Communications director – Crystal Albers, 134, calbers

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Associate editor – Kasey Brown, 277, kbrown;
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Assistant editor – Linda Robbins, 245, lrobbins;
Artist – Mary Black

Field editors – Barb Baylor Anderson, 305 Valley View Dr., Edwardsville, IL 62025, 618-656-0870, anderagcom@sbcglobal.net; Kindra Gordon, 11734 Weisman Rd., Whitewood, SD 57793, 605-722-7699, office@gordonresources.com; Becky Mills, 185 Lovett Farms Rd., Cuthbert, GA 39840, 229-938-1698, beckymills81@yahoo.com; Paige Nelson, 4112 E. 550 N, Rigby, ID 83442, 208-317-3095, paigenelson7236@gmail.com; & Troy Smith, 44431 Sargent River Rd., Sargent, NE 68874, 308-527-3483; wordsmith@nctc.net

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The Best Rise From Ashes *(from page 2)*

lunchbox, filled with grab-and-go snacks, makes its home on the front of the flatbed pickup truck ... just in case a quick pasture check turns into a longer project.

A husband buys his wife a chainsaw for her birthday.

Virginia entered the picture during that dramatic time and five years later, in 2007, Rachael Harnan married Kirk.

When they were dating, he made it clear that the ranch was in transition and would one day be theirs to care for, Rachael says. "He told me, 'If this isn't something you want to do, then we need to have a more serious conversation.'"

A few years later, she joined Virginia in managing the day-to-day chores, as John and Lew shifted to all the tasks of "retired" ranchers — including some calving and haying, of course.

Brandon and Kirk work "day jobs" at a Nebraska Public Power District plant in Sutherland.

Attitudes and appetites

As is typical in a generational ranch, each adds his or her own stamp.

It's become a running joke that the first year Virginia was at the clipboard during preg-checking time, mysteriously all the wild cows came up "open." Lew and John still give her a hard time about it, but even they can't deny the attitude adjustment.

"Pulling bulls" used to be a weekend-long event that involved several horseback riders, dirt bikes and some tense moments. There are tales of broken saddles and injuries.

"Now we can just get them in with a sack of cake," Rachael says.

That's been possible with genetics and management working together.

"They need to have a docile temperament; otherwise we're not going to be able to handle them by ourselves," she says, recalling one set of bulls they'd considered. They walked into the pen and the bulls threw their heads up high. "Virg and I looked at each other and turned around and walked out."

Between the two couples there are five

girls 10 and under who are often found tagging along.

"Life's too short ... we've got too many other things going on for somebody to get hurt," Virginia says.

They've also made facility upgrades — including a hydraulic squeeze chute and portable corral — and the handling has improved in tandem.

"You can work cattle without having to use a hot shot," Brandon says.

Virginia brings the experience she unexpectedly got while working 10 years at a "temporary" gig at the Eastside Animal Center, their local vet clinic.

"They gentled the cattle down, and that's benefited the cattle and the health. The way they're handled has a lot to do with how they respond to vaccines," says veterinarian Randy Burge, who has worked with the Everts for 17 years.

Nutrition also plays a role.

"That's huge," Burge says. "Paying more attention to nutrition improves the quality of the colostrum."

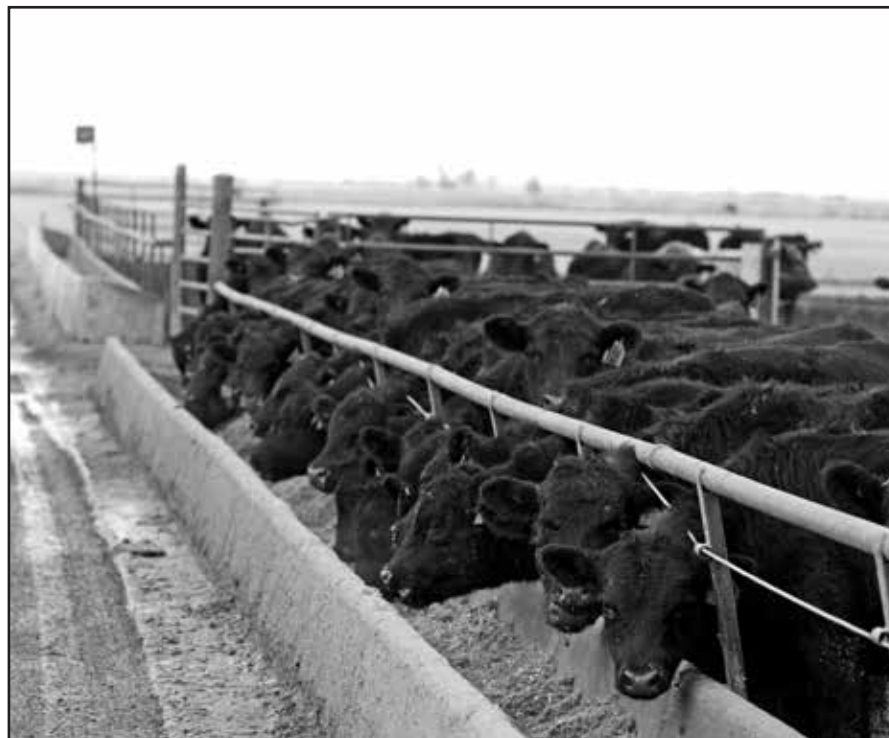
In addition to stepping up the vaccination program to include shots to protect against scours and clostridial and respiratory diseases at preg-checking, they now have their cows on a year-round mineral supplement.

"They're smart producers. They realized it benefited everything from conception to cow health and calf health," says Pat Laird, co-owner of Laird Feed in Gothenburg, Neb. Referring to recent fetal-programming research, he adds, "It makes sense. That cow is not only nursing, but developing a fetus, too."

True partners

A decade ago, they tried artificial insemination for the first time and "took a chance" on Final Answer, not that well-known at the time, Brandon says, noting it turned out pretty well. The couples study sale books together, but generally the women do the buying.

"Usually I let the wife pick out the bulls, so I stay out of trouble," Kirk laughs. Collectively they put pressure on weaning



This year they trailered 127 steer calves to the 3,000-head feedyard during a drizzly week just before Halloween. Upon arrival, the calves got their booster shot, an additional nasal vaccine and dewormer. Implants were delayed 30 days "to preserve quality-grade potential," the feeder says. Even with the weather seemingly working against them, the calves bested the average health in the yard.

and yearling weight, along with carcass measures and keeping milk to +26 or below.

Breed choice never enters the discussion. They've already settled on Angus.

"I really like the longevity of the cows and the value they bring at the sale barn, even in a low-price year," Kirk says. "And there's a reason at great steak houses they serve Angus beef."

Virginia keeps the records, which include individual identification and weights, in Excel and can now compare family lines and year-to-year trends.

With all of these changes, a marketing change was in order.

"If you're putting money into them, you want to see a return," Brandon says.

One of the last times their cattle went through the ring, Virginia and Rachael overheard a reaction from a stranger: "Wow. Those cattle do not belong in the sale barn."

That was just the push they needed to seek out local feeder Anne Burkholder of Will Feed Inc., down the road at Cozad.

"Once people go to Anne, they don't leave," Virginia says. "I figured there's got to be a reason."

Now four years into the relationship, they know why. They're getting feedback — which includes last year's steer calves going 95% Choice with 44% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand qualifiers — and advice.

The Everts have found a partner.

"I view them as one of my biggest success stories," Burkholder says. The women now talk in the summer and agree on price and arrival date closer to weaning. This year they trailered 127 steer calves to the 3,000-head feedyard during a drizzly week just before Halloween.

Upon arrival, the calves got their booster shot, an additional nasal vaccine and dewormer. Implants were delayed 30 days "to preserve quality-grade potential," the feeder says.

Even with the weather seemingly working against them, the calves bested

the average health in the yard. They had just five pulls during the weaning process, or 3.94%, compared to their contemporaries at 10%.

The first meal — "lots of prairie hay top-dressed with calf ration" — was gradually stepped up five times, until they hit full feed in January. Shortly thereafter Burkholder bought the majority of the Everts' heifer calves.

"All the old-timers say, 'Save when they're low and sell when they're high,'" Virginia says, but the last few years they've been in an aggressive herd-building phase. Ever since recovering from 2012, the region's driest year in more than a century, they've been developing nearly all their females into replacements.

Until this year, when they decided to pay down debt while the prices were still relatively strong.

"If they're not keeping replacements, we're not keeping any," Brandon says of how they make decisions cohesively.

Although the interest is held separately, an outsider would be hard pressed to see where it's divided. They live across the road from each other. They precondition calves and raise kids in tandem.

"We would go on vacation together, but we can't all be gone at the same time," Brandon jokes.

Cleaning house while buying bulls from an online auction is as common as working cows with their daughters playing in make-believe forts just down from the corrals. They have found a groove that includes tagging calves after school drop-off and scheduling major projects for the weekends.

Future plans include growth and getting even better.

"The cow-calf guys can't think, 'It's not my calf anymore,'" Brandon says. "If the feedlot is not making any money, they won't come back. It's all intertwined."



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