

# Keep in Touch

***This Oklahoma rancher didn't just sell his steers last year, and the feedlot didn't just buy them — they started a relationship.***

*Story & photos by*  
**STEVE SUTHER**

Thomas Heglin has worked to improve these cows since the 1980s, when most of them belonged to the Andrews Ranch. "I saw a lot of things I could change, and they let me," he says of the Gate, Okla., ranch located where the Panhandle meets the pan.

"When I started here, cows were wild as deer; you needed a fast horse just to find out where they went," Heglin says. "Weaning weights were around 400 pounds (lb.); the last eight years they've been over 600 pounds. The conception rate was as low as 70%; the last 12 years we haven't had less than a 95% conception rate." Heglin has been owner for the last three years, and his 2002 steer calves weaned at 688 lb. at 212 days.

"I had my own cows, too, from the start. In 2000 the boss was going to sell and asked if I wanted to buy over a five-year period," Heglin says. As it turned out, the deal was done in just two years. Heglin and his wife, Marty, and son, Trapper, are calving 338 Angus and Angus-Hereford females on their Anchor Ranch this year. Counting owned and leased land, it encompasses 6,500 acres of mostly native pasture, with some improved grasses and wheat paddocks. "I do the same work and more, but now I don't get a paycheck," he grins.

Expansion and genetic improvement have accelerated in this decade. The 30 heifers calved in 2002 gave way to 80 last year and 88 this February — all after a round of artificial insemination (AI) that netted some 60% AI-sired calves.

Nutrition was stepped up, too, with lick tanks of syrup provided throughout the year. The 35%-protein liquid supplement includes all recommended vitamins and minerals. At \$200 per ton, it never costs more than 15¢-20¢ a day, he says. "If something's missing out there, they get it from the syrup. The cows leave it alone from April to August, but the calves start on it then." Maybe that helps explain how 1,200-lb. cows wean more than half their weight.

Word got around in fall 2002, and winter brought a visit from John Parker, customer relations and outside cattle manager for Supreme



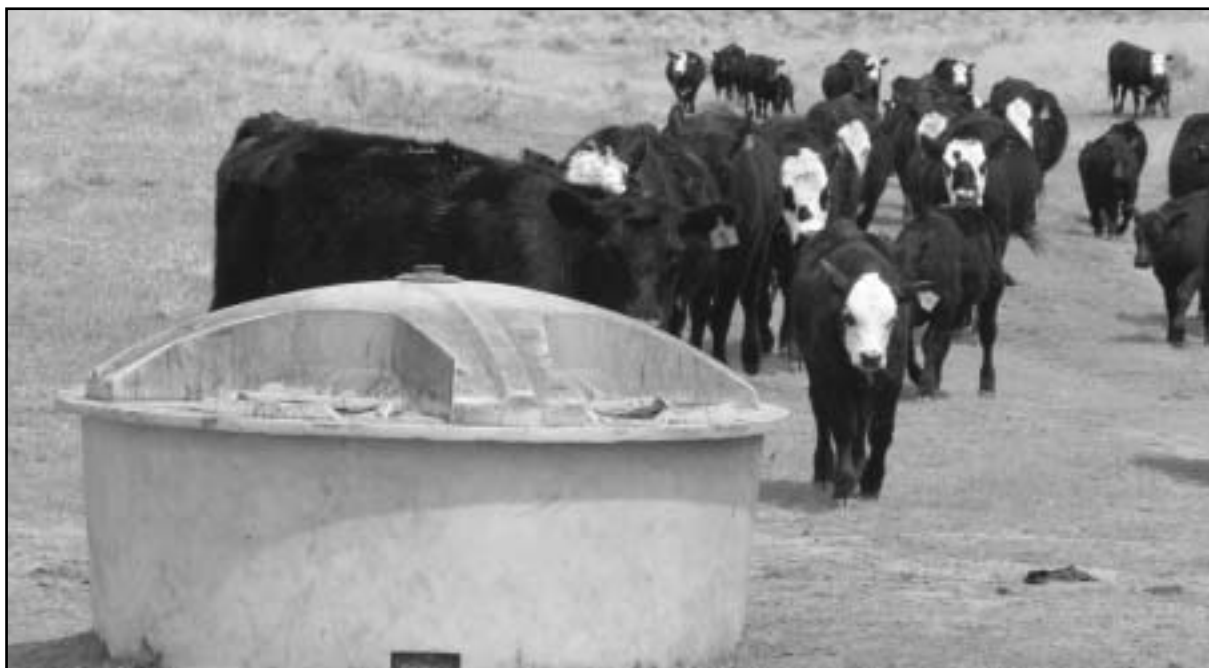
**Left:** "I expect the same from my heifers as I do the cows," Thomas Heglin says. "I calve them a month earlier, feed them better and wean a month earlier so they can regain some weight before winter. I expect their calves to weigh within 20 pounds of the cows' calves."

**Below:** "As Thomas continues to build his genetics with AI, we will have lots of opportunities to work together on the animal health side," says John Parker (right), customer relations and outside cattle manager for Supreme Cattle Feeders, a division of Agri Beef Co.

Cattle Feeders, a division of Agri Beef Co. and a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner feedlot near Kismet, Kan.

"Dusty (Turner, Supreme manager) heard they had some good Angus-cross cattle," Parker says. "I came down and looked at them for maybe 10 minutes before I knew we wanted to buy them. I knew he used Gardiner [Angus Ranch] bulls; I saw the cows, and this was a whopping set of steers. We also got acquainted with everything Thomas was trying to do and agreed to keep in touch. These cattle were doing it all on the ranch — we were going to get a benchmark reading on the rest of it."

Parker praises Heglin's  
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Lick tanks of a 35%-protein supplement available year-round provide missing nutrients to the herd. While the cows ignore the tanks from April to August, the calves use them.

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Heglin says his cattle perform well on the ranch. He is managing to take his operation to the next steps — feedlot performance and grid marketing.



knowledge of production costs, performance and marketing. “And it’s neat to see the open mind-set that wants to look farther down the beef value chain — are we ultimately producing what the consumer wants? This industry has got to get more vertically aligned, instead of just robbing off each other,” he says. “We got him the data back.”

**Beyond the ranch**

Heglin knew his cattle performed well on the ranch. “We’ll put our weaning weights up against anybody,” he says. “My commercial, straight blacks will beat most registered Angus bulls at weaning.” He’d like to get some registered stock, too, and work with Supreme to improve postweaning performance and grade.

“Disappointed,” is the word Heglin uses to describe his initial reaction to the first carcass data on his steers. But that doesn’t mean he was discouraged.

“They gained pretty good, more than 3 pounds per day,” he notes. “But we had some health problems because it was so dry, and they only graded 52% Choice.” All 123 steers were eligible for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand, but only 6.5% made it. The rising market was beginning to pull cattle forward, and that may have limited the chance for quality grades to bloom, Heglin and Parker add.

“As Thomas continues to build his genetics with AI, we will have lots of opportunities to work together on the animal health side,” Parker says. Currently, Heglin administers blackleg, somnus and modified-live virus (MLV) bovine respiratory disease (BRD) vaccines at branding and two weeks before weaning. Five days after weaning, calves typically go to wheat pasture, which “keeps them straightened out,” Heglin says, noting he has never had occasion to give a treatment shot.

Still, four of the 2002 steers died at Supreme. Was the bronchial pneumonia just a fluke due to warm, dusty spring weather, as Heglin believes? Time will tell, Parker says, “but we might try another MLV booster a couple weeks after weaning next time to build those titers.” That opportunity could come this fall.

Although Heglin considered retaining ownership or partnering with Supreme on last year’s steers, the combination of drought and a \$1.07-per-lb. bid at early weaning in September encouraged him to part with the 550-pounders. “This year we will have all the individual IDs (identifications) on the calves,” he says. “We’re definitely going to feed a pen of them with Supreme.”

Over time and with cross-referencing, Parker says Heglin may notice some of the same cows’ calves coming in sick regularly. “That costs you maybe \$80-\$90 per head if they don’t die, so you will want to cull those cows.”

The cows have always carried individual ID (though this is the first year for calves), and replacements were

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tagged partly for disposition culling. For example, last year's heifer class began with six more head than made it to breeding, with the six being kicked out for bad behavior. Planned grazing rotations keep the entire herd on the tame side.

Once calved, "I don't look at the heifers as much as I do their calves," Heglin says.

"I expect the same from my heifers as I do the cows. I calve them a month earlier, feed them better and wean a month earlier so they can regain some weight before winter. I expect their calves to weigh within 20 pounds of the cows' calves."

Of course, the carcass data has added a new dimension to expectations. "I tried to get my old boss to feed some. The calves were looking good and doing good here,

but we didn't really know what we had," Heglin says. "Now that we have some idea, we know it's time to pay more attention to the carcass side in bull selection."

**One step at a time**

AI will continue to lead the way in genetic improvement, along with natural-service sires that are primarily from the

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— *Thomas Heglin*

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Gardiners of Ashland, Kan. Heglin will keep up the generational pressure with lots of heifers and begin to AI what he believes are the best cows this year.

Parker questions whether 680 lb. is an ideal market weight for weaned calves, especially when wheat pasture is the preferred next step.

"Thomas may want to skip the wheat pasture and go for a 30-day earlier market, or calve a little later," he says. Partly because of drought, Heglin delayed the breeding season on cows three weeks last year.

"From where I started 15 years ago, it's unreal how far we've come," Heglin says. "But now I want to make sure all of it is in the right direction." He knows the role of a feedlot partner, the cooperation required, the give and take. "Some people say they feed cattle when they just buy a pen — if something dies, it's the feedlot's fault. That's not really feeding cattle to me. You have to know the cattle, and you have to think and act like partners. We're going to know our cattle, and they're going to get better and better."

The near-term target is 80% Choice, Heglin says. "We eat a lot of beef, and I don't mind paying for a good steak, but I hate to pay for a sorry one. In the next three years, that's going to be more and more important. We want our CAB rate to get up there over 40%."

Heglin is in the driver's seat, Parker says. "He has the growth genetics, and now that he's getting information back, process- and source-verification is right at his fingertips. And with ID issues getting bigger all the time, Supreme wants to be aligned with cow-calf operators."

To make it in the cow business, you need a good reputation, Heglin says. "We want to feed our steers to build the total operation through culling cows and breeding heifers from the best cows. We'll sell heifers if other people want them, sell feeders or feed them ourselves if the market looks right. If one deal isn't working, another deal will."



**Author's Note:** *There's a unique twist to this story. Parker found another reason to keep in touch. He met the Heglins' daughter, Rissie, on his first visit to the ranch. Subsequent discussions went far beyond the cattle business: The two were married last summer and now live in Kismet, Kan.*