

Small Herd, Big Impact



PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

Oklahoman builds lifetime of quality, performance in 15 years.

Story by

DOROTHY SPENCER and STEVE SUTHER

There's a right way to do things, regardless of scale. As a career soil scientist, R.C. Brinlee tries to follow the book, and that extends to his small farm near Wilburton, Okla.

He bought the 80-acre base in 1964 and moved there with his family in 1971. A couple of years later, Oklahoma Beef Inc. (OBI) started its bull test station at Stillwater, which would provide a logical place to shop for bulls. Brinlee began to shop there, along with other sources for seedstock, but his part-time herd lacked uniformity.

In 1988, Brinlee retired from the Soil Conservation Service at 56 and devoted all his technical attention to the cow herd. At that time it was a mix of Hereford, Simmental, Angus and even Brahman genetics.

"People used to think we needed a quarter Brahman blood in the cows, especially further south," he says.

"You didn't want to sell that kind to the feedlot, though. Other people had show cattle, too, but you need to determine early in the game if you are going to eat them or just look at them," Brinlee says.

"You need to determine early in the game if you are going to eat them or just look at them."

— R.C. Brinlee

Determined to measure so he could manage, in 1994 he began sending his steers to Oklahoma State University's (OSU's) OK Steer Feedout. By 2007, Brinlee had taken home 23 trophies and plaques — too many to fit on the kitchen wall.

His Simmental-based calves won a Gold Pen Award the first year, gaining 3.6 pounds (lb.) per day and finishing leaner than Yield Grade (YG) 2, but Brinlee wanted better than their 60% low-Choice.

He also wanted precise breeding selection data to guide herd improvement in marbling and uniformity while building up to 80 cows on additional pastureland bought in 1999. That led to bidding on exclusively Angus bulls at OBI.

Selection standards

Brinlee maintained rigorous standards for selection.

"I want them to gain about 5 pounds per day on the test, moderate birth weight not less than 80 lb., with weaning weight EPD (expected progeny difference) at least 40, and yearling EPD at least 80," he says, "and I look for a lot of ribeye and a high IMF (intramuscular fat) index."

The OK Steer Feedout helped scores of area producers learn about the carcass and feedlot performance capability in their cattle, and managing to realize full potential.

Above: "You can't keep a cow that doesn't have a calf every year," Wilburton, Okla., cattleman R.C. Brinlee says.

(Continued on page 2)

Small Herd, Big Impact *(from page 1)*

According to Greg Highfill, area Extension livestock specialist who works with the Feedout, “Brinlee is one of the progressive producers who used the performance data to complement his breeding selection and made great strides in his genetics.”

Over those 13 years, Brinlee sent about 250 head to the Feedout — usually all of his steers — but the top achievement came in 2005. He was the first producer in 21 years and 5,000 head to win the High Gaining Pen, High Carcass Indexing and Profit, and Top of the Curve awards. His best quality marks at the Feedout were 90% Choice with 30% *Certified Angus Beef*® brand (CAB®) and a Prime. He recalls making around \$250 per head profit one year.

“While other producers struggle with quality grade, Brinlee has emphasized it a lot, and his cattle show it,” Highfill says. “Through bull selection and heifer development, he’s done a nice job of bringing both quality and performance together in his breeding program.”

The Extension specialist knew Brinlee was ready for commercial feeding. “The way his cattle perform and their excellent carcasses, he can have full confidence in how they will perform in the feedlot,” Highfill says.

Determined to take that step, in the fall of 2007, Brinlee sent 65 steers and heifers to Cattleman’s Choice Feedyard, a CAB partner near Gage, Okla.

Sure enough, they were the right kind. “We may get a dozen pens in a year that will make better than 90% Choice and 50% CAB,” says feedyard manager Dale Moore. “R.C. Brinlee, as a first-time customer really got our attention. He is that rare individual who really knows his cattle, having built them up to what he wanted.”

“Their gains were phenomenal for mixed steers and heifers, or for any complete set of ranch calves,” Moore says. The first sort of 24 gained 3.95 pound (lb.) per day over 165 days and converted at an amazing rate of 4.14 lb. of dry matter. “I was very impressed,” Moore understates.

The carcass merit showed these were still the kind of cattle that can win trophies. After allowing for a death and three outliers, 61 head made 98.8% Choice or better and 51% CAB, including four Primes, with 67% YG 1s and 2s. Last year was not a forgiving one for

feedlot profits, and those outliers kept a lid on profits. “There’s a lot of different ways you can lose money feeding cattle,” Brinlee says he has learned during the years.

Still, he says it was a positive experience considering his “all in” commitment to feeding. “It was interesting to get data on heifers for the first time,” he adds.

With his strict culling system, records are a must. “You can’t keep a cow that doesn’t have a calf every year,” Brinlee says. He also demands that a cow’s calves excel in the feedlot and packinghouse. Maintaining a steady replacement rate, his average cow is 5 to 6 years old.

“At first, I’d just cull a cow if the calf didn’t gain fairly high or if it didn’t make Choice,” he says. “Now I might make an exception for one year if the cow family is solid, but I’m still pretty strict.”

With 80 cows and personal attention, you can’t help appreciating certain individuals. Brinlee wishes he had more like his “Little Bit,” an efficient, smaller-frame female that has produced a steer calf with 5.77-lb. average daily gain (ADG).

“Keeping replacements and buying top-quality and performance bulls is the main thing,” Brinlee says, noting \$3,000 is the top price he’s paid. “People can get a pretty good deal on a bull from a test station.”

Never one to use growth implants on the calves, Brinlee says the genetics should be able to deliver adequate gain. Quoting an OK Steer Feedout piece of advice, he says, “If a calf won’t gain 3 pounds a day, the only way you can make money is to steal the calf, steal the feed or steal both.”

Working on his ranch alone, Brinlee has put a lot of effort into developing his herd. Looking back as he approaches 77 years of age, he says, “I wish I had started this at 32 instead of 62. It’s a slow process, but it’s been rewarding.”

