

Earning Their Keep – Keeping Their Heritage

by Tracey Koester, *American Red Angus Magazine* editorial coordinator



The Missouri River flows along the eastern edge of Claymore's ranch, providing 36 miles of winding riverbank and fresh drinking water for the cattle.

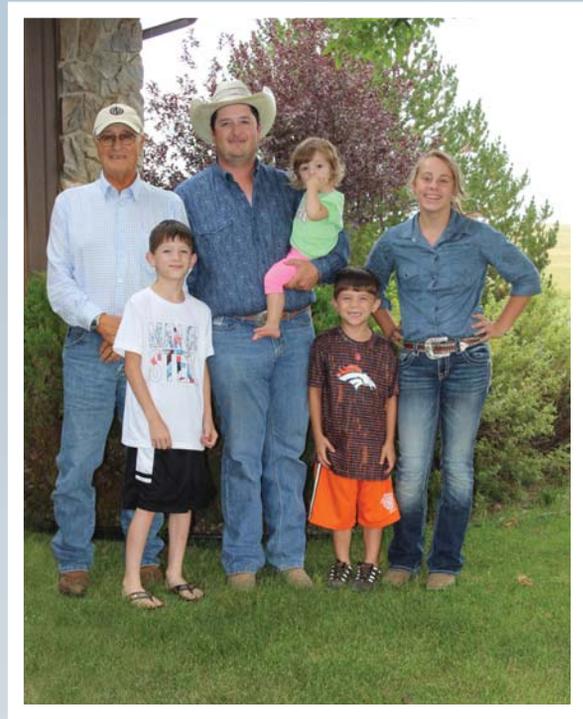
The Missouri River gently flows through north-central South Dakota, winding its path through the rugged terrain known locally as the “breaks.” Ash tree coulees and steep draws cut their way to the top of the breaks where natural prairie grasses and wild flowers wave in the Dakota breeze.

Other than an occasional barbed-wire fence and stock tank, this land remains pristine to its formation from a glacier 2 million years ago. Claymore Ranch near McLaughlin, S.D., lies on the west side of the Missouri River along 36 winding miles of riverbank. This land has been ranched by a member of the Claymore family for 130 years.

Today, Shawn Claymore, the fifth generation, is charged with the care and conservation of this beautiful, prolific ranch – and instead of the bison that roamed the prairies during his ancestors’ time, he chooses to stock the ranch with Red Angus cattle.

The Red Transition

Red Angus cows, however, haven’t always grazed Claymore’s ranch. In 2004, Claymore – who has owned cattle since he was 16 – decided to sell all of his black-hided cows and stocked the ranch with yearling heifers that he bred and sold in the fall.



The fourth, fifth and sixth generations of the Claymore family – (l to r): Duane, Ketch (10), Shawn holding Charlie (18 months), Kaleb (7) and Caitlyn (13).



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Claymore quickly found running just yearlings wasn't for him. "I was tired of not having cow-calf pairs. I wasn't raised to sit around and do nothing, and the winters were pretty boring," he chuckled. He had also done his homework and recognized that Red Angus heifer calves were gaining in popularity.

In 2009, he attended the first Red Angus Feeder Calf Sale hosted by Mobridge Livestock Market, Inc., in Mobridge, S.D., and came home with 489 replacement-quality heifer calves. "I made a lot of new friends that day," smiled Claymore. "I had a lot of seedstock producers come up and introduce themselves."

He also met Clint Berry. At the time, Berry was working for the Red Angus Association of America (RAAA) as the commercial marketing director and approached Claymore to welcome him to the Red Angus breed and explain the free marketing services RAAA offers its stakeholders.

"I had never had help marketing my black calves even when I topped the market," said Claymore. "When Clint came up and talked about how RAAA would help me market my Red Angus calves, it really sealed the deal." Today, Claymore enrolls his calves in the Red Angus Feeder Calf Certification Program (FCCP), tagging his calves when he preconditions in September.

The FCCP program is paying off, too. His steers generally sell in the top 2 percent and the heifers top the market, often bring the same price or more than their steer counterparts. Claymore has sold through the local sale barn, on Superior Livestock Auction and, this year, to a local cattle buyer.

Hitting the Target

"My goal is to wean calves that weigh 575 to 585 pounds – to have the entire calf crop within 5 to 10 pounds of each other with no light weights," said Claymore.

In order to reach that target weight, he tries to have as many calves on the ground in as short of time as possi-



Claymore calves his cows in the natural protection of the Missouri River breaks.

ble. That starts by synchronizing estrus in his cows and mass A.I.ing the mature cows in two days. The heifers are synchronized and bred for an earlier calving date, but the first-calf heifers get a by in the A.I. pen. "It's hard on those young mothers to keep separating their calves when we are synching the cows."

"It's a lot of work for those two weeks in June when we synchronize and mass breed over 300 cows a day for two back-to-back days," said Claymore. "But what other day can you get more work done than on the day you A.I.?"

He uses one A.I. sire for the cows and another for the heifers to improve his calf crop's consistency, then turns out bulls 24 hours after A.I.ing.

"Our bulls are an important investment on our ranch," said Claymore. "We aren't afraid to buy out of the top pens in the sale – bulls that usually sell to seedstock producers." He added that the bulls must hold their condition during breeding season when the cows often travel five to six miles a day grazing.

"We need genetics that give us growthy calves that wean up in the fall, but they also need good carcass traits for our calf buyers and strong maternal characteristics in the heifer calves. That combination in one sire can be a tall order to fill."

The ranch's feed base produces over 6,000 round bales of hay – oats, millet, sorghum, alfalfa and grass.



Earning Their Keep – Keeping Their Heritage

Claymore is adamant on purchasing only bulls that have been 50K DNA profiled, increasing the accuracy of their EPDs. “I look at that 50K test as an insurance policy that the bull will produce like his EPDs say he will. If we want to produce the best calves in the country, then we need to buy the best bulls we can.”

Claymore also pregnancy ultrasounds his entire cowherd and sells off all cows bred for the third cycle, further tightening his calving season.

Tough – and Functional – Females

Currently, Claymore runs 870 cow-calf pairs and 140 yearling replacement heifers, but he said he is still in the growth phase. “In order to maintain cash flow, we sell all the heifer calves and then buy bred heifers in the fall and open heifers in the spring to breed.” He buys from reputation Red Angus commercial herds and has built a good rapport with those from which he buys heifers.

The ranch is currently designated to carry 1,750 cow-calf pairs but with good conservation practices and grazing management, Claymore hopes to increase his carrying capacity to 2,000 pairs.



Claymore’s cows graze all summer and fall. Their goal is to not feed any hay until after the first of the year.

“The Red Angus cow is a great fit for our environment,” said Claymore, looking over the native grassland. “This is truly cow-calf country and they thrive on our grass and fresh water.”

“I also appreciate the Red Angus cows’ docile nature. They are great mothers with incredible maternal instincts,” said Claymore. That maternal instinct is key to Claymore’s profitability during calving season.

The cowherd starts calving the end of March and their only shelter is in the ravines and draws of the Missouri River breaks. “Those cows know how to find good protection from the wind,” said Claymore. “They also know it’s warmer towards the bottom of those draws than up on top.”

Calving in big country also means the cows are pretty much on their own. “We check them with horses and



Red Angus cows are a great fit for this South Dakota environment rich in native grass.

ATVs,” said Claymore, “but it’s a long way back to the corral. If we do find a cow with a backwards calf or a leg back, we have to rope her and pull the calf right there in the pasture.”

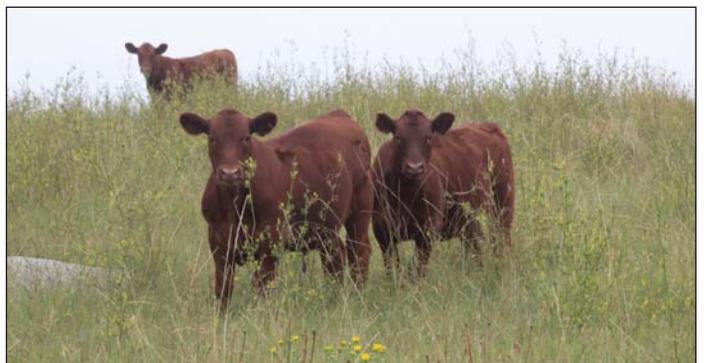
While calving ease is one of Claymore’s top priorities and one of the benefits of his Red Angus cowherd, he expects his cows to birth an 80- to 100-pound performance calf unassisted, and for the calf to hit the ground and start growing.

The 2-year-old heifers start calving the end of February, but because of the harsh winter conditions that time of year, Claymore calves them in the barn. Plus, he likes to keep a closer eye on his first calvers.

“Regardless of the breed or the calving ease of the sire, you’re still going to have help some heifers,” he explained. “But once the calves are a few days old and traveling, we kick them out to a nearby pasture to prevent disease and injuries like calves getting stepped on in overcrowded corrals.”

Redefining Maintenance Energy

Claymore never pampers his cowherd. “They have to make it on their own and get their own feed,” he said. “We aren’t out here babying them, petting them or giving them names.”



Calves will receive the Red Angus FCCP “yellow tag” at preconditioning time. Claymore’s goal is to raise consistent calves that wean within 5 to 10 pounds of each other.

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He reserves pastures for fall and winter grazing and expects the cows to forage for their feed until the first of the year. “If we get a lot of snow that covers up the cured grass and we have to start feeding before January, we risk running out of feed.” Once they do start feeding hay during the bitter cold of mid-winter, Claymore and his crew carry round bales to the top of the draws and let them roll out down the hill. “When the cows hear the tractor, they start coming back in – usually a two-hour trek spanning five or six miles – from where they have been winter grazing.”

Claymore also supplements them with distillers grain cake cubes for added protein and energy during the last trimester. “I like feeding cake,” he said. “The boss cows might get a few more pieces, but since it’s spread out, I know all the cows are getting some.”

Claymore puts up over 6,000 round bales of hay – oats, millet, sorghum, alfalfa and grass. He also rents a neighbor’s cornfield after harvest to chop and bale the corn stalks.

Fresh water is abundant in the summer with 36 miles of the river’s edge along their pastures. However, in order to provide fresh drinking water and better manage his cattle’s grazing patterns away from the river, Claymore has installed 29 miles of underground fresh water pipeline feeding 38 stock tanks. “I don’t like stock dams (ponds),” said Claymore. “They get stale and the calves don’t gain as well. Fresh drinking water means more pounds at weaning.”

The Heritage – The Future

Located on the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation, the ranch is more than grazing acreage – it is their family’s heritage.

“We take pride in caring for the land and to not overgraze it,” said Claymore. “I want to be able to pass down this ranch to my children, the sixth generation of Claymores.”



Claymore utilizes synchronization and A.I. in order to shorten the calving season and improve quality and consistency. He also pregnancy ultrasounds each fall, then sells off all cows bred for third-cycle calving.

Shawn’s father, Duane, is semi-retired but continues to help on the ranch and runs yearlings and share cattle of his own. He is also a member of the tribal council and works to ensure a prosperous future for his grandchildren and preserve their heritage.

“This ranch has been in our family for 130 years, and with good management and a solid vision for the future, this land will continue to provide for my kids and grandkids,” concluded Claymore. “Red Angus cattle will play a significant role in building that future.” ■

