

Integrity Matters

Rancher rebuilds plains of Oklahoma with Red Angus performance and efficiency

by Lisa Bryant for *American Red Angus Magazine*



Martha Griffin (left) is the owner of the Watson Ranch, managed by Dwayne and Beverly Miller.
Photo Credit: David Crenshaw, *Tulsa World*, Oct. 29, 2002

Will Rogers once said, “Live in such a way that you would never be ashamed to sell your parrot to the town gossip.” Seventy miles south of Rogers’ birthplace, a replica of his boyhood home sits atop the Watson Ranch. It’s at this historic ranch outside of Morris, Okla., where manager Dwayne Miller says Red Angus cattle have the integrity Rogers talked about.

Red Angus cows graze the tallgrass Cherokee Prairie on the Watson Ranch near Morris, Okla. The Red Angus cows have proven their temperament and efficiency to ranch manager Dwayne Miller.



Watson Ranch fell into disrepair after 15 years of leasing the land plus damage of oilfield wells. Dwayne Miller has used his Red Angus cows to bring the improved grasslands back to quality pastureland.

Rich in legacy since its 1929 origin, the Okmulgee County farm raised Herefords, selling cattle to the likes of John Wayne. When inheritance tax nearly took the ranch from Martha Watson Griffin, the registered cattle were dispersed and the land was leased for 15 years.

The acreage grew into disrepair. Griffin wanted to restore the land and hired Dwayne Miller to spray the weeds. Striking up a conversation about Miller's past working 28 years for an Oklahoma State University (OSU) research station, she asked Miller and his family to manage the 3,200 acres of owned and 600 leased acres. Wanting to put his research experience to use, managing Watson Ranch allowed Miller that opportunity. Griffin told Miller to take the ranch and run it like his own.

Adoption of Red Angus Cattle

At the time, a drought plagued Nebraska and Colorado, and the ranch took in "bed and breakfast" cattle for people trying to hold onto their herds. Miller was already interested in Red Angus, but coincidentally, these cattle were Red Angus-based.

Miller was focused on restoring the grasslands and believed commercial Red Angus were key. Buying one of the herds pasturing there during the midwestern drought, the ranch later added a herd from Nebraska's Fawn Lake Ranch.

The two herds were bred to Hereford bulls, but Miller saw the Red Angus breed gaining momentum so he switched to all Red Angus bulls.



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Miller had seen several breeds ebb and flow over time. “I knew when everything got black, they would find some reason to start discounting black cattle,” he said.

He appreciated the look and performance of Red Angus, and saw several advantages to the breed, including a marked advantage in heat tolerance over black Angus.

“When we ran red and black cattle, the red cattle would be out an hour to two hours ahead of the black cattle,” he said. “They would start grazing earlier and stay grazing later. They just performed better because of heat tolerance.”

Miller believes heat tolerance makes Red Angus more docile than black cattle too. Even calf buyers have commented on how gentle his calves are.

Miller’s wife, Beverly, said, “If he is going to count on me for help, temperament is everything. He and the dog and I can easily move 200 head down the road to another pasture.”

The Red Angus Advantage

“I think Red Angus is a genuine breed,” Miller said. “Some breeds have utilized other breeds to enhance their breed. I really believe that Red Angus have held their integrity better than other breeds.

“Red Angus also are as close as I think you can get to maintenance-free,” he said. “They can make it on grass. That’s what it takes when feed prices are what they have been. It makes the cattle shine when they can look good and perform well on grass that you raised.”

His cattle are thriving on the Cherokee Prairie. Most of the original herds have turned over by now, and the 650 cows are primarily farm-raised. Miller keeps outside expenses to a minimum with a goal of a low-input, forage-based operation.



(Left to right) Dwayne and Beverly Miller manage the 3,200-acre Watson Ranch along with the help of Paul Quin and David Boyett. The four-member staff cares for 650 commercial Red Angus cows.



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“What we grow here are what the cows make their living on,” he said. Three years of severe drought trimmed the herd by 15 to 20 percent. “It’s given us opportunities to cull our cattle and keep the most productive cows. I use Mother Nature as a tough taskmaster and use the elements to shape the cowherd to where we need to be to perform on what our environment provides.

“Working for OSU taught me if you are in the cattle industry, you are really marketing your grass. If you don’t have grass, you will be out of the cattle business soon.”

Rotational grazing allows the cows to more efficiently use available forage while helping to manage weeds. With improved grass, four acres support one cow unit.

“I like Red Angus bulls because most of the time if they have been treated right, they will maintain their weight and keep growing and doing well under range conditions without a lot of pampering and extra feed. Red Angus have proven they are a grass-based breed.”

When buying herd bulls, Miller primarily looks for a bull that will perform on grass.

“A lot of producers push their bulls so hard I think they’ve done a disservice. We’ve expected so much of the cattle we took away from the integrity of their bone structure. A lot of the herd bulls you buy look great until you put them with cattle and then they fall apart.”

Miller wants bulls with good conformation to withstand growth in addition to traits that indicate calving ease. He also wants bulls with length and depth. Miller watches for balanced EPDs alongside proven accuracy, with increased focus on milk production and yearling weight. To ensure uniformity, Miller searches for moderate bulls that are not extremes at the top of a sale, or at the bottom of the offering. Additionally, he studies a ranch’s bloodlines and production methods.

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Downsizing the Herd

Watson Ranch cows have been downsized to increase efficiency. Some of the original Red Angus cows weighed 1,700 pounds at full condition. Optimum size for the environment is 1,100 to 1,200 pounds.

Miller's ideal cow is moderate framed and easy fleshing with good udder shape and moderate milk. He avoids high milk production due to the cost to maintain body condition score.

Cross-fence weaning allows weaned calves to graze with little supplementation. Due to the number of heifers retained the past six years, weaning weights of marketed calves have dropped to around 500 to 550 pounds.

Red Angus-Verified Calves Top Market

Miller has marketed the Watson calves by online video on RFD-TV through Superior Livestock Auction for approximately 10 years. In 2006, he noticed the Red Angus Association of America Feeder Calf Certification Program (FCCP) advertised on Superior.

"Since I was using Red Angus, I was interested because it fit really well with what I was doing and the direction I wanted to go. I saw that Red Angus were going to be in demand so it made sense," he said.

FCCP calves are source-, genetic- and age-verified. The trademark yellow tag inspires trust and recognition among potential buyers for the Watson calves.

"When our calves are carrying the dangle tag, that verifies that they are really good cattle," Miller said. "I think it's paid for itself time and again — every time I've sold."



This set of Watson Ranch calves topped their weight class on Superior Livestock Auction in early July, selling for \$2.80 per pound.



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Watson calves receive a premium selling online with the FCCP verification. Miller establishes his price based on the top of the market selling at the Oklahoma National Stock Yards, setting his price at a nickel to 30 cents over what the best cattle sell for in Oklahoma City that day.

Jay DeBord, Miller's representative from Superior has purchased most of the Watson spring calves each year. "We were visiting before cattle sold in July and Jay asked me what the cattle would bring," Miller said. "I told him I think they'll bring more than \$2.50. Jay replied that he thought they would bring \$2.60. The calves sold for \$2.80 and topped the market for their weight class."

"They sell themselves," DeBord said. "Any customer I've sent Watson calves to has always been really pleased. The disposition and performance has been outstanding on the cattle."

"When you top the market, you can figure out that they are good cattle," he continued. "Red Angus have been extremely popular the past three or four years. Red Angus are the market toppers right now."

DeBord said Red Angus heifer calves are in high demand, citing a fall sale in El Reno, Okla., where Red Angus heifers brought \$15 per hundredweight more than their steer mates. "Seven or eight years ago, all the premiums went to the black Angus, but it looks like the Red Angus are the premium cattle right now," DeBord concluded.

Proving their performance and efficiency, Red Angus cattle are likely to graze Watson Ranch pastures for years to come. Will Rogers was a legendary son of Oklahoma, and now Red Angus cows are leaving the same storied mark on the Oklahoma prairie. ■