



# THE PRICE IS RIGHT

Colorado farmers know the value of their cattle start to finish.

Story & photos by Morgan Marley, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**A**t the headquarters of a farm situated between its irrigation circles west of Iliff, Colo., coffee is brewing in the Stieb Brothers Feedyard office. The daily 9 a.m. meeting is about to start.

With no typical day or agenda, each of five team members begins by comparing “headaches” and inviting discussion on plans for handling them.

It all started as a crop farm with feeding pens and evolved into a diversified ranch with plenty of chores to go around.

“We didn’t even have cows back when we were in college,” Leo Stieb says. For sure, no cows stayed for a whole year back in the 1970s and early 1980s.

“If we did have cows, we’d buy them after we got our crops out and just calved and sold them,” he says. “We never kept a herd.”

The feedyard was stocked solely with calves from auction barns.

A generation before, the Stieb

brothers had grown capacity from 500 head to near 2,000 head. Today, cousins Leo and Don have room to feed 3,000.

“That’s about how much feed we could supply,” Leo says. “We never fed for anybody else, but now we’ve had to start that to build up more income.”

## Building a herd

In the 1990s, the family began to buy heifers out of artificially inseminated (AIed) cows of any breed. It was time to build a keeper herd.

Like most decisions, adding a permanent cow herd to the mix was price-driven.

When they were just buying whatever was cheapest at the sale

barn, it helped justify a few higher bids if they knew where cows originated.

“When they started costing \$2,000 to \$2,500, we decided we better start raising our own,” Leo says.

The added complexity and scale of more and expanding enterprises takes more hands to get the jobs done. Now including the cousins, there are five full-time and another three part-time employees in the summer.

“We raise all the grain ourselves,” Leo says. “That’s our big thing. Now, we’re gonna have to start buying some because we’ve added on so much.”

The 2,500 irrigated acres can’t grow enough corn, wheat and alfalfa for the hungry mouths they have to feed.

“Pasture’s getting hard to grow,” he says. “That’s why we started the irrigated grass, and it’s worked pretty well for us.”

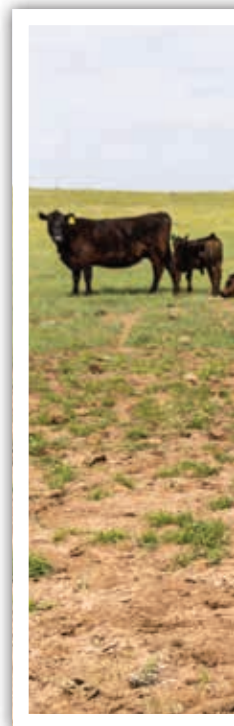
## Continual improvement

As time went on, the cousins began upgrading their herd by retaining only AI-sired heifers from registered Angus bulls. Progeny were evaluated by performance in the home feedyard and at a nearby packing plant.

“We know the quality we’re getting now,” Leo says, emphasizing the need for ever higher-quality bulls.

They don’t have to go far to find them. For four years they’ve purchased bulls from Walter Angus near Hudson, Colo.

“He really sees the value in genetics, especially from Angus,” Ty Walter says. “Rarely do people who retain ownership actually feed their own







Above: The Stieb family aims for quality from conception to harvest. They understand the role genetics play in return on investment.

calves. So Leo knows that carcass traits are important for his return on investment.”

A mix of red, white and black cattle still roam the eastern Front Range, but Angus covers the majority.

When you calve out nearly 800 cows, you don't want a lot of problems, the cousins note. Angus maternal instincts and reasonable

calf size make it easier on cattle and people.

“We don't want any 100 pounder; 80 pounds is really pretty good,” Don says. “I don't like pulling calves.”

Other improvements to the herd come from keeping younger cows. What used to be 10 to 12 years has changed to no more than 9 years in production.

Once they get through calving and planting crops, summers are spent tending irrigation lines and moving cattle around to grass. The day cows and calves first go out to pasture is a favorite day, with their caretakers relieved the calf crop has literally found room to grow. They'll stay on grass until weaning at 500-600 pounds.

“In one load, we had 91.25% Choice, which paid back \$13 a head in premiums,” Don says. At the time, cattle at the plant were averaging 65% Choice. Typically, more than half of each pen makes it into the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, with nearly 18% grading USDA Prime.

Marketing on the grid started when they began raising their own replacements. At first, the cousins weren't focused on Angus.

“The premiums were better,” Don says, “so we made the change.”

Tying everything together that goes into farming, ranching and feeding can be hard work. Yet when it's all you know, the cousins agree, it's all you really want to do.

“You see a lot of people that don't work near as hard and make a lot more money,” Leo says. “I don't know if they're as happy as we are.”

### Sorted out

From there, the sorting begins, with an initial split according to sex. Performance differences create later opportunities for sorting until the ultimate — choosing animals at optimum finish. When calves appear ready to head to Cargill in Fort Morgan, the fattest are picked off for a first load. All are sold on a value-based grid, but judging their best-value timing is all based on visual appraisal and decades of experience.

Cousins Don and Leo Stieb spend the summer checking irrigation lines and moving cows to green grass.



Editor's note: Morgan Marley is a CAB producer communications specialist.