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A Foundational Family

A centennial operation dedicated to keeping cow families and family values at the forefront.

By Briley Richard

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Sun-weathered hands wipe the dust from hand-written registration papers. Names the likes of Marshall Queen, Blackbird, Evidences Eppionia, Erica Ellen, Proud Formera, Dora and Emma top the pages. For Mike Sitz, these cow families represent more than just the beginning of the Sitz Angus legacy. For a century, they have been the matriarchs to the lineage of every single animal on the operation.

For something to stand the test of time, it has to be built on integrity, with a clear vision for the future. It has to withstand the trials and tribulations of decade after decade and hardship after hardship.

Today, Mike Sitz Angus Ranch is primarily run by Mike and his wife, Debra; alongside their daughter, Bethany and her husband, Joel; and granddaughter, Jordee — making the fifth generation of the operation.

Honored as 2023 recipients of the American Angus Association Century Award, the Sitzes have been devoted, like Mike's parents and grandparents before, to maintaining a profitable herd.

Bethany inherited the same humble mindset of generations past — respect for those who came before you; and prepare for those who will come after you.

“They’ve been through a lot, and they pretty much started from scratch,” Bethany says, speaking fondly of her ancestors. “Now they have a ranch, they have cattle, they have customers that are loyal — I think that speaks volumes to the type of people that they are and the type of cattle that they raise.”

Building the core

Mike's granddad, William, wanted to bring black cattle into the Sandhills' sea of red and find a way for them to flourish. Daring to be different, he purchased 10 head of registered Angus in 1923.

"He was kind of a progressive guy," Mike says, reminiscing on his grandfather's can-do attitude. "He was pretty fiery about Angus cattle, and when he did something, he usually tried to do the best he could."

William's plan was crystal clear — fight tooth and nail to raise functional cattle with genetics to stand the test of time.

"He was buying his first black Angus in a time when it wasn't cool," Bethany says. "Those animals had to be functional, and they had to be good-looking cows, and I think that's continued through the years."

When Mike's dad, Bill, took the reins, he relocated his wife and children to southeastern Rock County, just north of Burwell, Neb., where the ranch sits today. As financial times wore thin, Bill kept sight on the goal, functional cattle backed by proven genetics.

"When Dad and Mom came down, they were kind of living on a shoestring," Mike says. "Dad just wanted to keep the cow herd together, and they really didn't have enough money to buy anything outside."

As they steadily marketed cattle to operations in the region, the family began hosting their own bull sale. With gavels pounding before numbers got exciting, the family's grit grew stronger — yearning to achieve success while maintaining their core values.

"When you start out on your first sale, it's pretty tough for quite a few years," Mike



says. “You have to do it right for a long time before anybody notices.”

In their youth, Mike and his siblings played a key role in daily operations, making it fitting he’d return to the operation full-time, alongside his college sweetheart, Debra. With his transition into leadership, he toyed with the idea of bringing new genetics into the herd.

“I bought some cows in the late ’70s, early ’80s, and I thought they were really good cows,” Mike says. “I had them like two years, and then they were gone. They just didn’t fit the country.”

It all made sense. Like his grandfather and father learned before him, with the right genetics in the right environment, things thrive.

“You have to have the right kind of cow to run in this part of the country. You can’t have a cow that takes a lot of feed or management. They’ve got to do it on their own,” Mike says. “One reason the cow herd stayed the same was because we had to raise our own replacements.”



Continuing the legacy

The present-day operation functions with an all-hands-on-deck approach.

Mike oversees breeding and management decisions, in addition to owning the responsibilities come hay season. He uses the same breeding approach as his predecessors.

“We’ve always kind of keyed on the cow and the basic things — fertility, feet and legs, udders; cows that breed back every year and raise a calf,” Mike says. “We’re not trying to hit a home run; we’re trying to hit base hits.”

Debra, with a keen eye for photography and organization, creates their sale book and manages office-related duties.

Joel handles day-to-day duties, range and ranch management and assists with recordkeeping. Having grown up on a commercial operation, he channels that

mindset in everyday operations and customer relations.

“When I came here, I wanted to try to run this as much like a commercial herd as I could because I know our customers, most of them are commercial guys,” Joel says. “So, if we cull hard and go for all the profitability we can get, the genetics will help the commercial guy.”

Though Bethany isn't on the ranch full-time, she helps with the operation's financials and brings a unique set of career insights to the table, having worked in extension and for other agricultural organizations. This proves as valuable as anything.

“I can bring in that network of experts to help with the ranch, whether it's ruminant nutrition or rangeland management,” Bethany says. “If we need some vet expertise, there are people I can reach out to for that.”

With the next generation stepping into the spotlight, change is inevitable.

“Since Bethany and Joel came back, we're getting a lot more done and we've got more cows than we've ever had,” Mike says. “It's not something that's easy to give up unless you've got somebody that's really going to do something with it.”

Reflecting on the past, looking toward the future

When reflecting on the milestone achievement, Debra calls to mind the tenacity it takes. “You have to have a lot of persistence and faith that things will work out,” Debra says. “It's that importance of doing the right thing, even when the right thing is really hard to do.”

With the weight of a century's worth of sacrifice, Bethany voices respect for the challenge on her shoulders.

“For us to be here on the 100th year, part of that's just the pride of the legacy that the generations before have accomplished and everything they've been through to keep this continuing,” Bethany says. “At the same time, there's a lot of pressure to do it right and then be able to pass it on to that next generation.” Seven original cow families have been diligently cared for by five generations, who shared one vision for

the future. After 100 years of simply doing the right thing, the Sitz family is poised to continue the legacy for centuries to come.

Editor’s note: Briley Richard is a freelance writer from Grand Chenier, La.



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