

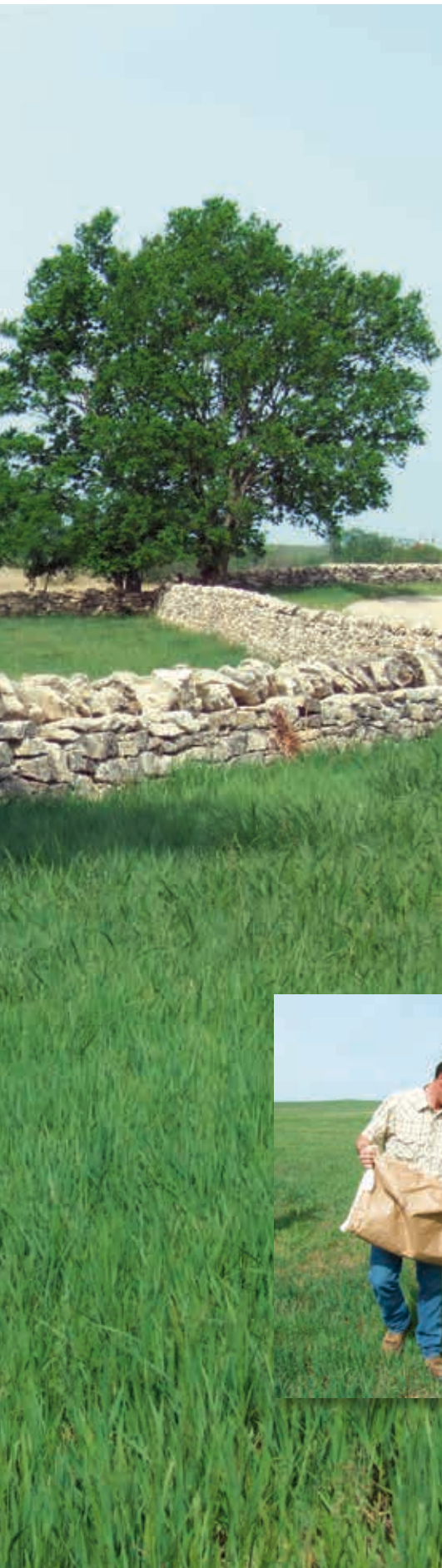


► Rock Hill Ranch has adapted throughout the generations in order to preserve the native grassland & restore the stone fences on its land.

Sustaining a Legacy of Quality

Kansas ranchers pass on a tradition of quality in an untraditional way.

Story & photos by *Nicole Lane*, Certified Angus Beef LLC



► Paul (center) and Nancy Miller are using a nontraditional estate plan to help Randall Debler and his family enter the cattle business.

When Paul Miller's ancestors reached the rocky Flint Hills of Kansas, they started a tradition — living off the land by improving it. Today, like the tall grass, that legacy covers Rock Hill Ranch, from the historic stone fences to the managers' way of embracing innovation.

As fourth-generation ranchers on the land their family homesteaded in 1878 near Alma, Kan., Paul and his wife, Nancy, wanted to pass it on to the next generation. Yet after 42 years of farming with no children or other family to take over the 300-cow commercial-Angus operation, the couple began to explore different ways to slow down.

"It didn't feel right to have an auction and have a stranger come in and buy us out after all the years of work and improvements," Miller says.



► **Above:** Randall Debler impressed the Millers with his work ethic, commitment and involvement in the community during college.

► **Right:** Replacement heifers that ensure a quality eating experience are a requirement for Rock Hill Ranch.

Luckily, strangers have a way of becoming friends.

The next generation

Growing up in southeast Kansas with a family cow herd that was little more than a hobby, Randall Debler always hoped to manage his own commercial herd.

Considering the obstacles, he never thought he could succeed as a first-generation rancher, so he pursued a career in parks and recreation.

"In the ag industry, there is so much capital to get involved that it is almost impossible," he says.

One day as a park ranger was all it took to realize that wasn't what Debler wanted to do for the rest of his life. So he returned to Kansas State University (K-State) for a second degree, this time in animal science. Little did he know that path would lead to fulfilling dreams of full-time ranching.

Fate steps in

Miller calls it serendipity, and Debler says, "the good Lord takes care of fools like me." Whatever it was, a hopeful cattle producer and an experienced one happened to cross paths at the perfect time.

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While still studying at K-State, Randall and his wife, Erin, began renting a house from the Millers. After graduation, he worked for different ranchers in the area while searching for a full-time job and building his own small herd on the side.

The young cattleman's work ethic, commitment and involvement in the community impressed the Millers. So, when Debler made an off-the-cuff suggestion about letting him buy a share of the ranch, Miller saw potential. He thought this might be a good way to pass on a lifetime of work and the tradition of raising quality, sustainable beef to someone equally passionate about the cattle industry.

After careful consideration and lots of conversations, Debler came to work for the Millers as a full-time employee of Rock Hill Ranch. He spent a year learning and working with Paul and Nancy with the end goal of becoming the next person to take over the operation.

The men agree that trial period was exactly what they needed to make sure they were all on the same path.

"It took a lot of trust and communication to make this work," Miller says. "Plus, it gave

us the opportunity to help a young couple get established in agriculture, which is so hard today."

A year later the group formed Rock Hill Ranch Inc., allowing the Deblers to buy a few shares at a time, overcoming some of the financial stress. The agreement includes cattle and equipment, while the land resides in a family trust that can be rented for two generations with an option to purchase.

Today, both families share management decisions on the ranch. Together, they continue the tradition of improving the land by reclaiming native grassland, trying new farming avenues like producing row crops, and raising ever-better Angus cattle.

"You always have to be looking ahead, making improvements and making things better," Miller says. "A lot of times it's the details, the small things. If you keep doing them, they add up."

Foundation of quality

Like all aspects of their ranch, the Rock Hill team works for constant improvements in cattle. Recently that has included individual carcass data. After years of selling calves on the Superior Livestock video auction, repeat customers took them to *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®])-licensed feedlots that began to share information back through the chain.

It validated that the genetics and management were on track, grading 90% Choice or better and up to 40% CAB acceptance.

"The reason we've had repeat buyers on our cattle is because they grade well for them, and we want to keep it that way," says Debler.

Rock Hill Ranch has also used the data as a marketing tool, posting those percentages with the auction consignments.

"The kind of people that buy our quality of cattle are looking to sell on a grid basis," Debler says, noting they'll be back when cattle earn premiums. "They are going to pay more when they have had a good experience."

Although they don't maintain ownership through the feedlot, he and Miller see the value of producing a quality product for their customer and the end consumer. With beef prices at record highs, consumer demand for beef is important to sustainability.

"Now is not the time to be turning people off with a poor eating experience," Debler says. "We need cattle that will ensure the quality."

That's a requirement for replacement heifers at Rock Hill Ranch.

"Going into this time frame and all the talk of rebuilding the cattle herd, we want cows that produce quality and stay in the herd. Longevity is very important and right where we want to be," Debler says.

He plans to use the individual carcass data to begin making breeding decisions, as well. As their business progresses, he says, he believes it will become a vital tool.

“I think we will get better at using it to keep track of cow families that do better than others,” he says. “We’ll keep replacement heifers with more emphasis on carcass data and how calves have performed.”

Worthwhile changes

Innovation has been a longstanding tradition on Rock Hill Ranch. Through technology, genetics or just being open to new ideas, the group agrees it is what has helped sustain the operation over time.

“Just because it’s something new, it doesn’t mean it’s not worthwhile. Change can be a great opportunity,” Debler says.

Adaptation and problem-solving have enabled cattle production with a vision of continuity on the same land for more than 130 years. Miller’s father was one of the first in the area to adopt Angus genetics in the 1950s, and consequent adaptations were evident in preservation of native grassland, restoration of stone fences and a succession plan outside the family.

“You always try to be as efficient as you can



► “You see that the people who came before you did as well as they could do, and you feel that connection that they went the extra length, they didn’t cut corners, to make sure that it would last until now,” Debler says.

in what you are doing. Well, the buzzword now is sustainable,” Debler says. “The less time and resources you waste the better; it’s all about managing it to its fullest potential, whether it is finances, grassland or genetics.”

He also keeps the history of the ranch in mind as he plans for the future.

“You see that the people who came before you did as well as they could do, and you feel that connection that they went the extra length, they didn’t cut corners, to make sure that it would last until now,” Debler says. “So

whatever you are working on, you want to do it as well as you can. I hope my sons are my age or older before they have to redo it. I want it to last my lifetime.”

He and Erin hope to pass on the traditions to their three children: Dalton, 7; Jacob, 4; and Anna, who will be a year old this fall.

“My favorite part is raising my kids in it,” Debler says. “That’s for sure the reason why I do it.”

For Rock Hill Ranch, preservation and progression meant changing one family tradition so another could begin.

“I just hope to have another family make their living off of this land and maybe the next generation,” Miller says. “Randall’s got three children and hopefully it will be big enough to support them and they will become a vital part of this community. That way, another family that loves livestock and appreciates taking care of the land gets to.”

Debler says he feels the same.

“It all ties back to the generations before you and what they did to build it.”

Even if it wasn’t your family.



Editor’s Note: Nicole Lane is an industry information intern for CAB.