



Big Skies, Big Heart

Texas cattleman gives the gift of quality beef.

by *Katrina Huffstutler, freelancer*

Sometimes blessings come in unexpected forms — like a well-marbled ribeye, grilled to perfection, on a blustery Sunday afternoon. Make that 100 well-marbled ribeyes.

It was an ordinary but busy day in the office when Barbara Dahl, vice president of community relations at the Hendrick Home for Children, Abilene, Texas, got a surprising call from a cattleman.

That cattleman was commercial-Angus producer James Cloud, Rule, Texas, and he called to make an offer she couldn't refuse.

He wanted to buy every child in the home a steak, but not just any steak.

Cloud rattled off his credit card information to Dahl and gave her only two instructions. "He said, 'I want you to be sure to buy enough, and it has to be *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB),' " she says.

Cold day, warm hearts

When the day of the steak feed arrived, it was unseasonably cold for March 2 in West Texas, but Mother Nature couldn't put a damper on the spirit.

"Anytime someone from the community gives to our children, it gives them a real sense of worth that someone would think of them," Dahl says.

For these 70 or so kids — some orphans, some living there to escape extreme poverty, abuse or neglect — the friendly rancher and cotton farmer made his gift personal. Not only did he join them for dinner, he made a point to visit with the kids and even provided his mom's homemade pie recipe for the kitchen staff to prepare. It only seemed right since this all began with a memory of mom's cooking.

Spending most of his childhood as what

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he refers to as a "half-orphan" after his dad passed away when Cloud was only 6, steak was a rare treat growing up. When they had it, it sure was good.

"Mom had a broiler with the heating element on the top, and she would fix sirloin every now and then," he says, "and it was always good — every time — and I just thought these kids should have the same chance we did when we were young to get to enjoy a good steak."

Cloud knows there can be a big difference in quality, even among Choice beef, so he wanted to make sure the kids had the best chance at having a good eating experience. He knew that meant buying CAB.

► **Above:** James Cloud, Rule, Texas, and Hailey Lowe, a resident of the Hendrick Home for Children, Abilene, Texas, enjoy a *Certified Angus Beef*[®] dinner together.

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“I knew if I was going to do this that I was going to ask them to buy *Certified Angus Beef* because of the standard for quality,” he says, referring to the brand’s 10 carcass specifications.

Quality pays

Cloud is no stranger to the CAB brand. In fact, up to half of his cattle have been hitting that target each year since he began feeding with CAB partner feedlot Sam Hands at Triangle H, near Garden City, Kan.

He hasn’t always been an Angus man.

His dad managed cattle on the same place and Cloud always enjoyed them, but the herd was sold following his father’s passing. In 1992, Cloud decided to bring cattle back to the Haskell County ranch. His original herd consisted of Braford females and a Brangus bull. When his bull died, he decided to replace him with a Hereford. Soon, he made the switch again to Angus bulls.

“I went from red and black to all black,” he says. “Those Brahman bloodlines grew well, but they don’t grade well enough to pay a premium. There’s good in them, but it wasn’t on the grid.”

These days, he focuses on what he refers to as the three Ms: marbling, maternal traits (after all, they “don’t make you any money if they don’t have a calf”) and muscling. He also wants cattle suited for his often harsh environment.

“People laugh when I tell them this, but I want a bull that looks like a butane tank on legs,” he says. “Tall and skinny doesn’t work here. This country’s too hard on them.”

He explains the biggest challenges are (lack of) rainfall and excessive heat.

“We’re supposed to have 22 inches a year — that’s our average for 100 years — but we



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haven’t been close to that the last few years. With such dry conditions, big cattle just don’t work for me. They can’t eat enough to breed back,” he says.

To help with the heat, there are some trees the cattle gather under by 10 or 11 in the morning on the hottest days, which may reach 110° F. While he admits the Brahman-influenced cattle were a little better-suited for that weather, he says the Angus do just fine — while making him a lot more money.

“The best way I can describe that is this land, or any land, will only run so many cows,” Cloud says. “The idea was to have the best-producing cattle you can have. If you can have only 100, try to get the most out of the 100. You can’t just turn 100 into 200 if all you can have is 100.

“An old man in Rule who was friends with

my dad had the best cows. He told me, ‘It doesn’t cost me any more to feed a good one than a bad one.’ It costs more to get them, because you have to start somewhere and work your way up, and not everything I did was right. Not every bull you get is the right one. Not every cow is the right one. There’s some expense in going from average to above average, and it takes a long time to get that back.”

The quality will eventually pay for itself.

He gives an example of Angus calves weighing 40 to 50 pounds (lb.) less than Brahman crossbreds but bringing in the same dollars per head. For a rancher with limited grass and water, that’s a no-brainer.

A little PEP

Good Angus genetics aren’t the only thing that has improved this 116-cow operation’s bottom line.

About six years ago, Cloud sat in on a meeting introducing the Texas Beef PEP (short for “Partners in Extension Program”) that kicked off an incredibly beneficial partnership between the rancher and the state’s foremost experts in various disciplines related to cattle production.

Russell Cross, professor and head of the Department of Animal Science at Texas A&M University, explains.

“The Texas Beef PEP program is a classic example of the land-grant mission to extend information gained through research to the Texas cattle industry,” he says. “Agricultural economists determine the financial and production status of enrolled herds. Faculty from agricultural economics, soil and crop science, animal science and the College of Veterinary Medicine then assist the producer in defining and accomplishing his objectives.”

The program typically lasts three years as the impact of implemented changes on all aspects of the operation are measured.



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Throughout the course of the program, Cloud worked closely with Texas A&M University Livestock and Food Animal Systems Coordinator Tom Hairgrove (who just happened to be Cloud's former veterinarian before making a career change) and state Extension specialists to overhaul his nutrition and vaccination programs, as well as his finances. Sometimes the advice he received was surprising or tough to hear, especially regarding the 2011 drought, but it was always beneficial.

"I remember '11, but I wish I couldn't," Cloud says. "I was talking to Dr. Hairgrove about something. He said, 'James, what are you gonna do about the drought?' and I said, 'I'm gonna wait till May when it rains.'"

"He said, 'James, it isn't going to rain.' I said, 'Well, I don't know. I'm just trying to feed them till the spring rain.'"

Hairgrove told him he had "better talk to Stan."

Stan Bevers, the extension economist for Cloud's region, echoed Hairgrove's advice.

"He said, 'James, you need to sell some cows 'cause it isn't going to rain. The 90-day forecast is horrible,'" Cloud says. "He was right. Those meteorologists were right."

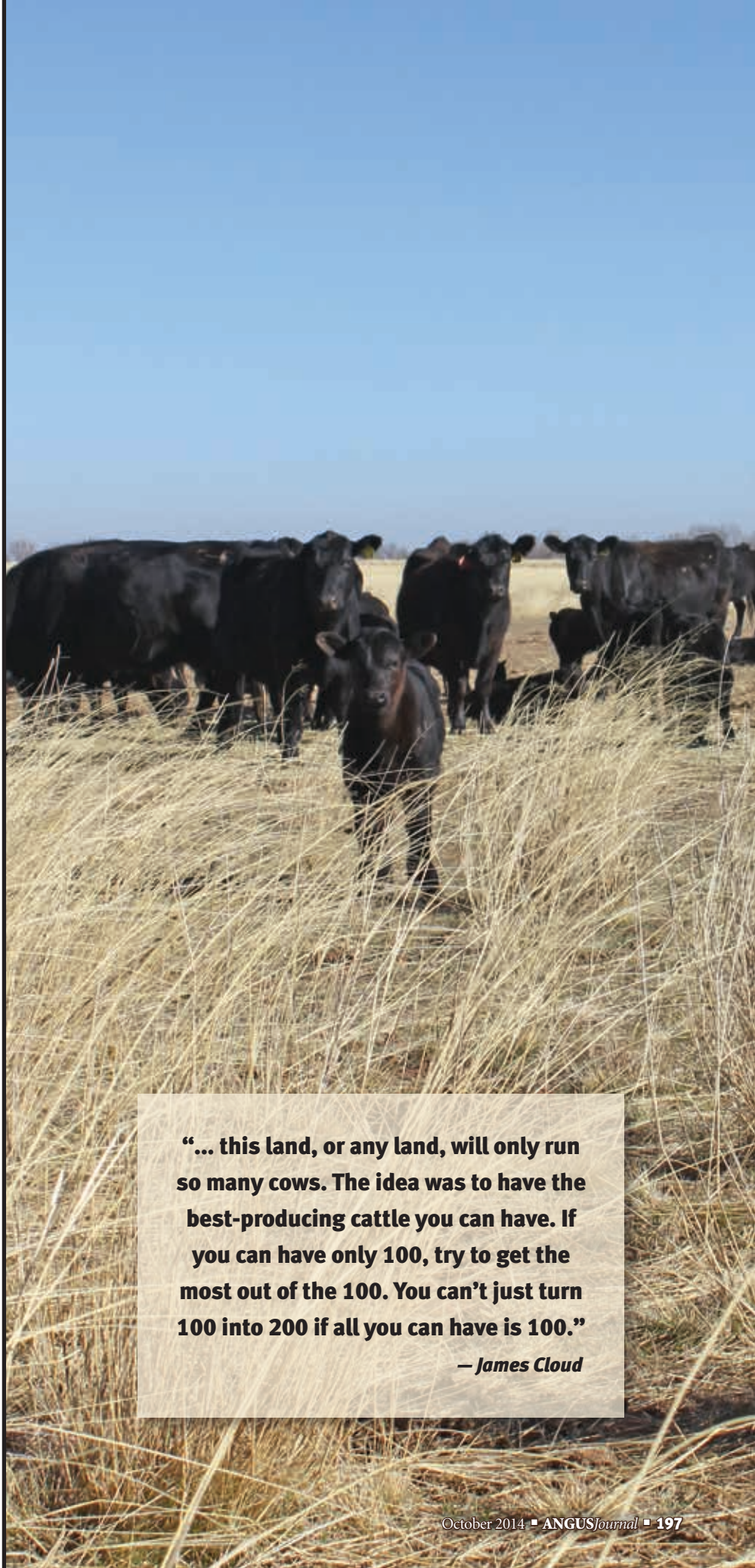
Three years later, it still hasn't rained much on Cloud's ranch, but thanks to cattle that make money, applied principles from Beef PEP and partnerships with some very helpful breeders, feeders and veterinarians, he's making do with whatever moisture does fall from the West Texas sky.

"We wouldn't be talking if it weren't for them," Cloud says, "because I would have been out of business."

Plus, a very special group of kids would never have gotten to taste CAB.



Editor's Note: *Katrina Huffstutler is a freelance writer for Certified Angus Beef LLC, based in Electra, Texas.*



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