

• SIMBRAH NEWS •

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Hot and Healthy

After 30 years of meticulous genetic planning and rigorous testing to produce high-quality, tender, heart-healthy beef in the most efficient manner possible, Bill and Jane Travis of Pine Ridge Ranch have succeeded in building a herd that is custom-made for both hot pastures and plates.

By Sharla Ishmael

At 74, Bill Travis confesses a rancher's life is finite; he's "just passing through." But he and wife Jane have spent three decades dedicated to a project – a very specific and unique line of cattle – that he hopes will be important for generations to come. At Pine Ridge Ranch near Athens, Texas, a breeding program has slowly but soundly evolved over the past 30 years to generate an ultimate hot-weather cow whose calves will produce preferred carcasses with every bit of efficiency bred into the production system.

"The animal we are producing now did not exist 30 years ago," he says. "Jane and I set out on a 40-year plan back in 1981 and we are in the 30th year of that plan. Our goal was to raise heart-healthy, tender beef out of the most efficient animal for hot areas. We are doing that now."

Their contributions to the industry were recognized by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in 2000 when Pine Ridge Ranch received an honorable mention for the southwest region in productivity. They've also been recognized for their contributions by the cattle

industries of Panama and South Africa.

To achieve their goal, the Travis' have a fundamental strategy — specify exactly what you want, then measure/test; measure/test; measure/test. They use everything from actual carcass data to ultrasound measurements on every animal to DNA evaluation to a custom-made Net Feed Intake system to do the measuring and testing.

"We are doing everything that the universities teach to develop animals," Travis explains. "We documented our first carcass data over 25 years ago. Now we produce almost all Choice and tender beef. We do not produce Prime or Standard carcasses. Our cattle average 5.42 shear (score for tenderness). We rarely have one over 8.0. In addition, through genetics and testing we have learned how to never produce a Yield Grade 4 or 5 carcass."

"The CAB® Angus program is brilliant (in marketing strategy), however, we believe their goal is wrong," he states emphatically. "The public has been told by the medical profession to limit their intake of saturated fat. Low to mid-Choice Pine Ridge beef

reduces saturated fat by as much as 50% compared to Angus CAB® Prime beef.

"A major goal is to produce tender beef. There's only a 5% correlation between the fat in beef and tenderness. I've been told that Southern cattle won't marble. But every breed can produce specified carcasses – it's just a matter of testing and breeding the good ones," he adds. "What we need is lean, heart-healthy beef and our Simbrah cattle have that. We have traveled 85% of the road that we set out on, and we got to a great carcass quicker than I thought we would."

Working with Texas Tech University and Texas A&M University, Pine Ridge sells their feedlot steers on a grid to packers and they get all the data back to analyze and further fine-tune their genetics. He credits Jane for doing a lot of the breeding plans. "She's smarter than me and remembers everything," he says. The two have been married for 53 years.

The Travis' operate on 1,425 acres and approximately half of their cattle are produced by embryo transfer. Because efficiency and productivity are the keys to their breeding program, they took the longer route of genetic progress by foregoing the advantages of linebreeding (quicker progress on fewer traits) to capitalize on maximum heterosis and multiple-trait selection.

"When you linebreed, you increase the probability of genetic defects," Travis adds. "To my knowledge, our cattle do not have any known genetic defects."

Physically, their results

have paid off in very uniform, striking cattle. Take a look at their website (www.simbrah.com) and you'll see cattle with dark-hides, red hair and blaze faces. He says the blaze face on their cattle has eliminated pink-eye. The color and uniformity is no accident. When writing their specifications for the perfect hot-weather cow, he noted that in the wild, most animals that live in hot environments are dark-hided and have red-derivative hair (except for Zebra and some Bos Indicus cattle).

Phenotypically, the Pine Ridge cattle are consistently deep-bodied, strong-topped and polled with moderate bone, tight in the navel but with plenty of neck leather for heat dissipation. Their structure specifications include moderate frame and shoulder height to brisket equidistant to length from brisket to the ground.

Also, they want a deep twist, flank and chest wall, appropriate slope from hooks to pins and heavy muscling in the rear quarter and over the loin. Small heads are preferred as well.

"Both Brahman cattle and the Fleckvieh type of Simmental that we use tend to have a fairly large head," Travis says. "They just need a big enough head to be able to drink, think and look. Anything more than that is inefficient. So are rafter hips, the stress of dehorning, short tail sets and too much navel."

"If you owned every aspect of the industry, you'd pay more attention to all the little inefficiencies that add up. We are breeding cattle for everything that would affect the income stream – about 50 breeding factors." He also focuses on early maturity and milking ability that Simmental add to the mix.

Hard work is the norm for these folks. Having grown up at the edge of town with all kinds of animals, Travis earned a structural engineering degree from the University of Texas, got married and eventually earned a business degree at Harvard

Business School and took classes at MIT, while waiting tables.

In 1962, he came back to Texas to work for a small company, bought it out seven years later and went public. He later sold that company and "for the first time in my life had two minutes on my hands." He started looking at ranch properties and the couple bought land and started a commercial herd with registered Angus as well.

"In 1979 when the market was hot, we sold the entire herd," Travis explains. "We just started taking hay off the farm until the market softened up again. Over a six-month period, we set out to identify every efficiency factor we could find related to hot weather cows."

Interest in the Pine Ridge program goes beyond the United States. In fact, he believes their program is actually better known overseas than it is at home. The two have traveled to many countries looking at cattle and talking to other breeders about the advantages of Simbrah, including Australia, South Africa, Argentina, Brazil, Central America, Europe,

Germany and many more. They have sold both semen and live animals internationally. In fact, in 2008 Pine Ridge Ranch was the No. 1 exporter of all U.S. breeders and all breeds to Mexico. Their cattle have been named national champions in Mexico and Brazil, and the Travis' have helped many juniors in the United States achieve their show goals as well.

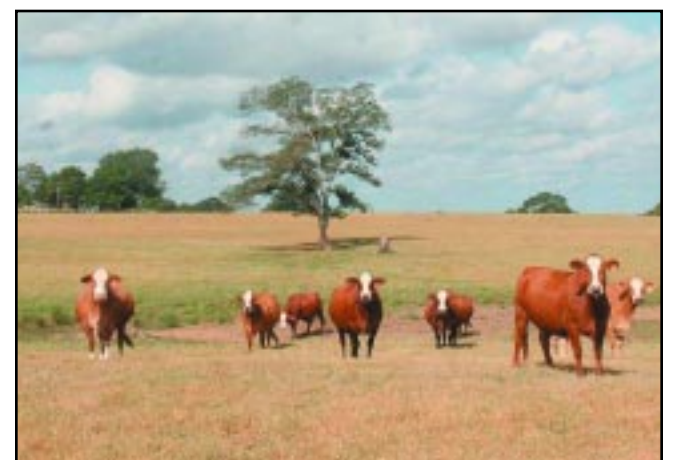
The couple has also served on various NCBA committees during the past 20 years and been involved with ASA activities. Their organization ties cover all ends of the spectrum, from NCBA to R-Calf to Texas & Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association.

All the hard work and perseverance is paying off. The latest set of carcass data on Pine Ridge steers included statistically 100% Choice carcasses and Yield Grades of 1, 2 or 3. Travis believes that seven out of eight steers from their program will grade Choice when fed to a point so that their hot carcass weight is over 750 lbs.

And they say Southern cattle won't marble. Don't tell that to Bill and Jane Travis. They know better.



Pine Ridge Ranch bred steers on feed.



Pine Ridge Ranch bred females on their ranch near Athens, Texas.



Bill and Jane Travis.