



Lowdown on Lowlines

Meet the little breed of cattle that can turn big profits for your hobby farm.

By Carol Ekarius

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I went to the National Western Stock Show in January to get an up-close and personal look at Lowline cattle.

As I walked through rows and rows of pens trying to find where these diminutive cattle were awaiting their trip to the show or sale rings, I felt like I was wandering through a mastadon exhibition: The modern Angus, Herefords, Limousins, Gelbviehs and Piedmontese that were also in the stockyard pens that morning were giant animals, a far cry from what their ancestors looked like less than 60 years ago, when the paradigm of the American cattle industry moved to a bigger-is-better mindset. Bigger calves, bigger weaning weights, bigger bulls, bigger cows.

© Rhoda Peacher/Lazy G Lowlines

Bigger was the answer farmers and ranchers heard, yet what was the question? In spite of cattle getting larger and larger, the cattle industry has been a tough place for farmers and ranchers to make a living, and the competition—poultry and pork—have continued to eat away at cattle's once-dominant role in American agriculture and on Americans' plates.

Over the last decade or so, some influential members of the industry started challenging the bigger-is-better assumption. They pointed to Lowline cattle as proof that smaller animals could increase profits and improve the lives of producers while at the same time meeting consumer demands for tender meat in smaller-sized cuts, produced in an environmentally friendly manner. My mission for the National Western Stock Show was to find out if Lowline cattle lived up to this promise—and what it means for American cattle production.

The Genesis of the Breed

In 1914, the government of New South Wales, Australia, formed an agricultural research center in Trangie, a small, valley town about 300 miles northwest of Sydney. One of the center's earliest charges was to improve Australian cattle genetics. To accomplish that, they began importing top-quality Angus bulls and cows from Scotland, Canada and the United States, and breeding them to some of the best Angus lines already in Australia. They kept up their genetic work until 1963, when the emphasis at Trangie changed from straight genetic research to improving performance testing and recording. They closed the herd to outside bloodlines starting in 1964, and worked to develop improved methods for analyzing and recording such performance criteria as weight gain, structural measurements and objective visual assessments.

Sale Summary

12 Bred, fullblood females:
Average = \$7,604 2 Fullblood pairs (bred cows with a calf at their side): Average = \$9,250 1 Fullblood embryo flush:
Average = \$4,000 29 Open, fullblood heifers: Average = \$1,759 10 3/4-blood females: Average = \$1,845 10 1/2-blood
females: Average = \$1,875 9 Fullblood bulls: Average = \$2,444 5 Percentage bulls: Average = \$1,610 6 Embryo lots:
Average = \$3,050 95 Lots: Average = \$3,867



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In 1974, researchers at Trangie began a new project designed to evaluate selection and production criteria to better understand just how growth rate impacted herd profitability.

They grouped their herd into three subgroups, one made up of the largest and fastest growing members of their herd, one made up of the smallest and slowest growing, and one a mixed group to serve as a control group. They continued breeding these three, closed-herd subgroups over the next 19 years with a goal of determining whether the larger and faster-growing animals were more efficient converters of grass into meat and meat into farm profits, or if the smaller and slower-growing animals were. The high yearling-growth-rate cattle were named High lines, the low yearling-growth-rate cattle were named Low lines.

The researchers used detailed evaluations, which included weight gain, feed intake, protein conversion, reproductive performance, milk production, carcass yield and structural correctness, with performance of the High line and the Low line cattle recorded on an individual basis. The lines continued to grow apart with the selection process and to be recorded on an individual basis; after 15 years, the Low line cattle were around 30 percent smaller than the High lines. Feed conversion was fairly similar between the two groups in spite of their size differences, but on a straight grass diet, the Low lines were showing themselves to be quite profitable.

Featured Farms

Neil Effertz/Effertz EZ Ranch

<http://www.loala.com/>

702-223-5202 Lone Tree Lowline Cattle Company

<http://www.lonetreelowlinecattle.com/>

970-278-1118 Muddy Creek Ranch

<http://www.muddycreekranchlowlines.com/>

406-578-9224 Shari Schroeder and Don Brown

<http://www.sharidonfarms.com/>

816-419-3514 John de Bruin

<http://www.californialowlines.com/>

805-LOWLINES

TopBy the early 1990s, the New South Wales Department of Agriculture was ready to pull the plug on the experiment. They planned to send the animals to slaughter, but a handful of Australian cattle breeders intervened and purchased the Low line animals, which had developed into a recognizable breed they dubbed Lowline. They saw value in the small, docile and very well-conformed herd the researchers developed, and believed that they particularly offered smaller landowners a viable option for producing cattle.

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From Australia to North America

By 1995, Neil Effertz, a rancher whose family runs purebred cattle along the Missouri River near Bismarck, N.D., had been in the cattle business for more than a quarter century.

He was an influential cattleman and an early adopter of a number of breeds, including Charolais, Limousin, Salers, Chianina, Maine Anjou and Wagyu.

He also ran an auction company that specialized in selling registered cattle, running seed stock sales in 44 states and most Canadian provinces.

But he was one of the cattlemen who had begun questioning the conventional wisdom.

"Breeders looked at other breeds as their competition, the Angus breeders thought the Herefords or Charolais breeds were their competition and the Charolais breeders thought the Limousin or Salers were the competition, but their real competition was poultry and pork—you can't get much poultry or pork from a bale of hay or an acre of grass," he says. "We weren't using our God-given competitive advantage in the American beef industry nor providing the consumers with what they wanted. Steaks were getting so large that they had to be cut paper thin to provide anything approaching a



reasonable portion size and they weren't consistently tender.

Consumers were becoming aware of environmental and humane issues with the way the beef industry was producing its product. They were becoming interested in grassfed and organic production, but the industry wasn't responding, and profits at the farm and ranch level were falling."

These thoughts were nagging at Effertz, but they didn't really coalesce until he called a respected Canadian rancher, Henry BeGrand, who had been influential in Charolais circles. "I called him to tell him about a bull I had on an upcoming sale that I thought he'd be interested in," says Effertz, "but he told me he wasn't. He was moving to smaller cattle, these Lowlines from Australia, because he really believed they would be more profitable."

The Lowline cattle, imported by BeGrand and a group of other Canadians, arrived in Canada on June 6, 1996, and two days later Effertz went to see them. He immediately made arrangements to buy and import a heifer to the United States as soon as she could clear customs, and to purchase the American rights to their embryo and pregnant recipient production.

"The numbers Henry showed me completely made sense. These cows required less labor and infrastructure, you could produce more pounds of retail product per acre because of a higher stocking rate and they have greater boneless retail yield of 25 to 30 percent because they have a 30 percent larger ribeye area per hundredweight than standard, larger-sized cattle."

Log on for LowlinesAmerican Lowline Registry

<http://www.usa-lowline.org/>

815-221-0641 The Australian Lowline Cattle Association

<http://www.lowline.une.edu.au/>

+03-5422-7038 Canadian Lowline Cattle

<http://www.canadianlowline.com/> NDSU research on feedlot performance of Lowline-crossed cattle

www.ag.ndsu.edu/news/columns/beef-talk-lowline-steer-value-plus-feedlot-performance-and-carcass-characteristics

TopPippa, the first fullblood heifer in America, arrived in North Dakota in July of 1996, just in time for the Effertzs to show her at the Iowa State Fair; he has never regretted his decision to jump into the breed. Since then he has imported bulls, cows, embryos and semen, and he has helped grow the American Lowline Registry. He has worked with researchers at North Dakota State University to confirm feedlot performance of Lowline crossbred cattle—a step he believes is critical to gaining the greater cattle industry's interest. In a Kansas feedlot for only 90 days, the Lowline halfblood steers, all out of first calf heifers, returned \$925 per head to the ranch after feed cost, a figure any rancher would be impressed with, but Neil also thinks that meeting consumer demands means finishing on grass, and his purebred cattle perform superiorly there as well. "They are excellent for a grassfed, locker-beef business," he says, "because of their high-quality finish, their extra tenderness off grass and their smaller size, which makes them more convenient for the home freezer business."

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The Sale and Show

One of the important functions for breeds that participate at the National Western is the ability to host sanctioned sales and shows. Each year, the National Western hosts dozens of breed sales and shows. The sales accounted for about \$6 million in livestock transactions this year and the shows provide a forum for breeders to evaluate stock through the eyes of experienced judges.

There was tremendous interest in the Lowline sale this year. The stands around the sale arena were full and buying was strong. The top-selling animals, both fullblood, bred heifers named LTL Sedalia (from Lone Tree Lowlines, Loveland, Colo.) and MCR Poison Ivy (from Muddy Creek Ranch, Wilsall, Mont.), opened the day's bidding, each selling for \$14,000. The audience had been anticipating these heifers, which already had significant wins in the show ring and came from bloodlines that have consistently produced top animals. According to Shari Schroeder, whose term as secretary/treasurer of the registry ended at the end of this year's National Lowline Show and Sale, the average sale price of full-blood, bred females averaged \$7,604.

They say first impressions matter and my first impression was great.



It was reinforced, however, the next morning as I listened to the judge of the Lowline show. (Judges at the National Western are hired directly by the National Western from a pool of judges around the country; breeders don't have a say in who will judge their breed.) For the Lowline show this year, the National Western assigned Randy Daniel. Daniel and his family raise purebred Angus cattle at their Colbert, Ga., farm, and he has judged breeds ranging from Angus to Simmental in 38 states, Brazil and Argentina.

After the first few classes, Daniel made a remark that echoed the thoughts I'd had over the last 24 hours. "Coming up here, I didn't really know what to expect," he said. "Often when I've judged a newer breed, the quality of animals just isn't there, or there are one or two clear winners and a lot of poorer-quality animals. But in these classes, we've seen really well-conformed animals and obviously serious breeders. This is a competition!"

The Perfect Small Farm and Ranch Beef Animal At the National Western, the more serious breeders are in attendance, but conformation doesn't necessarily translate to good on-farm values.

I spoke with a few small-scale producers about the quality of their animals for production purposes. What did they really get out of using this breed instead of some other?

Shari Schroeder and her husband, Don Brown, didn't grow up on farms, but started farming part-time shortly after they got married. Today they farm on 40 acres outside of Kansas City, their second place since starting out 25 years ago. They initially started a small beef herd of conventional Angus, but "because we work in the city, we needed animals that were really easy to care for," says Schroeder, "and we were direct marketing, and we couldn't get those animals to finish well on grass."

They started looking for an alternative and found the Lowlines. "We started off with just a few head and then replaced all the standard Angus," she says. "Then we about quadrupled our carrying capacity. We have definitely made more money since switching to the Lowlines, but what was even more critical to us was the fact that they are so easy to care for. Since we're not on the farm every day—our jobs keep us away during the day—I appreciate the docile nature and good mothering ability of these cattle. I lost calves with my traditional cattle, even using low birth weight bulls, but I have never lost a Lowline calf. I need an animal that can calve unattended and take care of that calf alone; these cows do."

I also spoke with John de Bruin, a Californian who purchased 168 acres when he retired from the aerospace industry. He first tried raising commodity beef, but soon recognized it as a losing proposition. "I quickly saw that if I really wanted to make money on a small ranch—and in California, mine is a small ranch—I needed to focus my business strategy on direct marketing and on reducing input costs. I am an engineer by training, so I started researching breeds that would fit with this model. I was looking for animals that would work well for marketing local, organic meat. I found them in the Lowline.

"They are early maturing animals, so you gain a time advantage," says de Bruin about the traits that really attracted him to the breed.

"They have the high ratio of meat to bone and their meat is tender.

And they are small and gentle, which makes them a lot easier to work with."

I left the Stock Show concluding that the Lowline breed offers something valuable to agriculture, particularly to smaller farmers and ranchers who want to produce organic or grass-finished meats for direct marketing to consumers. But the breed can also find a place with commercial cattlemen in crossbreeding; that's a must for the breed's long-term value to agriculture.

About the Author

Carol Ekarius is an HF contributing editor and author of *Hobby Farm: Living Your Rural Dream for Pleasure and Profit* (BowTie Press, 2005).

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This article first appeared in the May/June 2008 issue of Hobby Farms magazine. Pick up a copy at your local newsstand or tack and feed store. [Click Here](#) to subscribe to HF.