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Heart River Ranch

Starting small, growing blessed

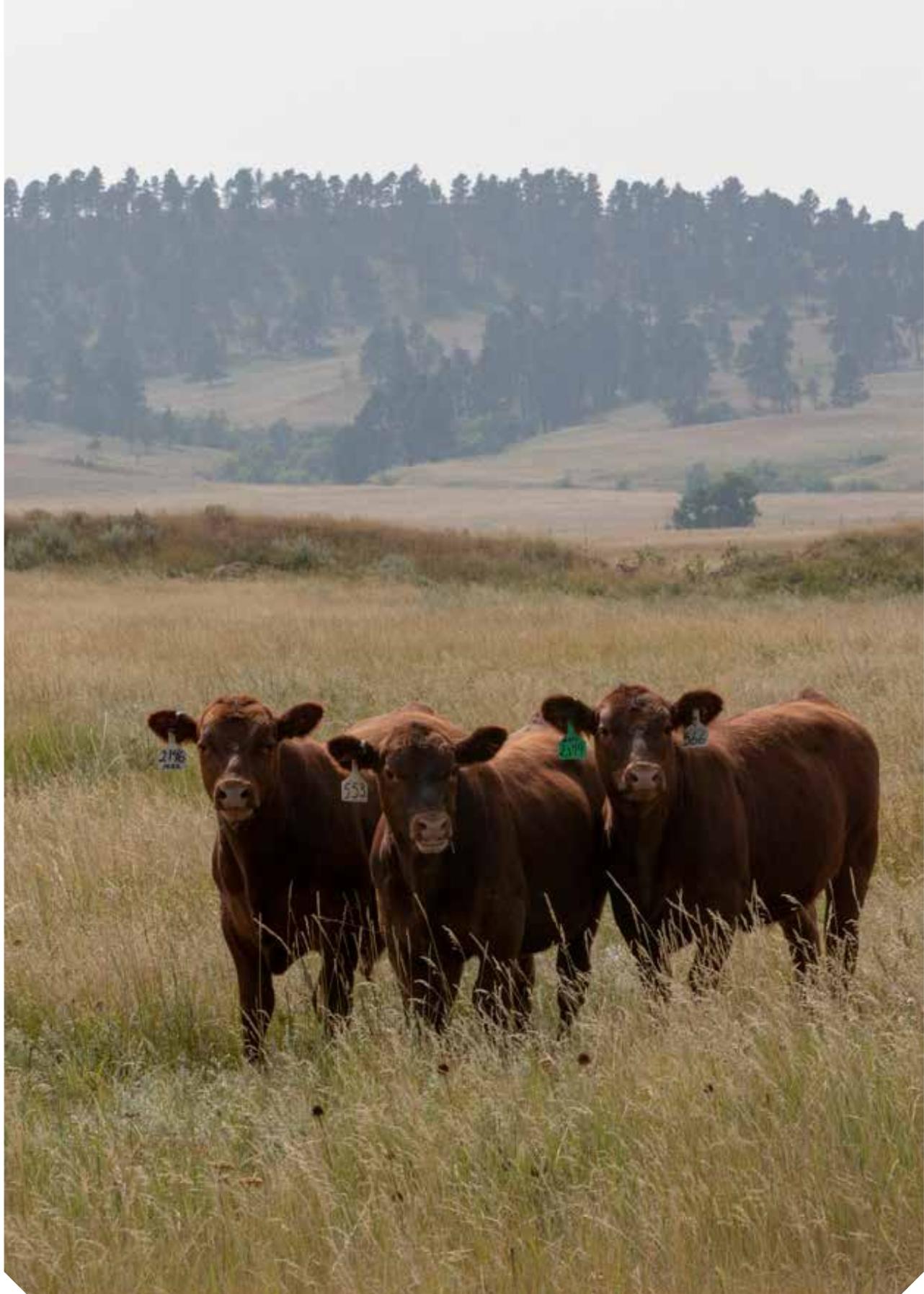
Working cattle at the Heart River Ranch is an all-hands-on-deck affair with family, neighbors and friends coming to help.

BY HANNAH GILL

Growth has been a common theme for Chuck and Annette Steffan of Belfield, North Dakota. When they first had to send one of their registered cows 450 miles away just to get embryos flushed, they immediately began thinking about how to create a facility closer to the ranch. In 2002, Heart River Genetics was born, only five years after the couple got started raising their own registered cattle.

Chuck and Annette had both grown up with families who raised commercial Red Angus cattle and the couple knew that eventually, they wanted to get into the seedstock Red Angus business as partners with Annette's parents, Bud and Ceceilia Obrigewitch.

"On either side of our families, the seedstock thing wasn't new either," Annette says. Both sides of the family had differing breeds of registered cattle around as the two were growing up.



Heart River Ranch bull calves are selected for moderate birth and adequate growth while maintaining a moderate frame size that will still meet industry needs for feeding and carcass purposes.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HEART RIVER ANGUS.

They started out by renting a 5-acre homestead and, with two used vehicles and the money they got from their wedding, Chuck and Annette fed about 100 head of feeder cattle, sheep and hogs. They were eventually able to put together enough money to be able to buy seedstock with Annette's parents. In 1997 and for the two following years, Chuck and Annette bought registered heifer calves from Scott and Jeff Holden, later adding 10 cows from Milk Creek Reds and shortly after, more cows from the Holdens' dispersion sale.

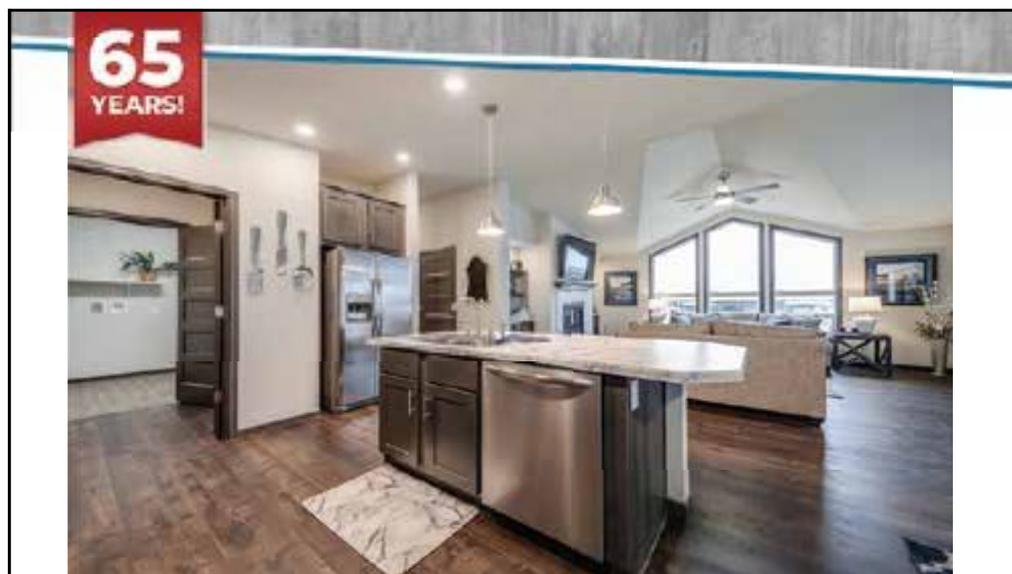
Then, they expanded the herd by leasing Mlk Crk Cub 722 and later Shoco Data 102, two bulls that helped put their herd on the map in the early years, along with flushing proven cows that they had experience with.

Annette had worked in the reproduction lab in college, helping to flush cows and swine, not knowing that a few short years later she would be heading up her own state-licensed reproduction lab. In the early years, they were flushing cattle

every two weeks, but after never having holidays off and struggling to find labor, they switched to flushing cattle about every 45 days. Annette manages a few different recip herds and they flush "enough cows to keep things going," according to Annette.

"It's still pretty intensive," she says. "We take in some outside cattle but not the way it used to be; we've slowed down quite a bit."

The ranch's registered herd has grown immensely with all of their hard work, not only in size but also in desired genetic traits. In the beginning, the Steffans wanted to focus on raising high-performing cattle. As they expedited their herd's genetics through use of embryo transfer and artificial insemination, they began to hone their genetics, creating a cow that could not only perform well, but also had a moderate, easy-fleshing frame with good feet and leg structure that could survive



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on limited feed resources. That type of cow has remained their goal through the years and they now run over around 250 head of registered mother cows, 75 head of heifers, about 100 commercial recipient cows and sell around 50 bulls each year.

Chuck and Annette assess their bull prospects for moderate birth weights, adequate growth and a moderate frame size that will still meet industry needs for feeding and carcass purposes, selecting the top sale prospects in August when they pre-condition. From there, the bulls start development at Heart River Genetics, then go on to the Open A development lot in January and stay there until



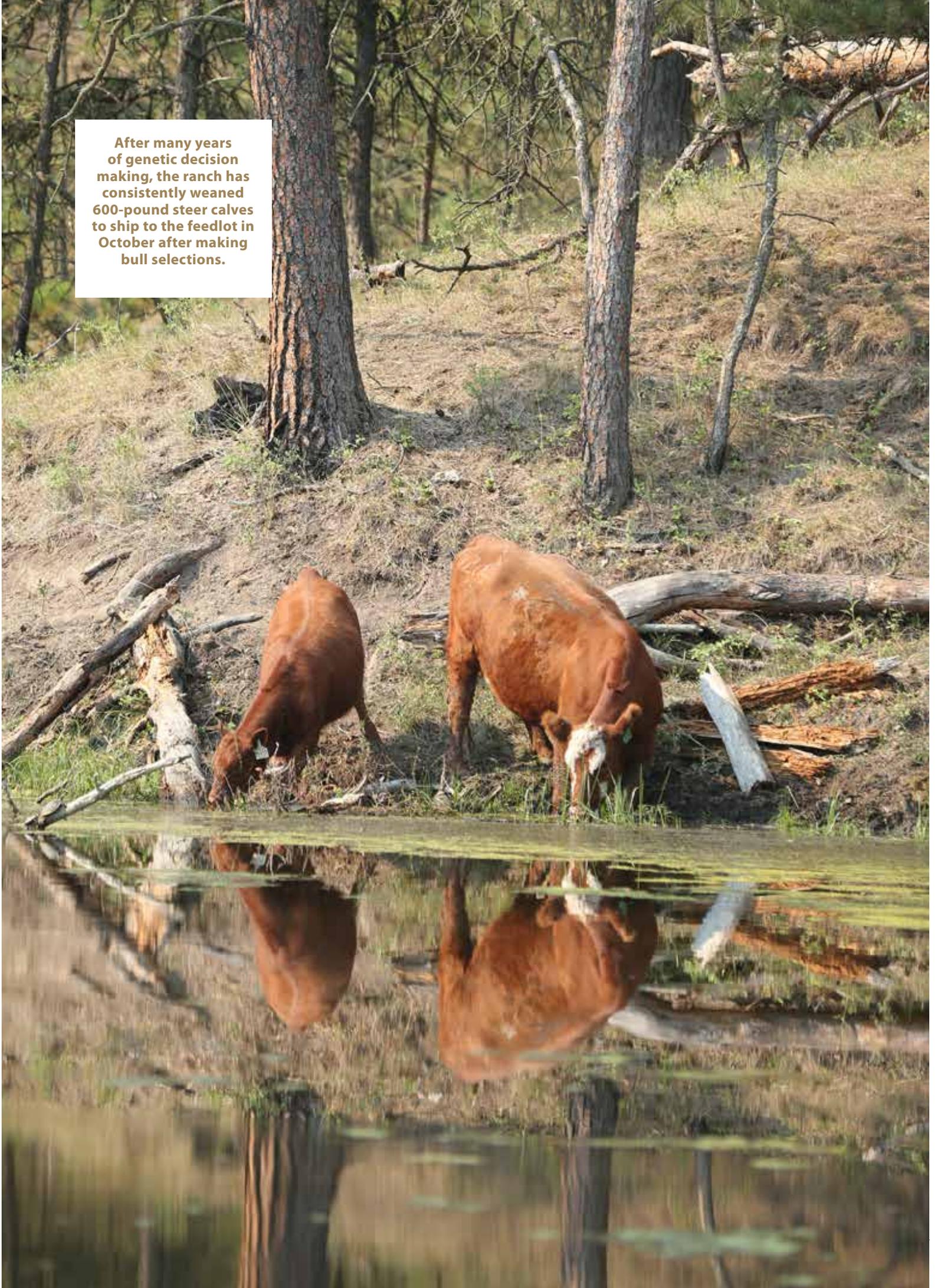
Annette and Chuck Steffan have been working on growing their seedstock business since 1997 when they started with 10 registered heifer calves.



While everyone works together at the ranch, Annette takes on the responsibility of videoing and photographing the bulls, preparing for the annual bull sale.



After many years of genetic decision making, the ranch has consistently weaned 600-pound steer calves to ship to the feedlot in October after making bull selections.



the sale, which is always the second Wednesday in March.

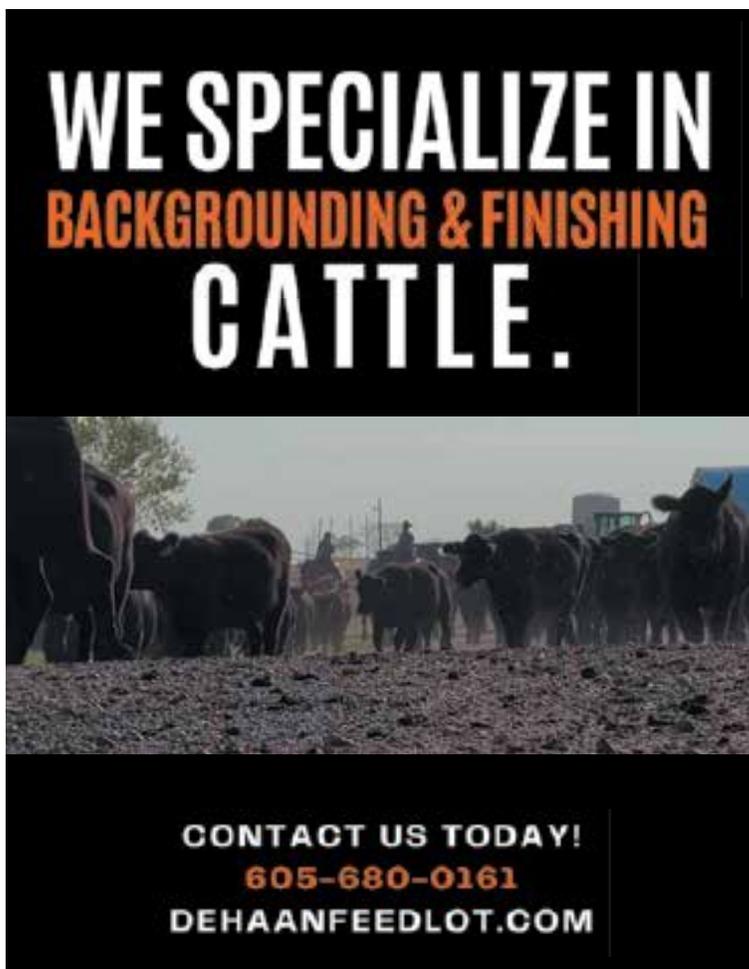
While the ranch started using 50K genomic testing on their bull and heifer regime, with bulls being tested to help customers make more informed decisions and heifers being tested to help make more accurate breeding decisions in the future, Chuck says that all the tools need to be used in balance, and that proven genetics are what has made the biggest difference in their herd.

“Technology is good, but what comes out on top in the computer or DNA lab isn’t going to always be the best choice in the pasture,” Chuck says. “We have used a lot of proven bulls in our genetic decisions because it can be too costly to venture

breeding decisions on what might appear to be a great EPD or DNA profile on an unproven bull.”

To that end, they have kept their selection for herd sires targeted on proven animals. If they find a bull that appears to be in sync with their maternal objectives, he is introduced into the herd through AI and the progeny is tested, and the results of this strategy seem to speak for themselves.

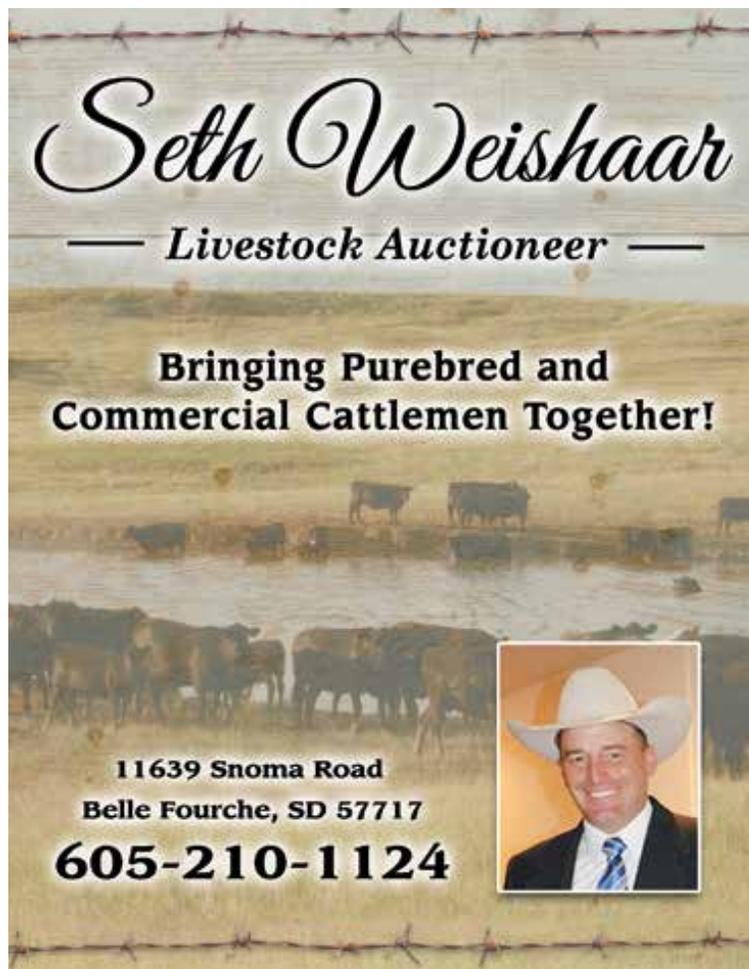
“We may not be the most cutting-edge program, but we find it rewarding to have customers with positive reports about the females our bulls are siring or the fact that they have been able to use bulls for several years and they have been able to stay in the herd,” Chuck says.



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But they have proven to be cutting-edge in their own rights, having been possibly the first bull sale in the area to switch to video and employ the internet.

“We sold private treaty for a number of years and it got to be too much, so we decided to go to a public auction,” Annette says. “Our first ones, we held at our place and we put photos up of the

bulls, but the bulls were outside in the pens behind the barn.”

Later, the sale partnered with Annette’s sister and brother-in-law at Open A Angus, who brought black Angus cattle to the table. After holding the sale in Medora for around 10 years, where bulls were penned outside of the town’s community center for customers to look them over, now the sale is held at the bull development facility that Open A Angus built south of Belfield.

In 2008, Heart River Ranch expanded into South Dakota with the lease of the Short Pines Ranch. A few years later, Ceceilia passed away and Chuck and Annette bought Bud’s half of the partnership. While still working Heart River Genetics, holding their bull sale and working to improve their own cow herd, Chuck and Annette also grew their family. Today, they are thrilled to now have their son and his family nearby running their own operation while still being around to help at Heart River, along with their other adult children who come to help with seasonal work, as well as Tim and Karen Stevenson, who manage operations at the Short Pines Ranch.

“The mindset that it takes a village applies here,” Chuck says. “We have been very blessed and have had a lot of help along the way, we couldn’t have done this without a lot of help.” ♡



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