

X-E Stock Ranch South Devon Cattle Thrive in Central Washington

By Jo Dexter

Cattlemen do not often just find themselves in the seedstock business. But Lee and Connie Engelhardt have become South Devon purebred breeders not because they set out to, but because South Devon cattle have shown them the way to a more profitable cattle operation.

Owned and operated by the Engelhardt family, the X-E Stock Ranch is located in the middle of Washington State near Moses Lake. Lee and Connie along with their boys; James 18, Lane 14 and Chance 12, make their living in the cattle business. The X-E Ranch environment resembles desert country with 5 inches of annual precipitation in a good year. Engelhardts' own 1,200 acres of which 720 acres are in center pivot irrigated pastures and hay fields.

The X-E brand has been in use since 1947 when Lee's dad started in the cattle business near Cedonia, Washington. In 1984 Lee and Connie moved the X-E Stock Ranch operation to Moses Lake where they currently run 350-400 head of registered and commercial South Devon cows. They raise over 1,500 ton of hay each year to winter their cowherd. The X-E operation is a family one. The boys each have their individual interests on the ranch and help out. Connie and Lee are a team of 27 years, their friendship and dedication make the rest of the operation work.

Lee Engelhardt has been a cattleman all of his life. Growing up, he and his father raised Hereford and Black Baldy cows. Engelhardt attended Spokane Community College and has an associate degree in Animal Science. While attending college, he met Connie who holds associate degrees in Field and Crop Science, Greenhouse Management as well as Animal Science. They were married in 1984.

Why South Devon?

Engelhardts started out in the commercial cattle business with primarily Black Baldy cows and Simmental bulls as a terminal sire cross in a 3 breed rotation. Their herd had some problems which kept them looking for cattle that would perform better in the X-E ranch environment. "It gets very hot in our country," says Engelhardt "We were fighting sunburned udders and cancer eyes and knew we needed to find a breed that would put some pigment back in our cattle but would also perform well maternally and on the rail." Engelhardt wanted an English breed with continental characteristics. He researched cattle breeds and decided to try South Devon. In 1997, the X-E bought 100 head of percentage South Devon cows. Next they purchased 7 South Devon bulls from Ken Hille in Ritzville, Wa. "We were very pleased with the results of adding South Devon genetics to our herd. Not only did we fix our udder and cancer eye problem, our calf weaning weights increased--we were sold on South Devon," states Engelhardt. In 1999, the X-E bought SB8103, a herd sire bred by Showboat Cattle Company at the Midland Bull Test. "We still have many cows in our herd that go back to SB8103. He helped our cattle program out tremendously," says Engelhardt. Up until 1998 and 1999 the X-E were using South Devon in a breed-up program. Then Engelhardt purchased a small herd of 45 purebred South Devon cows.

A Seedstock Herd

South Devon cattle have worked so well at the X-E, Engelhardts have never looked back. Now the X-E Stock Ranch herd is 95% ¾ blood South Devon or better. They maintain registrations on 150 of their best cattle and continue to improve their herd. According to Engelhardt, "The key to profitability in the cattle business is matching your cattle to your ranch environment. We tried it the other way and it was a fight where we lost money and valuable time dealing with the problems associated with the wrong cow herd for our ranch."

It has been about 15 years since there has been a Black Angus bull on the X-E. The change to a solid red cowherd, has added benefits. X-E cattle now have more longevity. "I will match my South Devon

purebred cows against a Black Baldy cow any day,” states Engelhardt. He says many of their South Devon cows are staying in production until they are 14-15 years of age and that alone adds significant profitability to an operation. “When calving a large herd of cows with little help, good maternal traits are necessary. With South Devon you get exceptional maternal traits and the carcass traits come as an added bonus,” explains Engelhardt.

Making the Cut

Engelhardt manages the X-E somewhat scientifically. There is an old saying that “you cannot manage what you cannot measure”. Engelhardt weighs the fed hay bales and he expects his cattle to winter on 26 lbs. of hay/day. In addition the cows are expected to wean calves that are 55-60% of their mature body weight. “Our ideal cow is 1,150-1,200 lbs. The more calf she produces with less inputs or feed the better,” says Engelhardt. “I have fed many different breeds and crossbreeds of cattle. South Devon cattle maintain their condition and get by on less feed than any other breed I have managed.”

Calving season at the X-E starts the middle of February with the first calf heifers followed by the rest of the cowherd. All of the replacement heifers are synchronized and A.I.ed. “Our cattle are not pampered. We run our operation much like I always have-- as a commercial cattle ranch,” says Engelhardt. The X-E has 14 breeding pastures where cattle are sorted and placed 30 head or less to a bull. Bulls are out 60-65 days and everything left open is culled. Engelhardt has about 150 head of the registered cows that he will A.I. breed as planned matings.

In addition to a high level of performance, the X-E cattle are scrutinized at birth. Those with birth weights greater than 90lbs or less than 70lbs are planned culls. “We are breeding our cattle to have a bend in their growth curve with moderate birth weights, weaning weights above 600lbs, sound feet and legs as well as a docile temperament,” states Engelhardt. The X-E also often sends the feeder cattle from their commercial herd to a Nebraska feedyard where they are evaluated for feed efficiency and feedlot performance. Engelhardts’ retain ownership on their cattle in the feedyard when it is profitable and collect carcass data when it is available so they can determine the quality of the end product they are producing.

Herd Marketing

The proof of performance and productivity are in the profitability and sustainability of the X-E. “I am a cowman not a marketing professional,” claims Engelhardt. But, locally Engelhardt has developed a private treaty bull market where he sells 25-30 of his best bulls each year. He believes in building relationships with his customers and he stands by his word. X-E also participates in the Midland Bull Test. Engelhardt says, “I believe if you breed good cattle they sell themselves.” The seedstock business offers new opportunities and challenges for X-E. “We are still determining how much of our time and resources to dedicate to marketing our South Devons on a larger scale,” says Engelhardt.

Looking Ahead

In the future, the X-E plans to continue to improve the quality, productivity and functionality of their South Devon herd. “When it is all said and done, I hope to have developed an industry leading South Devon herd that is genetically sound and capable of supporting my grandchildren or another family,” states Engelhardt. “I believe the biggest benefits of South Devon cattle are their docility, heterosis and longevity.”

Will the X-E eventually have a 100% purebred South Devon cow herd? Engelhardt is not sure. However he feels strongly, that in order for a breed to survive there has to be genetically sound purebred herds available to help the cattle industry maintain a diverse genetic base. The X-E is focused on breeding cattle that perform well in their ranch environment with profitability. “We will stay with what works best on our ranch and stay away from industry trends,” explains Engelhardt. “The English F1 cow is a good start in the commercial cattle industry, but I believe a South Devon bull is needed to produce a superior crossbred calf”.