



# Carcass and Conformation, No Compromise

That's the mission statement for Oklahoma's Davis Angus.

Story & photos by **Katie Alexander**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**B**urns Flat may sound like scorched earth, but the name understates this west-central Oklahoma town. Oil, wheat and cattle support it. Cotton came and went, but may be on the way back.

Davis Angus is a couple miles east of here on County Road 1140, the family home brightened by flowers on the porch and warm smiles at the door.

Jim and Debbie Davis are the “JDD” in the registered-Angus farm’s prefix, but you might also find another D, Denton, inside enjoying one of his grandma’s chocolate chip cookies. His folks are another J, Jordan, and her husband, Nocona Cook.



This is the quintessential farmhouse, lined with pictures of family, rustic décor and trophies from Jordan’s enterprise of showing cattle. The smell of freshly baked cookies and a sense of home says this is a family that welcomes everyone with open arms.

They’ll tell you cotton once paid the bills and made them think about individual value, as cotton bales are priced one by one. There are no cotton fields now where Angus cattle graze on range and wheat pasture. The house, barn and pens are surrounded by pastureland.

The view has cattle on all sides and it goes on for miles to the skyline, broken only by

cedars that line fences and creek beds to offer shade in the hot summer days. In a year with timely rainfall like 2016, fall pastures support the herd with knee-high grass.

Cows are near their fall calving date, and some already have calves running and bucking. Farther out, the land is planted with wheat, which the pairs enjoy for a few weeks after calving. It’s that slice of heaven, backed by information and decades of focus on the carcass and beef quality.

## Herd focus

The Davis family began raising Angus cattle 40 years ago, says patriarch Jim. They started using artificial insemination (AI) 20 years ago to get ahead on genetics.

Debbie takes care of all the bookkeeping

**Above:** From left are Nocona and Jordon Cook, their son Denton on the shoulders of his grandpa Jim, with Debbie Davis. The family believes in the whole program: Getting feedyard and packer data leads to better breeding decisions, and it all requires excellent health. Their efforts are sometimes complicated by having herds in both Oklahoma and in Green Forest, Ark.

while Jordan is “management trainee,” as Jim puts it.

They embrace the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand target, owing to the brand’s Value Discovery Project in the late 1980s.

“I was all in for that,” says Jim. “I enrolled three head of steers in that program and met a truck in the parking lot of the local co-op at 3 o’clock in the morning and loaded them up. My wife asked if I’d gone crazy, but the report we got back was really interesting.”

That was the first time the Davises had the opportunity to find out the kind of cattle they were actually producing.

“I figured out real quick it’s not something the eyeball can predict, what those cattle are really worth,” Jim says.

“With Jordan in the Oklahoma Junior Cattlemen’s Association, we always fed a few head in the Oklahoma State University steer feedout,” he says. “We fed cattle on the farm and sold them locally for whatever the news report said the carcass price was. When corn got close to \$6, it was \$8 here. I told Debbie we were selling them at a loss.”

They decided to do something different.

“I came in at lunch, and she was just as happy as she could be,” he says. “We had maybe 20 calves, it wasn’t very many, and she found a place that would take them, Buffalo Feeders, so the next day or two we loaded the little rascals up and away we go.

“That group of calves in the \$6-corn era going into 2008 actually made money,” Jim continues. “The average calf at Buffalo was losing something like \$100 a head, according to Tom [Fanning]. Our calves fed \$150 cheaper than the average, with a conversion of 5.7 or something, almost a pound below the yard average.”

They went 100% Choice and 50% CAB, which was a big milestone for the Davis family.

It harkened back to cotton farming, with sales by the individual bale. They don’t raise cotton now, but the lesson stuck: If anyone does a better job of raising cattle, they should get paid more for it.

“If you do things right, you get more money for what you produce,” Jim says. “It’s a way of putting a brand name on what you’re selling. CAB allows us to access our branded program through the packer grid.”

The Davises believe in the power of the premium brand to where they feature a *Targeting the Brand* logo prominently in their annual March production sale book.

### The whole program

The family believes in the whole program: Getting feedyard and packer data leads to better breeding decisions, and it all requires excellent health. Their efforts are sometimes complicated by having herds in both Oklahoma and in Green Forest, Ark.



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When the drought became severe in 2011, Jordan says they noted friends were shipping cattle to other states for the summer. The Davises looked farther afield.

“At one point it was so dry we couldn’t bring heifers home, so we sold most of them to a cattle operation in Russia,” she says.

When she and Nocona got more involved in 2013, they looked for a nearby relief valve and found it in 2014, sending 120 cows to Duane Swofford in Arkansas.

“It doesn’t matter if they get sick here or there or at the feedyard, that CAB hoop is a little high to jump through,” says Jim. “Once they have been pulled and doctored or actually got sick, unless they just bounced right back, it is really hard for them to perform at the level needed to make CAB.”

Buffalo Feeders manager Tom Fanning says his crew checks each animal to make sure they are healthy.

“One of the things we do, not only for the Davises but for all customers, is to reduce

the amount of antibiotics that we need to feed and increase the natural benefits of probiotics,” Fanning says.

The Davises buy back some cattle from customers to fill a pen at Buffalo, but most are their own steers that didn’t make the cut to be sold as bulls.

“They care about what they are trying to produce — the best set of bulls possible to put out into the industry for their customers,” Fanning says. “Which in turn creates the progeny that eventually come to the feedyard. It is just a blessing to be able to be a part in this industry and work with people like the Davises.”

Starting AI in 1995 meant Davis breeding stock all featured expected progeny differences (EPDs) by 1999. That lit a fire under the carcass side, Jim says, and the focus continues to this day, but daughter Jordan played a wild card about then: She wanted to show some of the calves they were raising.

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### Show experience

“Jordan spent a lot of time with me in the

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winter feeding cows, and one day she said, 'Dad, can I show one of these cows?' and I said, 'Sure, why not?' Jim remembers.

"We decided to go to Lawton in 2000 for the Wichita Mountains Classic in November," he says. "An FFA member that had been helping us got to be pretty decent at fitting and showed me a few tricks with the spray can. So we got the heifers trimmed up and went to work on them.

"We go down there and things weren't really working out," he says. "I thought the more of the stuff you put on the heifers, the better it was — everybody else is using it. Anyway, we were last that year, and I think the judge had a problem. The heifer was definitely the best out there, tail glued to the leg and all."

The next year, after going to official show cattle camps at Leedy and Prague, Okla., the Davises won the Lawton show with the same heifer.

"We won the Way Out West show in Denver in 2005 with a cow that had a set of twins, which was the National Angus Show that year," Jim says. "Now we just need a feedlot pen to go 100% CAB."

Jordan says it's come around to where she and Debbie have the show calf program and her dad gets to have the carcass program, but it's all one package.

"We have a show heifer out there that will raise the carcass cattle, but also raise the show cattle. That keeps everyone happy," she says. "It's a win-win situation."

Functional cattle rule in that situation. If a heifer or cow has a hard time raising a calf, it doesn't stay. Every female in the herd must be able to "lay down and have a calf."

"The cow that won the Way out West



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show, Lucy, had her twins and raised both of them with no problems," Debbie says. "We try to be very selective and have functional cattle; that's very important to us."

With almost 400 cows calving at various times, the Davis family uses a freeze brand to identify calves, applied before weaning.

That's only the edge of modern technology the family brings to bear on Angus cattle these days.

"We did not have the technology before to target what we need and what we want to produce," Jim says. "The communication between the feedyard and the CAB people and the bull producers, I think that is key and

unlocking technology that we are developing now to produce this more efficient animal."

Last year, the Davises had two of the top three Angus bulls ranked for feed efficiency in the Green Springs Bull Test at Nevada, Mo.

The family plans to keep up the feedyard and carcass side of production while still producing cattle uniform enough for the showing.

"We have fun," Jim says. "It's not easy, though. If it was easy, everybody would be doing it."

**AJ**

**Editor's Note:** Katie Alexander is an intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.