

Urban Cattle Ranchers

Colorado breeders face challenges from encroaching subdivisions and high-priced land.

By Dan Rieder



Cows and calves on irrigated pasture at the foot of the famed Colorado Front Range.



Reserve Champion Pen of three percentage Simmental, left to right: Rod Ahlberg, Ben Brown, Jess Clowser, Cashley Ahlberg, judge Roger Allen, Vicky Ahlberg, Rex Allen.

Ahlberg Cattle, owned and operated by Rod and Vicky Ahlberg and their daughter, Cashley, maintains a thriving 25-head cowherd, despite the pressure of a rapidly growing population. Located in Longmont, less than 30 miles north of the Denver metropolitan area, they have felt the effects of a land-inflating building boom, heavy traffic flow, and other impacts of increased population.

Yet, they remain undaunted, piecing together scattered parcels of grazing land surrounded on several sides by subdivisions, while making steady progress with a breeding program designed to produce quality breeding stock.

“Out of consideration for our neighbors, we try to minimize impacts, including the noise of bawling calves during weaning,” Vicky says. “Rod handles our public relations and tries to talk to our neighbors, building relationships as a preemptive way to avoid conflicts. He’s really good at that.”

Rod was born and raised in Longmont, a once-sleepy small town that has now morphed into a full-blown, bustling city of 100,000. Indeed, the I-25 corridor from north of Fort Collins is built-up and heavily populated south through Loveland, Denver, Parker and Castle Rock all the way to Colorado Springs, a distance of more than 150 miles.

Following high school, Rod landed in Lamar, located in southeastern Colorado, and went to work for E. S. Irwin and Associates, a research and development facility. “We tested feed additives for Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval before those products were released to the open market,” he explained. “We also had a commercial feedlot facility and that’s where I spent most of my time.”

In his spare time, he enjoyed team roping, and that’s where he met Vicky. A Canadian native who grew up on a commercial cattle ranch, she had accepted a rodeo scholarship to Lamar Community College. They became acquainted during one of their roping events and eventually married in 1983.

After his 10-year stint in Lamar, Rod and his new wife migrated back to Longmont, where he entered the family business, Ahlberg Funeral Chapel. “I was raised in this business, assisting my dad whenever he needed help,” Rod says. “But I worked more for local farmers than I did for my dad as a teenager, and always enjoyed agriculture and livestock.”

Today, six family members, including Vicky, comprise the mortuary staff. Following their move to Longmont, she had worked for Colorado Animal Health, selling veterinary supplies. “After 10 years in that line of work, the mortuary business had grown so much that they needed a full time bookkeeper, so I became a part of the family business,” she said.

After Cashley was born in 1989, Rod and Vicky exposed her to the cattle business and rodeo. “We made biannual trips to my folks’ ranch in Alberta and she always enjoyed that. So, we got her started with bucket calves, 4-H, and junior rodeos as soon as she was old enough,” Vicky commented.

“We continued to rodeo quite a bit, but when Cashley was 12 she told her dad that ‘I don’t want to do any more rodeoing, I just want to show steers.’ That’s basically what led us to our own little cowherd. We believe in doing things as a family, so we sold our horses and replaced them with cows and calves, since that’s where her interests were,” she continued.

Cashley is now a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. “After high school, I attended North-eastern Junior College in Sterling, earning an Associate Degree in Animal Science and was on the judging team there,” she reports. “From there, I enrolled at UNL and became part of their Livestock Judging and Meat Animal Evaluation teams.” She earned High Individual Overall honors at the 2012 National Collegiate Meat Animal Evaluation Contest.

She is currently working on her Master’s Degree in Breeding and Genetics under Dr. Matt Spangler and spent this summer in Lincoln on an assistantship that involves some teaching and working on her thesis which is focusing on Across-Breed Adjustments for Calving Ease. Earlier, she worked on a study involving fatty acids and double-muscling in cattle.

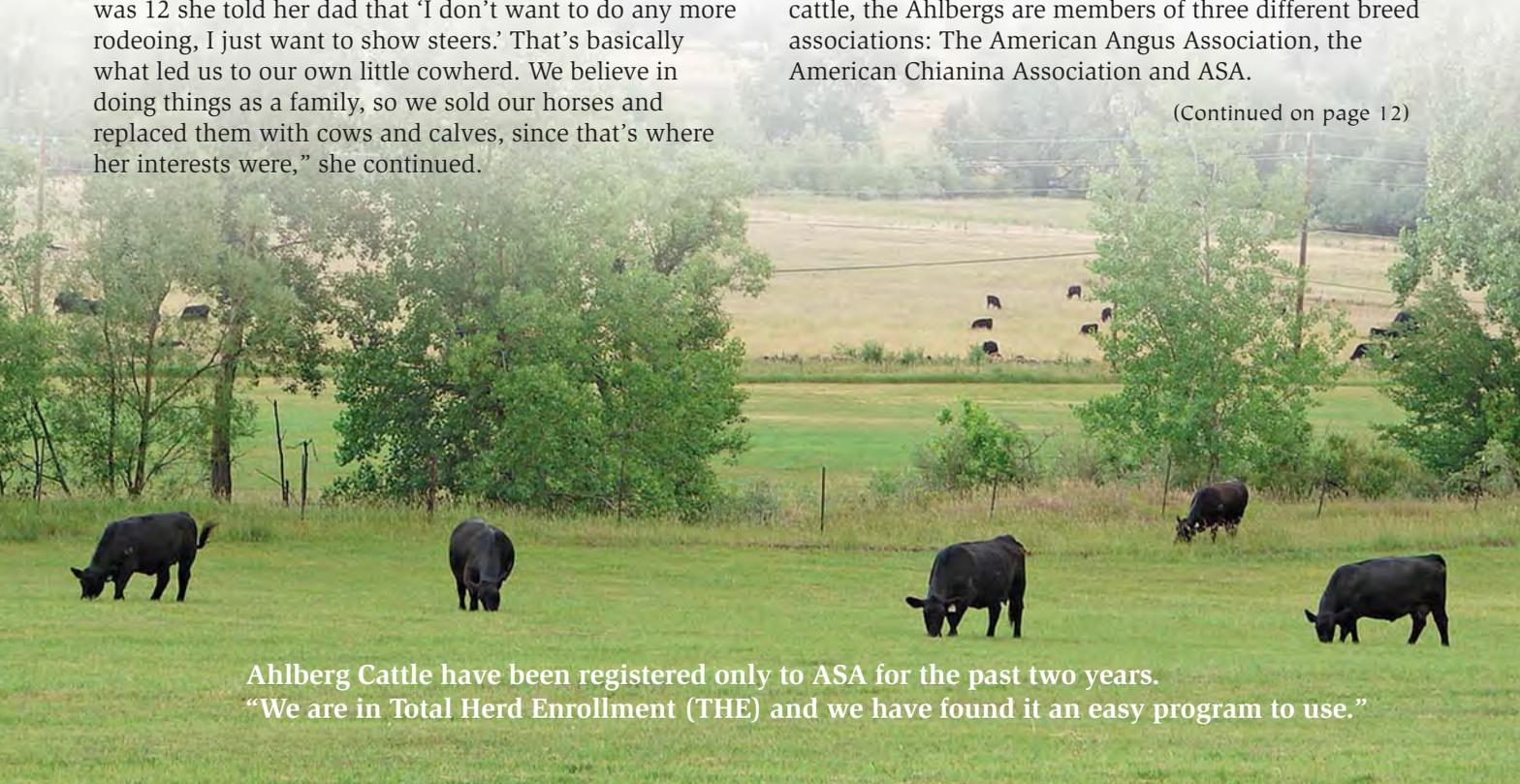
Cashley is contemplating going on for a Ph.D. in breeding and genetics. “I definitely want a career somewhere in the cattle industry,” she added.

The Ahlberg cowherd is a mix of Simmental and Angus genetics. After establishing an Angus base, they turned a chance meeting with Doug Smith of Silver Towne Farms, Winchester, Indiana, into a Simmental acquisition. “Cashley had been down in the yards at the National Western and said that she had seen a really nice bull,” Rod says. “So we went down to their pen, met Doug and his family, and ended up buying the bull. The next year, we went to their sale and bought some heifers, both open and bred.”

Rod indicated that they’re attempting to fill a market niche. “We have purebreds for those people who prefer purebreds and we have SimAngus™ for those who want composites. The SimAngus has been very good to us, especially for the heifers, which are in great demand.”

In response to Cashley’s fervent interest in showing cattle, the Ahlbergs are members of three different breed associations: The American Angus Association, the American Chianina Association and ASA.

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“After a family discussion a few years ago, we said that we wanted cattle that were marketable, a breed association that had its own show, and we wanted an outstanding state association,” Vicky said. “Through the process of elimination, we settled on Simmental. We’ve had a great experience with both ASA and the Colorado Simmental Association (CSA) — working with both of them has been just super.”

Cattle have been registered only to ASA for the past two years. “We are in Total Herd Enrollment (THE) and we have found it an easy program to use. Cashley handles our on-line work, report calving and weaning weights and other data,” Vicky said. “With today’s technology, she can process and report our records even when she’s away at school.”

She also has praise for the CSA. “It’s a good working group — going out of their way to help new members and they’re strong for the kids’ program.”

Vicky serves as beef superintendent for the Boulder County Fair, and along with Rod, serves on the sale committee that lines up buyers for the fair’s market animals.

This past January, the Ahlbergs accomplished a major jump in raising the recognition and profile of their genetics. They entered a pen of three percentage heifers in the National Western Pen Show and walked off with reserve honors in that category.

Then, as guest consigners, those three outstanding heifers were sent to the prestigious Wild, Wild West Sale, where they exceeded all expectations, topping the sale, including the high-selling animal.

“Now, we’re full-blown members of the Wild, Wild West Sale, along with Altenburg Super Baldy Ranch of Fort Collins; Bridle Bit Simmentals, of Walsh; and Campbell Simmentals, Ignacio,” Rod says with obvious enthusiasm. “We’re extremely pleased with the pen show and sale results and are looking forward to 2014.” The 2014 Sale will be held on Tuesday, January 21, at the Adams County Fairgrounds in Brighton.

“Herd expansion for us is almost out of the question because of the urban sprawl. Agricultural land is unaffordable,” Vicky reiterated. “We’re pleased with what we’ve been able to accomplish as a family, with our breeding program.” ♦

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