

Open Gate ranch offers Simmental genetics for the commercial breeder

BY MORGAN ROSE

The Prairie Star.

FAIRFIELD, Mont. – Just outside of Great Falls, in the heart of Montana’s ag country, somebody left the gate open, at least that is how the story goes. The Richert family has been raising Simmental cattle for the past three generations and although they laugh together about their unique ranch name, the family remain proud of their generational operation and the cattle they have come to develop.

It was patriarch, Stew Schwartz, that started this cattle family. He began putting a cow outfit together in the 1960’s. Hereford and Angus cattle dominated the area at the time but it didn’t take long for Stew to start looking at the benefits of Simmental genetics.

“Grandad heard about the continental deal and he started Al’ing to some Simmentals early on. He was one of the early ones that started cross-breeding and he put himself together a purebred herd through the 70’s and early 80’s,” Explained Stew’s granddaughter and third generation rancher, Julie Taylor.

Back in those days, Stew was breeding to very traditional looking Simmental with their red and white painted bodies, over the years the breed has evolved. In the 80’s, Stew started to cross Simmental cattle with prime Angus bulls and worked hard to develop a base of black mother cows. Today, Open Gate Simmental offers solid black and a few red hided bulls.

Julie’s dad, Mike, came on board with the operation in the 70’s when he began working for Stew. The two worked side by side to develop a herd of cattle that could produce bulls for the commercial man. Mike saw early on the heterosis achieved by injecting Simmental genetics into a herd offered many economical advantages for cattle producers.

Today, Open Gate is run by Mike, his wife Kim and their children, daughters Julie, Micah and Lisle and sons Dustin and Brandon. With a base herd of about 750 mother cows, Open Gate offers between 85 and 100 yearling Simmental and Sim-Angus bulls every year during their spring sale.

First and foremost, the Richert family works to build a good cow so their focus on maternal qualities really shines through in their bull calves. Micah emphasizes the ranch’s goal is to provide producers with bulls that they can keep replacement heifers out of.

“We really like to focus on offering a crossbred animal to commercial cattlemen that is going to make a significant difference with their first generation of offspring,” Julie echoed.

The Open Gate spring bull sale sees about 85% repeat buyers and the majority of them are from predominantly Black Angus commercial operations. Open Gate offers bulls that are anywhere from one quarter Simmental all the way to purebred so buyers can truly select how much hybrid vigor they want to add to their herd back home.

Yes, the yearly bull sale is a huge part of the Open Gate bottom line but the family points out that their feeder calves are still the operation’s bread and butter. Having a foot in both the purebred and commercial sides of the cattle industry has given the Richert family a unique perspective.

“We sell several pot-loads of feeder calves ourselves so we see how they perform and can have confidence in our own program. Pounds is what pays and that is what the rancher wants. We can always adjust our own breeding to make sure it pencils out in the real world,” Micah said.

Open Gate began as a family operation and it remains that way to this day. Mike and Kim’s children all received a heifer when they started school, and from there they have been able to grow and develop their own herds within Open Gate. This is a tradition Julie and Dustin have continued with their own children. Open Gate even promotes their annual sale as a family and community centric event, which is held the third Tuesday in March at the historic Broken O Ranch.

Focusing on disposition, adaptability and genetics that create pounds across the scale, Open Gate has developed a cow herd that raises bull calves for the beef man.

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CUTLINE FOR PHOTO 1: It is a family affair on the Open Gate Ranch, even when it comes to working cows.