



The family behind Bar 69 Angus —from left Callie and Dillion, Ellie, Craig, Deb, Chase and Ashton, Ivy, Cora.  
PHOTO BY ME PIX IMAGES.



Kukuchka Bar 69 Angus

*South Dakota*

BY SENTEL SCHREIDER

The winter of 1986, Craig and Deb Kukuchka's Black Angus cows stepped foot onto the frozen gumbo sod of their new home 25 miles north of Belle Fourche, South Dakota.

In the midst of the farm crisis of the 1980s, the Kukuchkas were in a rush to find a ranch to lease. They found the Widdoss place just in time. "The last cow stepped off the semi and calved right there below the loading chute," Craig says.

The wide open and often merciless landscape of northern Butte County was a stark contrast to their origins in Montana. At first Craig stayed in a sheep wagon and calved out the cows as Deb made her way to South Dakota with their infant son,



The Kukuchkas balance low birthweights with high weaning weights. Photo shows bull calves before weaning in 2022.  
PHOTOS BY DEB KUKUCHKA.



ABOVE: Chase and Craig at the Bar 69 Angus production sale.

RIGHT: Craig and Deb pose for a photo before the bull sale.



Chase. Their first few months were reminiscent of a Laura Ingalls Wilder novel. "The house was uninhabitable. The electricity didn't work, fences were down, and there was no water. We hauled jugs of water from town. I warmed water on the stove to give Chase a bath," Deb says. "We met our closest neighbors, Dan and Cindy Conner, when they showed up on a four-wheeler with cookies and a big container of water. We later met the rest of our neighbors when they came to help us put out a fire on our place. And it's a good thing. The fire truck got lost on the way," she says. "It was probably the toughest year in ranching for us," Craig adds.

Luckily Deb and Craig were up to the challenge. Originally from Sheridan, Wyoming, Craig started selling his own Hereford bulls while still in high school. "I hated school," he says. "My dream was to have a 500 cow ranch." An ambitious 18-year-old, he moved to a remote ranch in Sumatra, Montana, after graduation to begin his lifelong career in the cattle business. Deb remembers first seeing Craig

when she dropped a bull off at his ranch with her dad, Bob Sitz. Deb chuckles thinking about their first conversation at the Sitz Ranch's annual bull sale in Harrison, Montana. "He said, 'I'll call you' and I thought 'yeah right!' But he did," Deb said. She quit teaching, married Craig, and added more irons to the Kukuchka ranch fire.

In Sumatra, Deb was still keeping records for her dad's purebred Angus cows plus her own herd of purebred Angus 250 miles away in Harrison, Montana. "I would travel back every so often to keep his records on the purebreds. It was a lot to handle," Deb told her dad her plate was too full with the cows so far away. About a week later, he "broke her plate" by hauling her 20 head of purebred Angus cows and her horse in a semi, to their home in Sumatra. These purebred Sitz Black Angus cows became the genetic base of their purebred herd today.



**ABOVE:** Cleanup Bull Sitz Conquest. The Kukuchkas select cleanup bulls from the Sitz Angus Ranch in Harrison, Montana.

**RIGHT:** Chase weighs a new calf for the records.

Converting the herd to purebred Angus just made sense. Craig had already been performance-testing his commercial cattle for years and was AIing Deb's purebreds. "We were either going to have to get serious with the purebreds or get out; so we went for it," Craig said. "Little by little we phased out our commercial cows."

By 2010, they had completely phased out their commercial herd and now maintain a herd of 300 purebred Angus cows. Deb recalls the first time she and Craig sold purebred bulls, "I marched down to Belle Fourche Livestock with registration papers in hand and we sold them at the auction in 1988. We still have customers from that first sale." The ranch soon established a reputation for bulls that work: low birth weights, high weaning weights, and longevity. But it's no guessing game: "We believe in the importance of hard data. From birth we maintain records on these bulls. In addition, we also DNA test for parentage and genetic EPDs."





Ellie helps her dad herd cattle in the summer time.



Callie and Dillion. Callie's husband Dillion works off the farm but helps out on the ranch whenever he can.

They also believe in handling livestock with as little stress as possible. "We work them on horseback, but they are also used to having kids and four-wheelers around. This makes a big difference in disposition."

Jesse Labree, a customer since 2011, attests to the mild disposition of the bulls he's bought for his heifers in Ekalaka: "Lots of bulls seem to get ornery as they get older, I haven't noticed that with Kukuchka bulls. We've been very satisfied."

## Investing in infrastructure

After a few harsh winters on the ranch north of Belle Fourche, Craig knew right away he would need a source of homegrown feed and a place with more storm protection for calving. "If I was going to buy a farm, I wanted a good one," he said. In 1993, Craig and Deb purchased a farm along highway 212 between Belle Fourche and Newell. With irrigation from the Belle Fourche River and Orman Dam, the Kukuchkas are able to supply their own hay and grain. The farm also provides infrastructure for Deb's extensive and precise record keeping during calving and enables the Kukuchkas to shed-lamb 1,000 Targhee ewes. They believe the sheep are key to grassland conservation. "We realized that if we ran both cows and sheep, we could almost double the carrying capacity of our grass," Deb said.

However, the Kukuchkas run their cattle on the gumbo up north most of the year. "We're able to graze quite a bit through the winter. Hopefully at least until January," says Craig.

"Craig feeds the bull calves at a growing ration – then their growth is pretty much on their genetics," says Deb. This way, the bulls are acclimated to the range conditions their customers run in. "We only bring the livestock to the farm for calving and lambing. Chandy Olson ultrasounds and tells us when they're going to calve. We'll sort them by calving date and just bring them home in groups."

After calving in March, the pairs are taken to the north ranch until weaning in late September. The Kukuchkas take the top half of their bull calves based on phenotype and ratios. "We weigh them, and figure out the ratio based on their weaning weight and birth weights." The steers are sold every year by private treaty. Last October the steer calves weighed an average of 678 pounds.

### The next generation steps up to ensure a future of quality Angus

Craig and Deb are fortunate to have their son, Chase and daughter Callie back on the ranch. "It's wonderful having Chase and Callie on the place," says Deb, "Callie and Chase do all the AI. I'll help heat detect but they can do it all."

"They both have different abilities," says Craig, "Chase can fix anything, Callie likes the sheep and is really good at reading livestock. But both really love raising purebred Angus."

Steeped in ranch culture, Chase and Callie both knew they always wanted to be involved in the production side of agriculture. After a successful college rodeo career at National American University and Dickinson State, Chase worked in the oil fields and rode saddle broncs in the PRCA for ten years. "I loved it, but I wanted my daughter Ellie to experience the kind of childhood I had growing up." Chase and his wife Ashton moved to Belle Fourche in 2010 and have three daughters: Ellie (12), Cora (4), and

Ivy, (1). "Ellie helps out on the ranch, especially in the lambing barn."

Similarly, Callie says the sheep operation was a good introduction into the cattle business. "I pulled my first lamb when I was five years old. I've probably pulled a thousand of them since then. I think the sheep gave me the ability to enter the calving barn when I got older. A lot of that knowledge crosses over."

Callie graduated from South Dakota State University with degrees in animal science and ag business in 2019, bringing her husband Dillon into the fold when they married in 2020. Callie couldn't imagine a life apart from agriculture, "I really like the variety. I truly enjoy working cattle and sheep horseback and I do a lot of the lambing and calving. I like the contact with the animals as well as our customers. I was gone four years for college so I'm enjoying building back relationships with our bull customers."



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Callie also started selling her own rams two years ago. "I was trying to think of ways to bring in more income without causing a big rift in operation. People would ask if we sold rams, so a couple years ago I held back some lambs. It's going well. Next year I'll keep a few more bucks" she says.

The Kukuchkas hire seasonal help to manage their intense schedule. They have employed foreign exchange workers through the program, "Communicating for Agriculture" for years. "We've had over 40 different exchange students from over 12 different countries in Africa, Europe, and South America. They arrive right before calving in March

and stay until October," says Deb, who was a foreign exchange worker herself in Germany during college.

Callie speaks highly of the program. "Growing up, it was a unique opportunity to experience different cultures in a rural area." In addition, the ranch has hosted college interns from South Dakota State University and through the American Angus Association. "We've been really lucky to have help from local kids too," Craig says. Deb has been a 4-H leader for over 30 years, and has found that many of the 4-H kids enjoy the everyday adventures of working on the ranch.



Deb says running both sheep and cattle on rotation improves plant diversity.

## Staying focused on the cow

The Kukuchkas sum up their ranch in one word: Diversified. "Between the farming, the sheep, and the cattle, we're sure kept on our toes," Deb laughs. "We don't really have an off season." But it's obvious the Kukuchkas put their cows first. "We build cows from the ground up," says Chase, focusing on good feet and legs, good udders, easy keeping. "What we're looking for are cows that will last for years in a customer's herd."

Callie agrees, "Our focus is on the maternal side of things. Going forward we want to sell more bulls while maintaining what we already do – produce bulls that work for people."

Joe Gantz, a customer from Alva, Wyoming, keeps coming every year for that very reason. "Between my Dad and I, I think we've been to every sale since the Kukuchkas started selling bulls," Gantz says. "They're easy calving and grow fast too. We just love the cattle they make."

On April 22, the Kukuchkas will host their 34th annual bull sale at Belle Fourche Livestock, selling 70 purebred Angus bulls along with 50 registered replacement heifers. No bulls are sold before the sale date and online bidding can be made through DV Auction or by phone. The Kukuchka's also offer a \$50 repeat buyer credit and deliver within 200 miles.

Even though there's not much free time on the Bar 69 Ranch, the Kukuchkas wouldn't trade the life they've built. "You're independent. You work really long, hard hours but you pick those hours," says Deb. "It's definitely a challenge. But I think people were meant to be challenged. Plus there's always something to look forward to – from the excitement of watching that calf that you've AIed grow into something special, to little things like being outside in nature – sunrises, wildlife. We've had so many adventures. I feel like we've lived, and we are so blessed to do what we do and live where we live." ▶



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