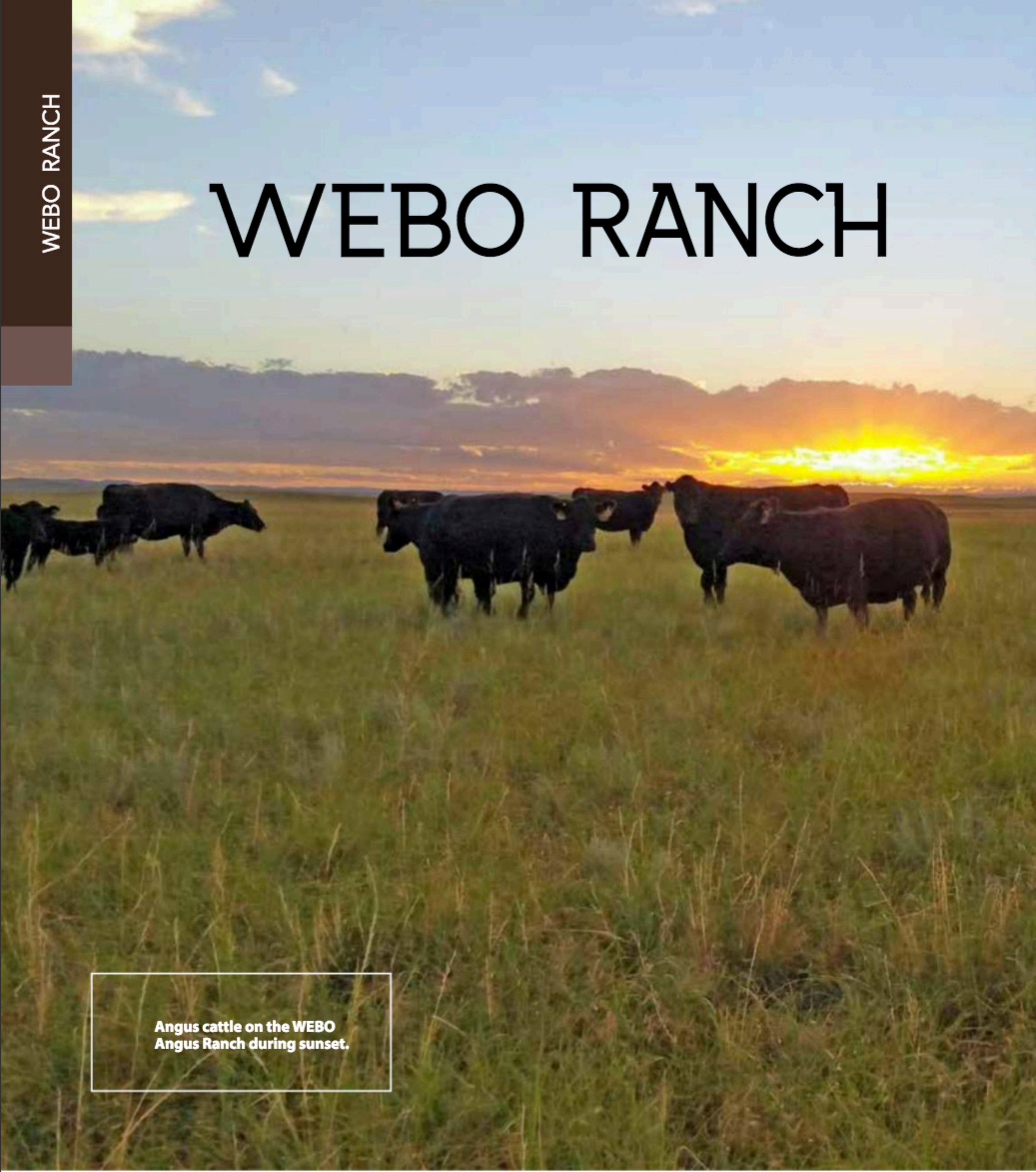
WEBO RANCH



Angus cattle on the WEBO Angus Ranch during sunset.

Sisters Odessa Mathias and Elly Wurdeman and Wurdeman's daughter Lainey move heifers home on the WEBO Angus Ranch.

PHOTOS BY ODESSA MATHIAS

BY RUTH NICOLAUS

The women on the WEBO Ranch know how to get the job done.

That's good, because there are no men around to do it.

When Buttons York was widowed in November of 2015, it was she and her daughter, Odessa Mathias, who had to make the decision: would they keep the ranch and the herd of registered Angus going, or sell?

Both women had plenty of experience with the cattle herd. York had bought the cattle in 2006 when she married Waldon. The cattle were paid for.

But the mechanics – and four pivots of hay– were not as easy to handle.

Odessa, a graduate of the University of Wyoming and a member of the University's livestock judging team, knew cattle and was experienced in working with them.

Odessa Mathias and her mother Buttons York took charge of the WEBO Angus Ranch after York's husband Waldon died nearly two years ago.

But baling hay was a problem. She had never run a baler till last summer, when she had to bale without Waldon's help.

A dear friend and neighbor, Kevin Baars, came to help after the women called him. He's helped in a variety of ways, as has Button's son-in-law, Neal Wurdeman, who is married to York's daughter and Odessa's sister Elly.

The women are making it, and are doing well at it.

They have about 300 head of Angus cattle and last year had their tenth annual bull sale. York does most of the paper work and makes the financial decisions. Mathias chooses bulls and makes many of the cattle decisions. Elly Wurdeman, who owns an insurance agency in Lusk, helps on the weekends.

Mathias is careful of "form and function" of the bulls, York said. With their bulls, the women work towards fertility and feed efficiency. They have "good country cattle," as York calls them, and

Elly Wurdeman and her daughter Lainey move heifers home. Lainey kept losing her gloves, so she wore them on her boots.

select for fertility. "None of us can afford open females or females that don't breed back early and have big calves."

They balance that with feed efficiency, using residual feed intake (RFI) data and working towards bulls who put on weight while eating less. "We think that puts money in our customers' pockets," York said. Their geographic area requires cattle to be feed-efficient. Many of their customers graze BLM ground and the cows have to "sustain themselves, get bred back, and wean an acceptable calf. And that acceptable calf has to go on to convert feed and gain three to four pounds a day when the feeder buys him."

One of the challenges York sees in the industry is profitability. Cow herds have been repopulated, she said, and Brazilian beef will be imported again. WEBO Angus Ranch knows their beef needs to be profitable not only for the rancher but for the feeder, taste great and be tender for the end consumer. York recounts a saying Waldon told her years ago: you

need to put as much performance and milk in your cows as your country will allow.

She's a big supporter of the Certified Angus Beef program, and she believes CAB's challenge is to get a bigger and better acceptance rate. "Us seed stock producers have to do a better job on our genetics so the commercial people's calves can hit the CAB target," she said. "That's where the premiums are going to be."

York would also like to see Country of Origin Labeling (COOL). People want to know where their food comes from, and she doesn't want the blame when someone has a less than enjoyable eating experience with American beef. "We have enough issues of our own in this country," she said. "I don't want to get a black eye from what someone else is doing in a different country."

One thing the women will start this year is PAP testing their cattle. A test for pulmonary artery pressure, also known as PAP, helps determine cattle that are most at risk for brisket disease, a disorder that causes the right side of the heart to quit functioning at high elevations. Brisket disease is most common in heavier cattle as they get closer to finish weight and the heart must work harder. Mathias believes their customers will want to know that, and "if we can't give them that information, they'll go somewhere else." They have a vision for their cattle and what their customers want. "Our customers are who keep us running, so we need to keep them in business as well."

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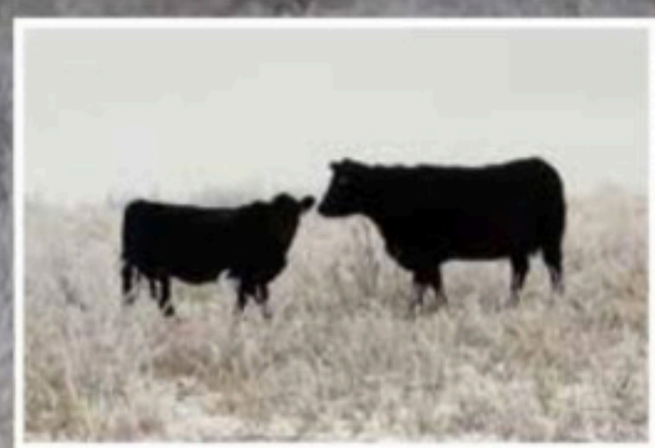

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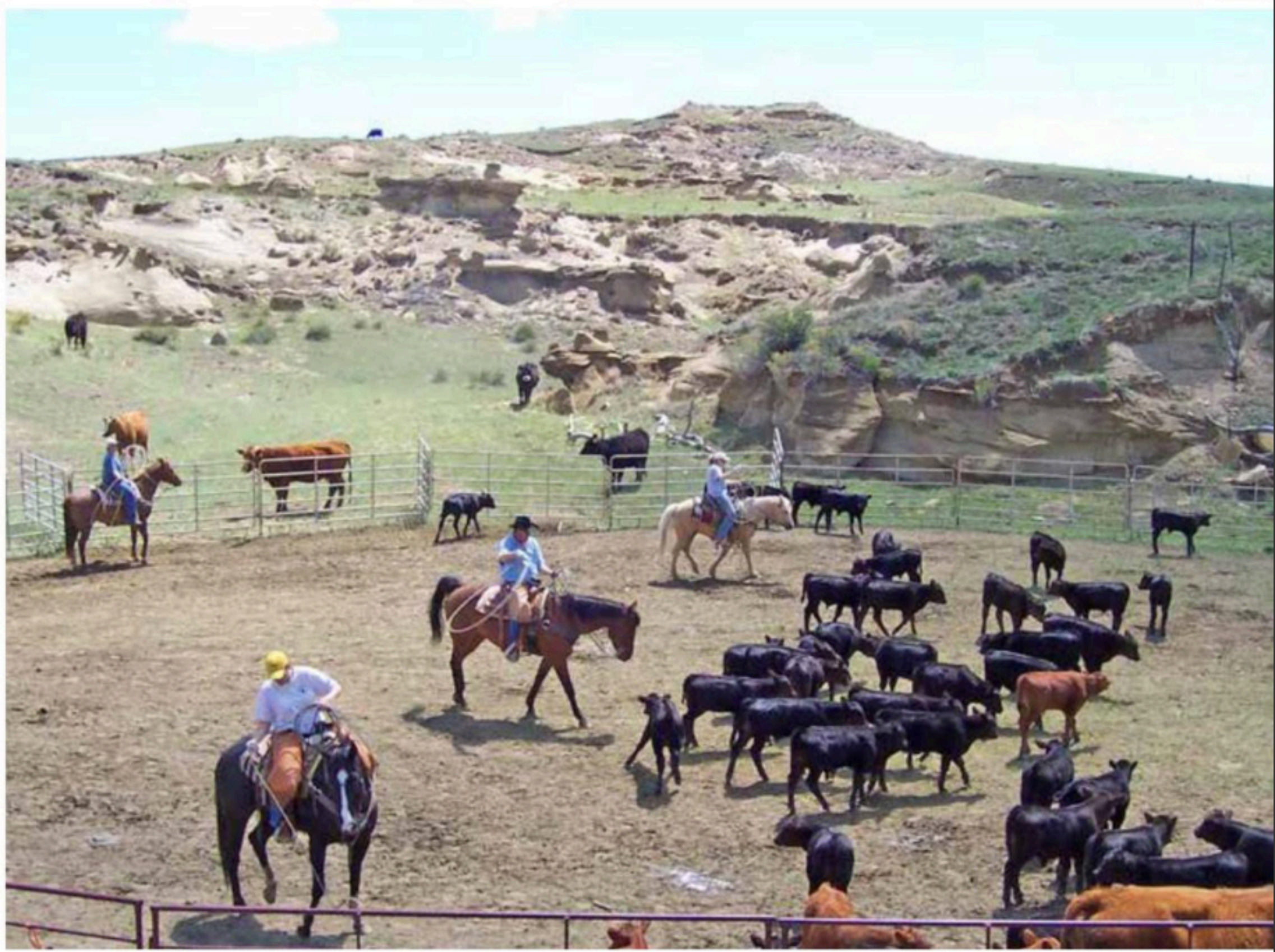


The WEBO Angus Ranch near Lusk, Wyo. has been in the Angus business for the past ten years.

There were many people who thought the WEBO ranch would fold after Waldon died. But the women kept it going. York's parents had instilled in her, in her youth, the characteristic of perseverance. She remembers her dad telling her, "Don't you ever use being a girl as an excuse. You're just as smart. You may not have as much muscle but you'll have to figure a way around it."

Last year, the women went to change a drive shaft on a pivot, and they couldn't. They called Neal, who came to help. The women make their own decisions but are willing to listen to advice and are not scared to ask for help. "When Odessa and I went to change (the drive shaft), we did not have enough power to get it changed, and that's a fact. Was it nice to have a good strong man to change it? Yes. It didn't bother my ego one bit," York said.

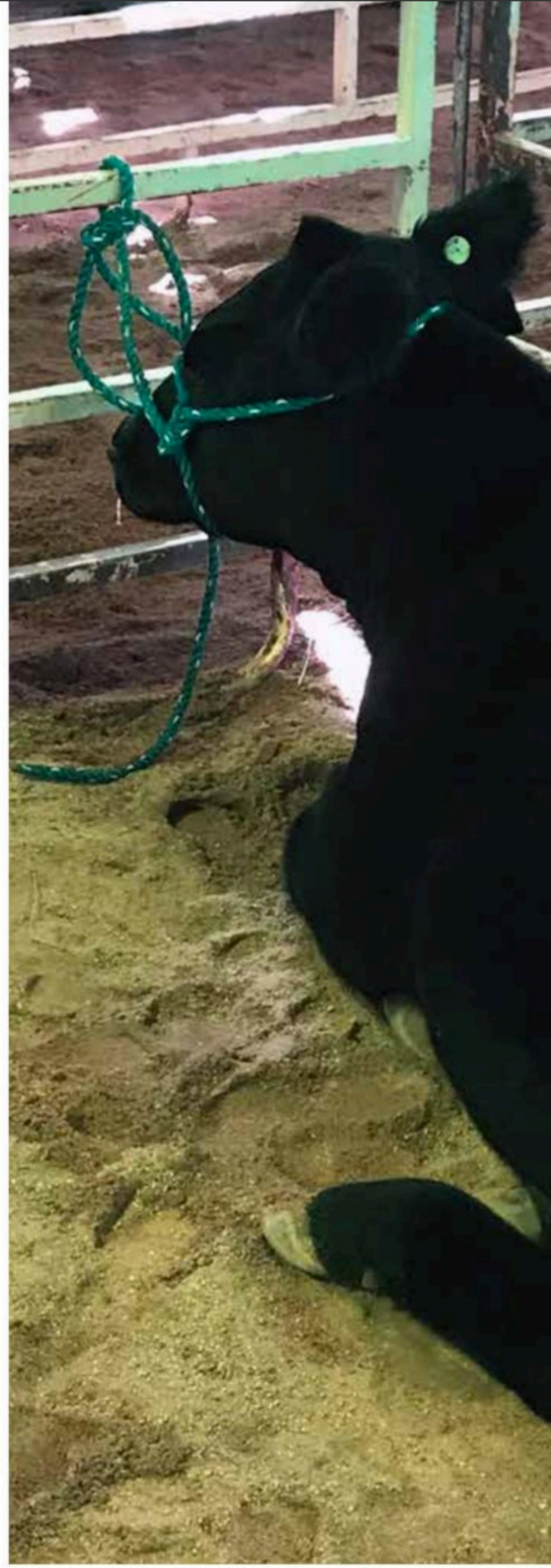
"You can't get by in this world without help," York said. "It would be foolish to

say we are doing it on our own, which we are not."

She has some advice for women who protest what they consider inequality between men and women. "Men think differently, and to me, that's a good thing. The women who want equal rights and stand on the street corners of New York City, come on out. We'll give you equal opportunity and see how you do."

York also has advice for ranch women who aren't involved in day to day activities. "The next time he's fixing fence or working on equipment and he needs your help, go with him, because you don't know when you're going to need to know how to do that."

The WEBO ranch gets its name from the first initials of Waldon, Elly, Buttons and Odessa. A third daughter, Megan Franzen, lives in Sundance with her husband Josh, and their two children. Elly and Neal Wurdeman have three children.



Lainey Wurdeman rests on an Angus heifer raised on the WEBO Angus Ranch.

Angus cattle on the WEBO Angus Ranch graze on a frosty winter morning.