

# Lasater — The Legend Lives On

*Tom spent his life developing a breed of beef animal that adapted to its environment.*

By Betty Jo Geiger

**L**ocated on the eastern plains of Colorado, the ranch might seem to some folks like the edge of the earth—or close to it. Pikes Peak floats on the western skyline like a giant ice cream sundae. The other three directions are a panorama of waving grass as far as the eye can see.

The only break in the landscape is the tiny town of Matheson, about a mile east with a population of less than 100. The cross still stands tall on top of the weathered church on the edge of town. A tractor, orange with rust, decorates the churchyard.

The small wrought-iron sign on the left-hand side of the road belies what a visitor is about to experience...The Lasater Ranch.

## The Breed

When Tom Lasater made his decision to leave Texas in 1949, few would have imagined he would bring such fame to his isolated country. That fame came from the Foundation Beefmaster herd he brought with him. Tom spent his life developing a breed of beef animal that adapted to its environment.

"The program today is very similar to the way it was developed 30 to 40 years ago," said Dale Lasater. "We still take the same position. We try to select cattle that fit the environment. We match the cattle to that environment—not the other way around."

Dale Lasater, Tom's son, is managing partner of the ranch.

"We simply eliminate the ones that don't fit," Dale said. "We are looking for range cattle that will do the best in the High Plains. The test of time is on the range. Therefore, the cattle in south Texas will be different, due to selection of the ones that work better for the land down there."

The Beefmaster breed is a composite of Shorthorn, Hereford and Brahman. The selection process is done according to disposition, fertility, weight, conformation, hardiness and milk production. One of the unusual principles of the herd is

the use of multiple sire breeding.

"We are seedstock producers and totally committed to efficiency," Dale said. "Many breeds will do well in the feedyard but many will not work on the range on the western plains."

Driving across the bull pasture of the Lasater Ranch, the massive animals get up, stretch and wander over to eat cake from Dale's hand. Often, they then stick their heads in the window of the pickup to see who else is along.

"We select cattle for gentleness," Dale said. "Buyers tell us they can tell our cattle by their disposition, even on the range. We sell any animal that does not fit. We cannot and will not make exceptions."

As you can tell, the system is very strict. Any animal that wanders away from the herd or a cow that loses her calf is gone, according to Dale. Cows that do not wean a calf are also sold...even if the calf died through no fault of the cow, such as a lightning strike.

## Gearing to the Industry

Proud to be producers of a lean prod-

uct, Beefmaster raisers rarely can put together enough numbers to put through a feeding program without getting lost in the crowd.

Dale's brother Laurie is working on that. He operates NewBeef Inc. along with Isa Cattle Co. out of San Angelo, Texas. NewBeef, a wholly-owned subsidiary, feeds out the steer progeny of Isa bulls and provides feed performance and carcass data back to the rancher. Since Laurie has several thousand head on feed at a time, major packers have been interested in buying cattle on a formula basis. The result has been a premium over current finished cattle prices.

Dale feels progress in the industry has come very slowly.

"Feedyards changed the industry overnight," Dale said. "They were probably the biggest change on the American business scene, ever. Changes in the cow-calf segment have taken a much longer time."

Dale took a 10-year detour before coming back to Colorado to the ranch. That provided him with some additional insights. After graduating from Princeton University, he received a Fulbright Scholarship to the University of Buenos Aires. He spent two years in a cattle improvement program with the Peace Corps in Colombia and then spent several years in feedyard management in Kansas.

"I value the feedyard experience," Dale said. "If you grow up on a ranch and stay there you tend to think that is the whole world. Cattlemen must realize the commercial end drives the business. It has to."

## Caring for the Land

The rule for the land is still the same: "Don't fool with Mother Nature." Tom's range management techniques are still used today. The belief that nature will stay in balance is their creed.

The ranch includes a wildlife sanctuary where hunting, trapping or poisoning of predators, including coyotes, prairie dogs and rattlesnakes is forbidden. There is no seeding of ranges and no use of



Dale Lasater

## BEEFMASTERS

chemicals for weed and insect control. One change Dale has made is in the area of range management.

"We were always conservative and careful with the land," Dale said. "We found we were, in no way, utilizing the potential of the ranch. We were just getting started. We were at 700 animal units and think we can increase to 900 and still do justice to the land."

"The secret was that we always looked across instead of down." Dale and his Spanish wife, Janine, and part of their staff have attended the Allen Savory school in Holistic Resource Management. Through that training Dale has decided what they have been missing is timing.

"If the growth rate is faster, then movement on the grass should be faster. If the grass is growing slowly, move slowly," Dale said. "The secret to moving cattle is to look backward. You always have to see where you were last and how soon you will get there again."

The Holistic system teaches that it takes about 75-80 days for plants to recover. The ranch has been split into five cells. Each cell has 11 to 17 paddocks.

Cattle are in a particular paddock from three to seven days, depending on growth of the grass. The most important thing is to see the animal never takes that fatal second bite that will damage the plant and weaken the root system.

"We always had a winter and a summer pasture," said Dale. "We grazed along the creek in winter and out on the hills in summer. Some of the grass never got used that way. One thing about the HRM program is that you become more aware of your land. You notice things you've never focused on before."

### Today at the Lasater Ranch

When touring the ranch today, Tom sits in the back and inspects fences and windmills while Dale explains the new grazing plans. Cattle fan out across the open plains and a new element has been added. Because of their rule of never interfering with nature, the Lasaters never use chemicals for weed and insect control. Therefore, goats are being used to graze the leafy spurge along the creeks. Currently there are 43 small black goats munching their way through the growth the on the stream banks. So far they seem

to be doing their job.

"If you use chemicals you kill all of the broad leaf plants, also," Dale said. "We need all of the ground cover that we can get so we are going to try goats."

Longrange, Dale is looking for ways to apply the family breeding philosophy and ideas on range and forage management on a larger scale. His dream is to work with larger numbers of cattle and expanses of land.

To facilitate that dream, he and his dad, along with Duke Phillips have formed a new company named Lasater Ranch Associates, Ltd. Through that company, they offer consulting and ranch management services to other cattlemen.

In December, 1989, Lasater Ranch was given the "Leonard Horn Range Livestockman of the Year" award by the Colorado Cattlemen's Association. The award was given for the joint stewardship of Tom and Dale Lasater. It recognized their accomplishments in beef breeding, genetics, range management and land stewardship. ♦