Barker Cattle Company, located near the small town of Elba in southeastern Idaho, is an LLC (Limited Liability Company) comprised of three partner families.

The patriarch and primary spokesman for the operation is Ruel Barker, 78, who spent 35 years as a Brigham Young University (BYU) Professor after acquiring his Ph.D. in Physical Education and Exercise Science. Since retirement, Barker and his wife, Kay, continue to maintain their principal residence in Provo, Utah, home of BYU.

The second partner is Tyler Barker, Ruel and Kay’s only son, who is employed as a regional manager for Zoetis Pharmaceuticals (formerly Pfizer Animal Health) and also lives in Provo with his wife, Amanda, and their children. Tyler’s involvement with the ranch focuses on herd health and marketing aspects.

The day-to-day operation of the ranch is under the watchful eyes of Tom and Sally Ottley and their family. “Tom grew up across the street from the family ranch in Elba and one day about 25 years ago after completing the Ranch Management course at BYU-Idaho in Rexburg, he told me that he’d like to work for me on my ranch,” Ruel says. “The rest is history. Tom and Sally are our working partners and their son, Braden, also works on the ranch.”

Barker explained that he makes the 210-mile trip to the ranch as often as possible. “I try to get up there every couple of weeks in the fall and winter and several days weekly in the spring and summer. We have our own house on the ranch, so it works well for Kay and me. Tyler also visits the ranch whenever he has some spare time. Our entire family, including our three daughters and our 17 grandkids, just loves the ranch — and we gather there for family holidays.”

Coincidentally, Ruel and Kay’s three daughters all married engineers, and all three continue to live in the Provo area as well. “We are really fortunate to have our children and grandchildren living so close to us. We get together one Sunday afternoon every month to celebrate any family birthdays,” he added. Their daughters are: Tammy (Mike) Sandstrom; Traci (Matt) Branham; and Tiffany (Matt) Carter.
Nestled In a Mountain Valley

Barker Cattle Company is headquartered in the spectacular Elba Valley at an elevation of approximately 5,200 feet. “People who come here for the first time say that ‘this valley is one of the best kept secrets around’,” Barker says. “We’re pretty much surrounded by mountains and plentiful wildlife. Mule deer are the most numerous, but elk have gradually been moving in, and we’re even seeing moose on occasion.”

The home place consists of 1,000 deeded acres, 300 of which are under irrigation, plus several leased parcels totaling approximately 800 acres of good pasture, some irrigated, but mostly dry mountain range. Recently, Barker Cattle Company expanded by partnering with a family friend, Jeff Robison, on a hay ranch and feedlot facility near Malta, 12 miles east of Elba. “That ranch adds 400 acres of hay ground, so now we’re in a position where we can sell some hay and have some extra fall and winter pasture,” he said. “We also have a Forest Service permit for 85 head over a four-month period in the summer.”

Ruel, along with four siblings, was raised on the ranch, which had been established by his parents, A.M. “Criss” and Gladys. “I was the only one who was interested in returning to the ranch,” he says. “My dad told me that I needed to get an education first, so I enrolled at Utah State in Agricultural Education.”

He accepted a teaching position at Raft River High School, his old high school at Malta. After teaching and coaching for several years, he went to BYU to work on his Master’s Degree. That’s where he met and married Kay. They went back to the ranch for a few years before making the decision to return to BYU for a Doctorate Degree. After graduation Ruel accepted a faculty position at the University. “While I was teaching and living in Provo, I ran back and forth to the ranch every time I could find a spare minute trying to keep things together,” he says.

His father had maintained a herd of purebred Horned Herefords, but in the early 1970s, Ruel elected to change course and purchased 50 head of purebred Simmental heifers and a French-imported Abondance bull named CanCan. Abondance are one of several separate strains of Simmental developed on the European continent and are characterized by their solid, mahogany-red color and moderate size.

“The Abondance influence facilitated the change from our original spotted cattle to a herd of dark-red, goggle-eyed cows,” Barker explained. “From there it was a simple step when we made the move to black Simmental.” In addition, the Barkers have also developed quality smaller herds of Angus and Maine Anjou. Presently, the Barker cowherd of 325 head consists of approximately 50 purebred Angus, 20 or so Maine Anjou and the remainder are Simmental-influenced. Spurred by a surplus of available hay, they recently purchased 200 head of Angus heifers, which will be AI-bred and resold as commercial replacement heifers.

Every female in the herd is bred AI one time, using the CIDRs (Controlled Internal Drug Release) protocol, before the bulls are turned in. Cleanup herd sires are acquired from sources outside their own herd. At the present they have sires purchased from South Dakota, Nebraska, Colorado, Missouri, Michigan, as well as neighboring states.

Calving begins in mid-January, which allows sale animals a little extra time to mature. “We move them off the meadows when we calve, to some dry and brushy ground, which has greatly reduced cases of sickness. The brush and a big gully that runs through that parcel lets them get out of the persistent winds that blow through here,” he said.

The newly acquired Malta ranch is situated at a lower elevation and receives considerably less snow, allowing cattle to stay on pasture longer. “We also have that feedlot, so we’re feeding our sale bulls and females there, working closely with a consulting nutritionist. We feed the sale cattle on a growing ration to get them ready to produce in range and pasture settings,” he remarked.

“I’m very proud of what the Simmental industry has done over the past 10-14 years. Size has been moderated, they’ve emphasized crossbreeding and now the Simmental influence has filtered down to the junior livestock level,” he stated. “There was a time when Simmental got too big, but they’ve found their place again.”

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Partners in Performance

The three partner families involved in Barker Cattle Company. 

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Marketing Genetics

Together, the three partners have assembled an effective plan for selling their genetics. Primary emphasis is on two sales — a production sale in March held at the nearby Burley Livestock Auction Barn and an on-line show calf sale at the ranch in October.

“For several years, we sold our bulls through the Quest of the West Sale along with several other consigners at Spanish Fork, Utah,” Barker reported. “But, for the past five years, we’ve been holding our own sale at Burley, about 35 miles north of here.”

The 2015 sale included 90 bulls and 50 females, an offering that included Angus, Simmental and SimAngus™ genetics. “People in this area are generally fiscally conservative and careful with their money so breeding animals don’t bring as much as they do in some other areas. However, we averaged $4,000 on our bulls last year, and we are satisfied if they sell at that level,” he said.

The Barkers got into the club calf market when Tyler, as well as the girls, showed an enthusiastic interest as teenagers. “They showed some great Simmental steers that were discriminated against because ‘they were too big’, so we decided that we needed to do some crossbreeding. That’s when we went out and got some Angus and Maine genetics, because that’s what the judges seemed to prefer. We sell about 40 head of steer and heifer show prospects to buyers primarily from Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming, but have sold some to Kansas, Nebraska, and other midwestern states.” Ruel commented.

“Our goal has always been to develop easy-calving, easy-fleshing, structurally ‘sound, moderately framed cattle,’” Barker summarized. “We do all we can to provide a good product for our loyal commercial customers.”