Founded in 1886, the Willow Springs Ranch has been in the same family ever since. Situated in the arid and often harsh environment of far western Utah, the ranch is currently owned and operated by Don and Beth Anderson. Beth is the fifth generation to live and work on her family’s ranch, previously named the Bagley Ranch.

The ranch is located near the small town (population, including ranchers: 35) of Callao (pronounced Cal-lay-oh), just a few miles from the Nevada State line. The nearest paved road is more than 35 miles away. It is 90 miles southeast to Delta, and 80 miles north to Wendover, Nevada. It’s also just south of the famed US Army Dugway Proving Ground and the Great Salt Lake Desert.

“We’re at 4,300 feet elevation, but don’t usually get a lot of snow or severe cold,” Don said. “Because we’re on the high desert, which is part of the Great Basin, our forage doesn’t have the same qualities of the higher mountain grasses of some other regions of the West. We don’t get quite the weaning weights that other ranchers often report. If our steer calves top 520 pounds at six months of age, we’re generally satisfied.”

The Callao area has a rich, Old West heritage. When settlers began to move to northern California, the relatively even terrain and widely scattered water sources became part of the migration route. “Our little oasis of Callao has a good supply of stream and ground water, so many of those groups made this a rest stop during the mid-1800s,” Anderson says.

“In 1857, the Overland Stage Company had a relay station located here, so their horses could be rested, fed and watered. Then in May of 1860, the Pony Express was founded, following the same route before making its final run in October of 1861. We have the original Pony Express station right here on our ranch, an old adobe and wood-framed building that we still use. We store some relics in there and also use it now and then when we cut up a beef,” he reported.

When the Bagley family founded the ranch, they primarily raised horses, including supplying mounts for the US Cavalry. When wild horse stallions and human thieves made that endeavor unprofitable, a switch was made to cattle.

“The earliest Bagley cattle were Hereford and at one time, they even had a herd of registered cows,” Anderson said. “The first few generations of Bagleys who ran the ranch stayed with Herefords, until Beth’s dad, David, began AIing with some of the first Simmental semen and continued that Simmental-Hereford cross-breeding program until the 1990’s, when he and Beth’s mom, Reuvo, decided to retire.”
Transitioning to the Ranch
A native of the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado, Anderson spent his early years on a small dairy farm. “My dad and uncle had been in business with my grandfather, were school teachers by trade, eventually sold the cattle and leased out the land. As a teenager, I worked for some of the local ranchers and learned quite a bit about the business from them,” he explained.

Anderson enrolled at Utah State University and earned his B.S. in Agricultural and Irrigation Engineering and an M.S. degree in Water Resources Engineering. That’s also where he met Beth, a Secretarial Science major. After graduation and marriage they spent the next few years applying his education to irrigation projects in the states of Utah, Arizona and Guadalajara, Mexico, before landing in California’s fertile, productive San Joaquin Valley.

“By that time, we also had a family of four sons and a daughter,” he said. “Beth’s folks were getting along in years — all of their children were engaged in other occupations and weren’t interested in returning to the ranch. We had been sending our sons to work for Grandpa in the summer and when he put it up for sale, the boys convinced us that this was the lifestyle they wanted. So, in 1994, we made the move to this place.”

Educating their children was not without some unique challenges. “They attended a small elementary school right here through the eighth grade. The kids received their secondary education 25 miles to the south at West Desert High School in Trout Creek. However, two of our sons wanted to play football and our daughter was also interested in sports, so they transferred to Delta, where they stayed with friends and relatives during the school year,” he says.

Russ and Newell, their first and third sons, are in the construction business in Salt Lake City, while number two son, Wayne, works for Great Basin National Park at Baker, Nevada. Daughter Marci, the baby of the family, is employed as a social worker in Salt Lake City. In 2011, the family suffered the devastation of losing Grant, their youngest son, who drowned at Flaming Gorge Reservoir in Wyoming. “That was a very difficult time for us,” Anderson said.

“Our kids come and help out here on the ranch as much as they can. The ranch is a very special place for each of them and their families.”

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The Simmental Thread

Beth’s father took over the family ranch after World War II upon earning a degree in Dairy Science, also from Utah State. “He was on the Board of Directors for Select Sires for many years and was among the first Utah cattlemen to establish A.I. in their beef programs. When we took over, the existing cow herd was basically one of Simmental-Herford crossbreds,” Anderson recalled.

“We were completely red, with several yellow-shaded cows and a heavy spotted look, typical of Simmental at that time. We also had a predominance of goggle-eyed cows, something that we still emphasize because pigmentation around the eyes is so effective in reducing the threat of cancer eye,” he continued. “We wanted to continue her dad’s successful A.I. program, so Beth and I both went to A.I. school.”

By 1996, a couple of years after the Andersons acquired the ranch, cattle prices dropped significantly while the industry was favoring black-hided cattle.

“That’s when we began to use semen from black Simmental bulls to meet the demand of the market. At the present time we only A.I. our replacement heifers, placing heavy emphasis on calving ease,” he said.

Mature cows are bred primarily natural service by a battery of 14 bulls, a large majority of which are pure-bred Simmental or SimAngus™. “We’ve also used black Angus, a black Gelbvieh bull or two and even an occasional Maine Anjou,” he commented.

“Our cowherd of 300 still has a few head that resemble the old-time Herefords, but we stay away from the full white-face. Our breeding goal is for every cow to have some Angus and some Simmental influence. That is a combination that we really like. We’ve increased our weaning weights by 50 pounds and feel that we’re making steady progress,” he said.

Wise use of forage and hay are critical components of the operation, combining efficient utilization of private land and adjacent Bureau of Land Management (BLM) grazing leases. “We run the cattle at home during the summer on irrigated meadows and pasture. In the winter, about half of our herd, primarily middle-aged cows in their prime, go out on a BLM allotment where they graze all winter, calve on their own and return to the ranch on May 1. We keep the heifers, plus the very young and older cows at home where they can receive extra feed and we can keep an eye on them,” he said.

“Our lifeline is water management. We have good water rights through stock in the Callao Irrigation Company, from three streams, supplemented with private ground water wells. We need about a ton of hay per cow for those that stay at home and most years we produce enough to get by. There are five ranches located here and we work closely together, helping with branding, shipping, equipment and other neighborly acts,” he observed.

Feeder calves are marketed through video sales and depending on feed supplies, are shipped right off the cows in October. “Her dad liked to retain ownership, but we decided early on not to do that when costs of gain dramatically increased and we’re pleased with the results,” he states.

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Both Don and Beth have been active in Utah cattle industry affairs. A year ago, they served simultaneously as presidents of their respective state-wide organizations — she with the Utah Cattle Women’s Association (UCWA) while he headed the Utah Cattlemen’s Association (UCA). As UCWA president, Beth was also seated as a member of the Utah Beef Council (UBC). Don assumed the presidency of the UCA in December of 2013, and finished his second year in that position this past December. As immediate past president, he will continue to be involved as a UCA board member and UBC member.

During Anderson’s tenure as UCA president, he dealt with several “touchy” issues, including a steady increase in wild horses and the proposed listing of sage grouse as an endangered species. “Unfortunately, issues that affect agriculture often become political in nature, hamstringing sensible efforts to resolve such problems,” he lamented. “Animal agriculture throughout the country is under fire from various interest groups and organizations. I believe we have to take a more proactive approach and help people to better understand what we do and how we do it.

“Here in Utah, we’ve invited people to our ranches and we have helped sponsor chefs to tour feedlots and packing plants. If people have a clearer understanding of the entire pasture-to-plate process, we believe they’ll be more receptive of our industry,” he concluded. “I think we’re doing a pretty good job of that here.”

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