



## *Traditions of value*

Tradition. It's that salad you can count on Aunt Kari bringing to each and every family picnic. It's the Christmas cookie recipe that great-grandma brought over from "the old country." Tradition is the annual barn dance your neighbor holds after the last cutting of hay, or that classic pickup truck the high school always borrows to showcase the royal court in the homecoming parade.

Tradition can be good, bad or indifferent. Maybe you'll keep up the traveling "over-the-hill" birthday gag gift or doing the chicken dance at every wedding dance. The egg toss at the county fair—you could take it or leave it.

Your farming and ranching enterprise might be based on tradition. Your dad always started calving the 15th of February, so do you. You were taught to get up with the sun and to feed the cattle before you take a stop for breakfast.

Often there's a good reason for those traditions. Experience may have taught you what worked best. There's nothing wrong with a tradition that works, if it still works. However, marketing schemes based on tradition might leave you short changed.

Looking at a few disappointing calves, most producers start thinking about culling cows this time of year. Not long after, they will sell those that don't measure up. Seasonal trends show that the majority of the nation's slaughter cows are sold from October to November. It's no accident, that coincides with the annual low price.

Last year the lowest USDA Utility grade cow price was listed in November at \$47.91 per hundredweight (cwt.). That's nearly \$6.50 less than the yearly average.

If you want to top the cull-cow market, rather than find the bottom, you might think about selling earlier or later. The first option would most likely mean early weaning. That could be an option if you have plans to background and feed the calves. Started on a corn ration early, they'll

have a better chance to maximize quality grade. And you can trade those pesky, non-performing cows for cash. But it also means foregoing those pounds cows often put on quickly after weaning.

Selling later could just mean keeping those cows with the rest for a few months, where they will probably gain significant weight while the market price improves. Another option is to put them on feed for those months, increasing quality for higher prices as auction or direct sales to packers.

Once you've decided when to sell your cows, you need to decide which cows will be sent down the road. Those cows that didn't breed back are typically first out of the herd. What else decides it—tradition? Some cattlemen have a magic age, some keep a round number of cows and must sell to allow for the next generation of heifers, while others look at soundness and condition.

Disposition often captures your attention. There's that cow that got out three times this summer and refused to ever let you get near her calf. Think of all the time you spent chasing her back in, fixing the fence and devising plans on how to tag her calf. You already threatened her; now it's time to back it up. She takes more work, and poor disposition is heritable so steers lose money on feed or heifers keep up the tradition in your herd.

By working with a buyer or feedlot, or feeding your calves to finish, you could get carcass data back. That would allow you to find cows with below-average feedlot and beef quality calves. If cow #807 consistently produces calves that grade low Select, she's not pulling her weight.

Whatever method you use to identify culls, it's the marketing that will help you capture more dollars. The value of a cow is certainly in the number of healthy calves she gets on the ground, but don't shortchange her worth when she's outlived her usefulness on your ranch. Resist the urge to load them up just because it is the week after harvest or the week before Thanksgiving.

The difference between great-grandma's recipe and the egg toss at the county fair is in the value you see in them. The same is true for your culling traditions.

Next time in *Black Ink*, Steve Suther will look at the purpose-driven herd. Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail [steve@certifiedangusbeef.com](mailto:steve@certifiedangusbeef.com).

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