

OKLAHOMA FARM & RANCH

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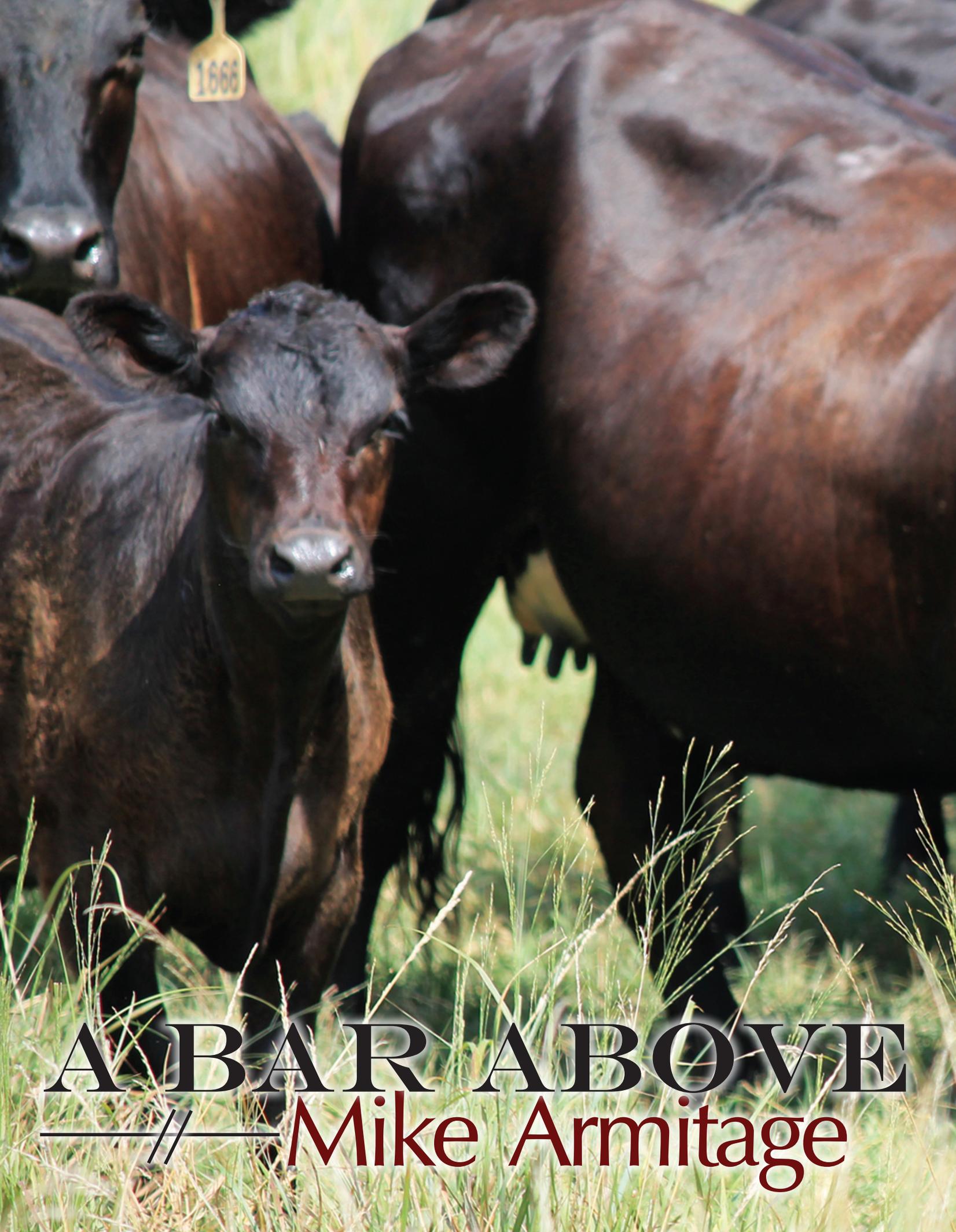
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A BAR ABOVE

Mike Armitage

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ABAR ABOVE
—//— **Mike Armitage**



The Armitages consistently wean 600-pound, highly marketable Angus calves. (Photo by Laci Jones)

A BAR ABOVE

Mike Armitage

It was a warm summer day with the relief of a slight breeze making the rolling bluestem grass sway. Horses and cattle gather under the few oak trees. The owner of this northeast Oklahoma ranch, Mike Armitage, continuously studies management techniques to improve livestock production while staying true to his traditions. The producer said he is hopeful for the future of the beef industry.

“It is an exciting future for the beef industry,” Armitage explained. “For those who are always evolving and willing to step to that forefront, I feel as though they will be justly rewarded.”

Armitage was raised 10 miles north of Shawnee, Okla., in Meeker, Okla., on a cow-calf and alfalfa operation. His grandfather and father—Fred Frost and Vernon Lee Armitage—influenced Armitage from a young age.

“The biggest inspirations came from my father and grandfather who both found no hurdles too big to overcome, and their sheer determination and hard work made them undoubtedly the most impactful men in my life,” Armitage added.

Broad-based agricultural experiences through the FFA organization led him to attend Oklahoma State University after graduating from Meeker High School. There, he was on the Livestock Judging Team while pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in agricultural economics with a farm and ranch management option.

“Through this ag economics degree, we were taught everything from appraisal to statistics, to monthly analysis of project costs,” he explained. “Many of those skills weren’t utilized until 10 to 20 years later in my life.”

After graduating college in 1974, he landed a ranch management job at the McGuirk Hereford Ranch in Claremore, Okla. Armitage said he did not foresee him owning a ranch, but he knew he wanted to work in livestock production.

While working for the McGuirk family, he also owned a herd of purebred Hereford cattle. The Armitages had the opportunity to lease the operation and began purchasing the ranch after nine years of leasing.

“I was so blessed to end up owning the

ranch that I managed out of college,” Armitage added.

A Bar Ranch

The owner of A Bar Ranch said the ranch is comprised of four divisions—A Bar Ranch Headquarters in Claremore, Okla., Rock Creek in Adair, Okla., Squaw in Pryor, Okla., and V Bar Ranch in Welch, Okla. Overall, the ranch operates 45,000 total acres throughout nine Oklahoma counties.

The headquarters in Claremore, Okla., was once a part of the original Cherokee Indian Allotment to Frank and Dora Rucker during the 1880s. Famous trick roper Will Rogers built a friendship with the Ruckers while working as a ranch hand. They were later involved in Will Roger’s traveling Wild West Show.

The ranch was owned by the McGuirk family then purchased by Mike and Martha Armitage in 1989. Armitage said the A Bar Ranch Brand has a unique history.

“The brand is an open ‘A’ or a rafter brand,” Armitage explained. “It was the Rucker brand from the 1880s. Since our name is ‘Armitage,’ we continued to use the ‘open A’ and added the bar to it in the early ‘90s.”

Cattle Production

“Our own fully-independent operation started in 1980,” Armitage explained. “Originally, it was just a registered Hereford operation but had the fortune of leasing a 7,800-acre ranch that adjoined [the headquarters].”

After analyzing their month-to-month expenses, the cattle producer recognized the need to eliminate 60 percent of annual cost of their cow-calf business from the winter season. To reduce annual costs, they stocked their adjoining ranch with purchased bred cows. Armitage Livestock was founded in 1989 for the marketing of commercial females.

They sold cows and calves that fall in their first annual Fall Gathering Sale in 1989 at the Southern Oklahoma Livestock Auction in Ada, Okla., later moving to the Joplin Regional Stockyards in Joplin, Mo. Always held the first Saturday in November, A Bar Ranch will have their Fall Gathering Sale at OKC-West for the fourth year. Armitage Livestock has evolved to present day marketing of 10,000 to 15,000 bred commercial females annually.

“When we market, we have to be looking around the corner and adding value to producers’ cow herds to remain competitive and in the forefront while offering more value for their dollar,” he added.

With productivity of his cow-calf herd at the utmost importance, Armitage said the most important element of production is fertility. In the early ‘90s, he selected only the females that were pregnant in the first 30 days of exposure through ultrasound aging of females.

“It was new on the scene at the time in the commercial industry,” he added. “It continues today as one of the most valuable tools in selection.”

Changing their female selection criteria resulted in an increase of pregnancy rates in the first 30 days of exposure from 55 percent in their first year to 87 percent in 2016.

“This, in my opinion, is the most important economic trait for a cow-calf producer,” Armitage explained. “The cow that calves first is the best cow in your cowherd and so are her daughters. It results in more uniformity in our calf crops, more predictable breed-ups and its selection.”

However, Armitage said their personal production cowherd continues to grow. In the ‘90s, he acquired bred tigerstripe cows, the F1 cross between Hereford and Brahman breeds, from a producer in south Texas and grazed them on his leased property. The producers said grazing these tigerstripe cows resulted in an additional 50 to 100 pounds of weaning weight, but other producers valued this breed as well.

In the mid-‘90s, Armitage started retaining his own heifers from his purebred Hereford herd and began crossing with Hudgen’s Brahman Genetics, producing his own herd of F1 tigerstripes. He then crossed the tigerstripes with Angus bulls, producing the “super baldie Brangus,” which is one-quarter Brahman, one-quarter Hereford and one-half Angus cattle.

“We have found they are the most efficient, least maintenance cows for our eastern Oklahoma environment,” Armitage explained. “They consistently wean 600-pound, highly marketable Angus calves.”

They also retain heifer calves to breed for

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This barn is located at the A Bar Ranch headquarters in Claremore, Okla. (Photo by Laci Jones)

RANCH

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their own replacements and for auction to the public. This year, A Bar Ranch is retaining 400 head of cattle to help grow and replenish their cattle herd, he added.

Equine Production

In Armitage's early years as a purebred cattle manager, the utilization of horses was imperative for heat detection of cattle prior to heat synchronization and the spring and summer breeding season.

"One-on-one sorting led me to an exceptional lineage of Hollywood Gold bred horses," Armitage explained. "From that first purchase of brood mare horses in 1984, we bred horses to be durable, cowey, trainable and intelligent."

Horses are bred to be used on the ranch each day, he added. They are bred for their size and structure, and evaluated for their skill set and trainability. The Armitages start and ride approximately 40 two-year-old horses each year.

Through their efforts to produce horses that meet these cri-

teria, they market approximately 140 horses annually through two sales. The first sale, known as the Cowhorse Classic Sale, is held in mid-June. The second sale is held with their Fall Gathering Sale in November, bringing buyers from more than 15 states.

"I call it my 'hobby out of control,' but it's been very rewarding as well," he added. "We have had two AQHA Reserve World Champions and numerous ranch horse competition winners."

The horse breeder is also a committee member on the AQHA Ranching Committee and an AQHA Ranching Heritage Breeder.

In 2015, the Armitages began working with the Oklahoma Cattleman's Foundation Intern Scholar Program, employing livestock production youth for the summer season.

"The same focus was developed through the AQHA and the Ranching Heritage Breeders Program with our first intern through AQHA in 2017," he added.

These interns experience all aspects of the A Bar Ranch. The recipients of the 2017 Oklahoma Cattlemen's Foundation Scholar Program internship and the 2017 AQHA Heritage Breeders internship are Kaden McCombs, Navajo, Okla., and Bradley Cornell, Claude, Texas, respectively.

"We are blessed to have this quality of ag youth involved here at the ranch," he added.

A Family Business

Armitage met his wife Martha in Stillwater, Okla., where she was pursuing a bachelor's degree in home economics communications at Oklahoma State University. They were later married in 1985. With being raised on a yearling cattle ranch in Welch, Okla., Martha is the A Bar Ranch accountant, advertising agent and sale catalog developer.

The Armitages have two sons—Merrit and Turner. Merrit, an Oklahoma State University alumnus, lives north of Pryor with his wife Michelle and son Myles. Merrit currently manages the Rock

Creek division of A Bar Ranch, raising cattle and backgrounding yearling horses.

Turner graduated from Oklahoma State University in spring 2015. He married Sarah Coffey in August, where they also live on the Rock Creek division in Adair, Okla. Turner oversees colt starting, mare breeding and first-calf heifers.

While he is not a family member, Mark Hockensmith from Inola, Okla., is a "big asset" to the ranch's daily activities, Armitage added. A Kansas State University alumnus, Hockensmith has worked for A Bar Ranch for 20 years.

Management and Traditions

Throughout the changes in the agriculture industry and new additions to the Armitage family, they continue to stay true to their roots. Since he was a youth, Armitage said livestock were managed on horseback.

"Through my walk in the purebred business, I managed cow herds horseback because of the

influence and traditions that my 64 years have brought”

He added cattle properly handled horseback encourages their health and well-being. Another primary reason is purchased cattle can come from “all walks of life” from the extreme mismanaged to the properly managed. Managing while horseback provides consistency to the herd.

“In any time of the day, any place on the ranch— whether it’s rocky, rough, timbered— we have the skillset to gather and handle those cattle,” he added. “It always puts us in a position as not being a limiting factor to gather and manage.”

The Armitages are actively involved in several organizations including the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, Oklahoma Cattlemen’s Association and the American Quarter Horse Association.

Armitage also said he hopes the future generations of A Bar Ranch and agriculture production are able to adapt to the ever-changing world of beef production while becoming leaders in both agricultural organizations and in their communities.

“I had an agriculture economics teacher explain to us, ‘If we didn’t marry it, or inherit it, that we might as well get the thought out of our mind to going home and survive in agriculture.’” Armitage began. “I hope I am a living example that it’s not impossible. If you’re willing to make those sacrifices, work hard enough and have tolerance and durability, you could be very successful in agriculture.”

Niches within the agriculture industry are going to create a lot of opportunity for those willing to take those risks, he added.

When asked about the risks the entrepreneur had taken, he replied, “Every day is a risk in what I do... My grandfather always told me, ‘The harder you work, the luckier you’ll get,’ and I find that to be my biggest lucky charm.”



Mike and Martha Armitage have been married for more than 30 years. Together, they have two sons—Merrit and Turner. (Photo by Laci Jones)