



Generations of **GRIT**

East of Petit Jean Mountain, where the Arkansas River winds through rolling pastures, the Payne Family Farm stands as a testament to generations of dedication, resilience, and a passion for quality cattle. For father and son duo John and Travis Payne, ranching is more than a livelihood; it is a way of life, built on hard work, innovation, and a deep respect for the land and livestock.

The Payne family's ranching roots trace back decades, beginning with Herefords. In 1964, John's father, Herschel, made a defining move by officially purchasing the land, setting the stage for what would become a thriving cattle operation.

John was immersed in the cattle industry from an early age. While showing Herefords as a young man, he met his future wife, Kim, who was showing Shorthorns. Their shared background in the cattle industry built the foundation for the family and their ranching legacy.

Today, John is retired while Travis works in sales, bringing his industry knowledge and experience to professional roles while continuing to help manage the family operation.

When Herschel and John started having trouble with high-birth-weight calves, Clomer Young from Winrock Farms proposed an experiment, introducing one of their Santa Gertrudis bulls to the Payne family's Herefords to see if it would enhance their herd's genetics. This seemingly small suggestion ignited John's curiosity and set him on a path of discovery.

"We started realizing we could get hybrid vigor, and we could get better genetics," John Payne said.

Through industry connections and extensive research, he was introduced to Gelbvieh cattle, a breed that would ultimately transform the family's herd. These cattle offered advantages including increased weaning weights, superior maternal instincts, and efficient growth rates—qualities that made them an ideal fit for the Payne operation.

"Genetics are a big part of the cattle industry now," Travis Payne said. "That momma cow plays a big role in it, if she is a 900-1,100 pound cow and she can raise a calf that's 600 pounds sitting on her side obviously that's what you want so that's what we are after."

With this knowledge in hand, the Paynes spent years refining their breeding program, methodically selecting and crossbreeding to achieve the ideal combination of size, marbling, and maternal ability. They strategically incorporated Gelbvieh genetics with Brangus and Angus to create a herd that not only thrives on their land but produces high-quality beef that meets the demands of today's market.

"The first thing we look at is can they have the calf; that's a big thing with me. I want them pelvic measured to make sure they can have the calf. Number two is milk. With the Gelbvieh though I have yet to worry about that," Travis said.

Record keeping plays an essential role in their success. They meticulously track weaning weights, pelvic measurements, and other performance indicators. Each decision is backed by data, allowing them to continue refining their herd generation after generation.

This balance of genetics ensures that their herd is not only productive but also manageable. A key factor in their operation is temperament. Docile cattle are easier to handle, making day-to-day work safer and more efficient.



"Docility is a big thing for me. I don't put up with rude people or high-headed cattle," John said.

Careful management is the backbone of the Payne family's success. Every decision, from breeding to weaning, is made with precision and purpose. Calves are typically vaccinated and weaned between 90 to 120 days, though the exact timing can vary depending on conditions. Some calves are fed before being sold, while others are moved directly to market, allowing the Paynes to adjust their approach based on economic and herd needs.

The family maintains both spring and fall calving herds, a strategy that not only balances their workload but also provides flexibility in marketing their cattle. When it comes to weaning methods, they have found that fence-line weaning helps ease the transition of calves while minimizing stress.

The Payne family operates with a keen awareness of market conditions, selling cattle strategically to maximize profitability. While the majority of their calves are sold to stockyards, they have also explored selling bulls as an additional revenue stream. However, the volatility of the cattle market has influenced their approach.

"My future goal is to sell some bulls again. I am looking at teaming up with some partners to make southern balancer bulls and to have a commercial herd and seedstock," Travis said.

With approximately five hundred acres spread across their home ranch and leased land, the Paynes rely on rotational grazing to maintain pasture health and optimize

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forage use. By moving cattle through different grazing areas, they prevent overgrazing, allow grass to recover, and improve soil quality—critical factors in running a sustainable operation.

"My ag teacher used to say that the best farm in Arkansas is one where you can run a cow on two acres – and that's exactly what we're able to do here," John reflects.

Additionally, they are investing in pasture improvement, with plans to implement better forage management techniques.

"We are currently getting ready to spray to continue to improve our ground," John said.

This adaptability is key to their longevity in the industry. Instead of chasing trends, they remain focused on long-



term sustainability and smart financial decisions. While they work as a team on the farm, Travis focuses on selecting the right genetics for their herd. They share ownership of their hay equipment, continuously investing in better tools to improve efficiency. When it comes to selling cattle, they combine their stock to increase their numbers and maximize their market impact. When it comes to working with family, communication is key.

"We talk a lot," Travis said. "I'll call him and say, 'I have an idea I'm thinking about running with—what do you think?' And we'll talk it through."

The Payne family's vision for the future is one of growth and continuous improvement. They are in the process of developing Southern Balancer bulls (a hybrid of Gelbvieh and Brangus) designed to offer superior genetics to other ranchers seeking high-performing cattle. This initiative reflects their commitment to not only improving their own herd but also contributing to the broader cattle industry.

For the Paynes, ranching has always been about more than just cattle—it's about legacy. John's decades of experience, combined with Travis's drive for innovation, make them a formidable team, blending traditional wisdom with modern advancements. With each calf born, each pasture improved, they are laying the foundation for a future that extends far beyond their own time on the ranch. ■

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