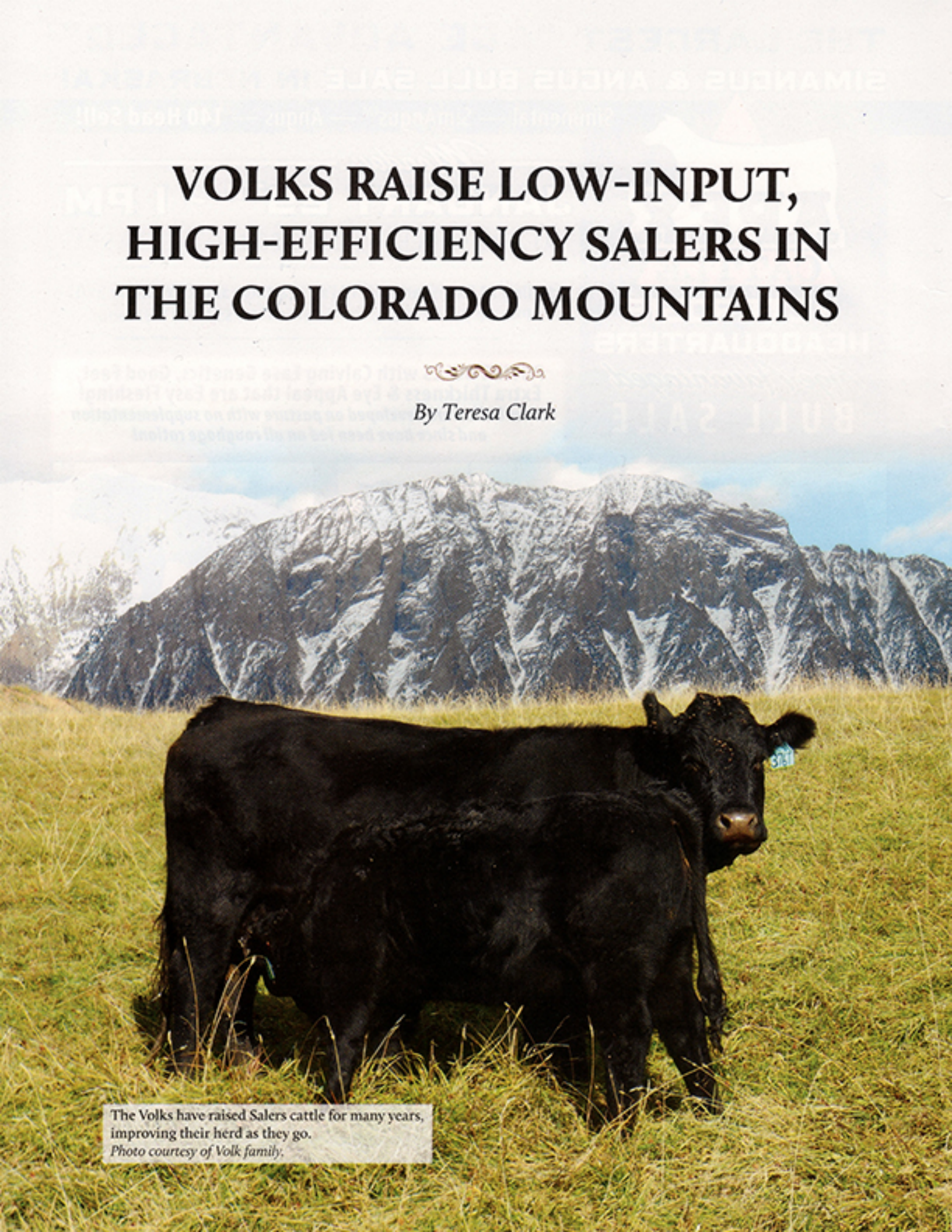


VOLKS RAISE LOW-INPUT, HIGH-EFFICIENCY SALERS IN THE COLORADO MOUNTAINS



By Teresa Clark



The Volks have raised Salers cattle for many years, improving their herd as they go.
Photo courtesy of Volk family.

A registered herd of Salers cattle graze contently at the base of the Ragged Mountains in the northwest corner of Gunnison County. The way they're raised is what sets them apart. "They receive no special treatment," Gary Volk says of the cattle. "We raise registered cattle that are kept like commercial producers would keep them. They don't get supplements, only minerals and hay during calving. Our goal is to graze them most of the year. What we produce here are good honest cattle."

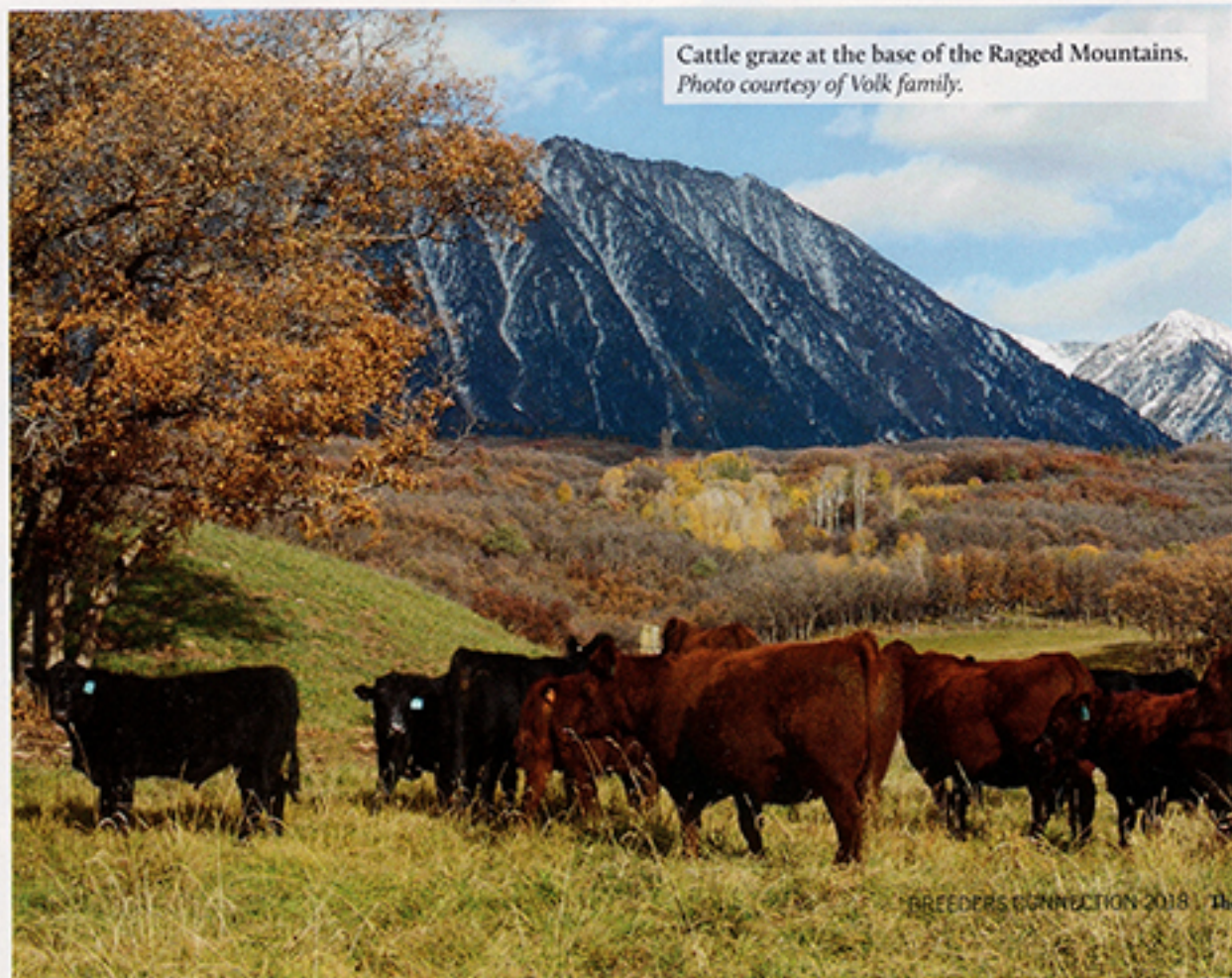
Ancestors of George, Gary and Gail Volk of the Figure 4 Cattle Company started raising cattle at the base of Ragged Mountains nearly a century ago. They homesteaded 20 miles north of Paonia in 1911, where they cleared brush for fields and pasture. They set in motion a tradition of commitment to the land, livestock, and family that the Volks still treasure today.

Although the ranch originated with the traditional Hereford, and later, Angus cattle, Gary and Gail decided they wanted to focus

on something different. In 1982, the couple set out to build what has become one of America's top registered Salers cowherds. "Our goal is to produce functional cattle that can withstand the harsh production realities of our environment, while exceeding industry standards for reproductive performance, production and carcass quality," Volk explains.

The couple decided on Salers, after trying several different breeds. "What drew us to the Salers cattle was how they performed in the National Western carcass contest. They had won it seven out of eight years, so we decided to look into the breed," he says. "We like the Salers because of their uniformity, productivity, longevity and range-ability. They are like no other cattle we have owned over three generations," he adds.

Starting with 35 head of high percentage Salers females in 1982, today the ranch has increased to 750 head of registered Salers cows. "We are a 90 percent closed herd," Volk says. "We develop all our females and all our own



Cattle graze at the base of the Ragged Mountains.
Photo courtesy of Volk family.

herd sires. We have tried to use outside blood occasionally, but we have had the best luck using our own creations of cows and herd bulls."

"We have kept with the Salers breed because they are unequal in fertility and calving ease," Volk says. "They are also unmatched in longevity. At one time, over 30 percent of our cowherd was at least 14 years-old.

"They are a very dependable kind of cattle. They do well on the range, and have good ease of management and keep-ability. Over the years, we have accented all those traits through our breeding program which has been well received by our commercial customers," he says.

The cows are moderate in size, averaging 1200-1400 pounds, with a hip height of 52-56 inches. "We have worked hard on reducing the frame score," he says. Today they're in the frame score range of 5.5 to 6.5.

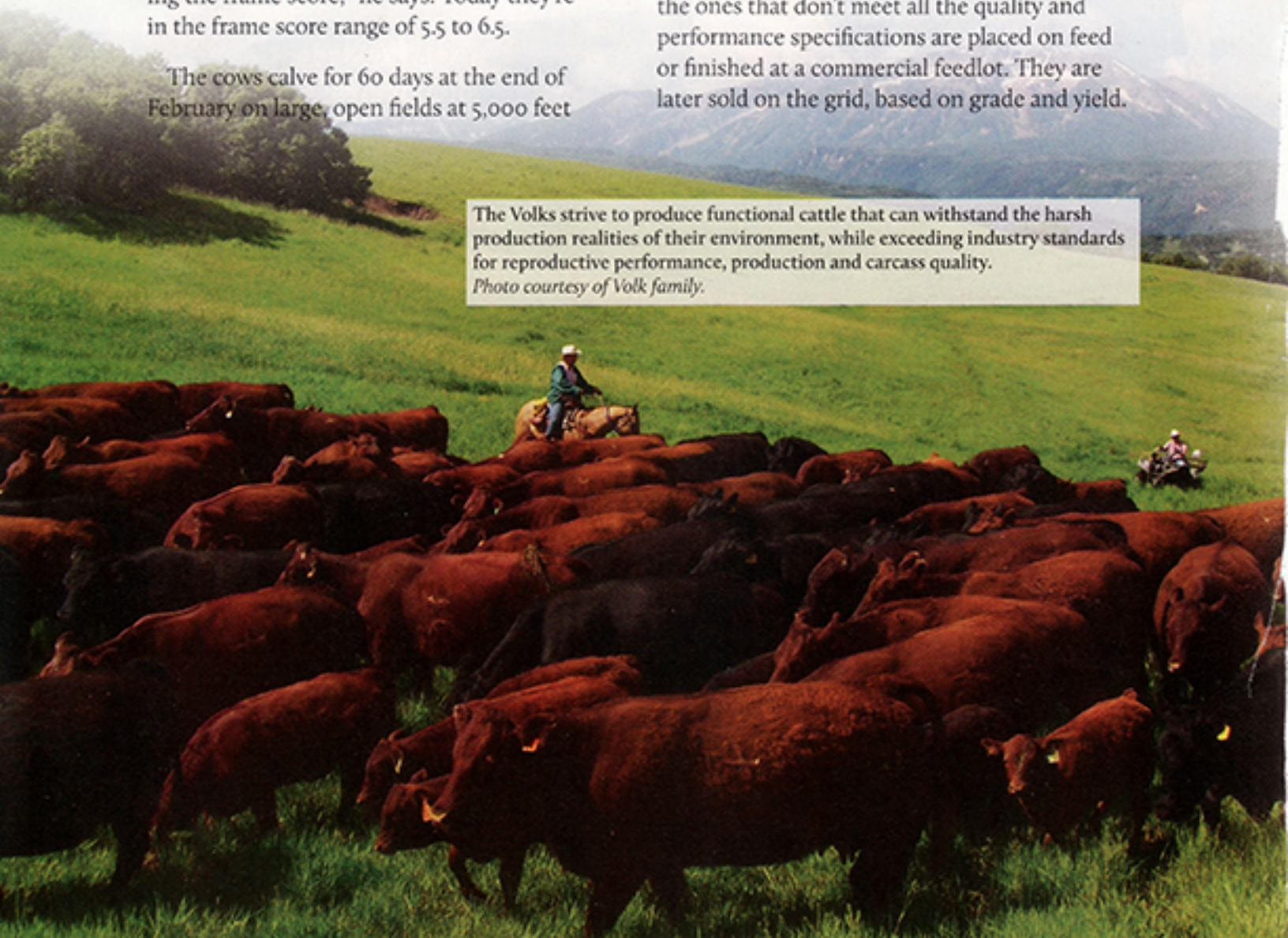
The cows calve for 60 days at the end of February on large, open fields at 5,000 feet

elevation. In mid-April, the pairs are moved to semi-desert range till mid-May, when they are trucked to Ragged Mountain where they spend the summer at 7,000-10,000 feet in elevation on private and federal owned pastures.

The Salers cattle do not have brisket problems, Volk says. "They were developed in France over thousands of years in conditions similar to ours. They would winter these cattle at lower elevations, and summer them at the higher elevation. Elevation doesn't bother them. They will cover the range no matter what the elevation is."

The calves are weaned in November, when the operation moves to the Figure 4 Development Center near Delta, Colorado, where the bull and heifer calves are developed for the spring private treaty sale. At this time, the calves are put through a stringent culling process, and the ones that don't meet all the quality and performance specifications are placed on feed or finished at a commercial feedlot. They are later sold on the grid, based on grade and yield.

The Volks strive to produce functional cattle that can withstand the harsh production realities of their environment, while exceeding industry standards for reproductive performance, production and carcass quality.
Photo courtesy of Volk family.





The Salers were developed in France over thousands of years in conditions similar to the Volks. The cattle are wintered at lower elevations, and summer at the higher elevation.
Photo courtesy of Volk family.

"It is a full circle of information, based on real world facts," Volk says. "We have done that for 30 years. Most of our feedlot data is based on the culls. This information helps us cull breeding herd bulls and cows from our program."

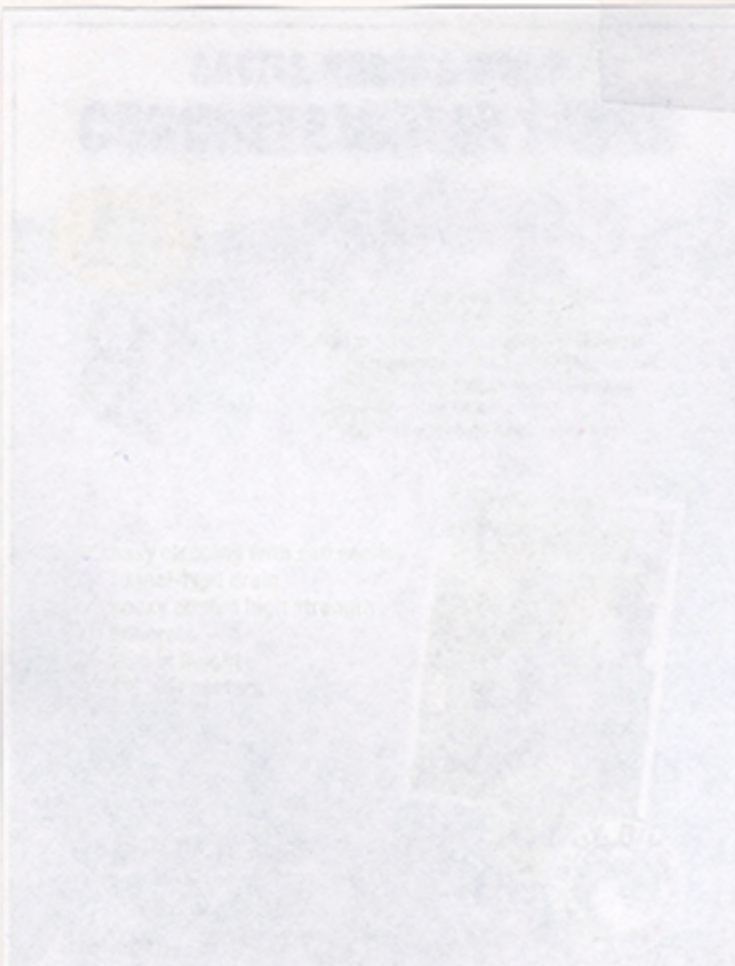
They're selective about which bulls they put on their sale. "We only keep 30-40 percent of the bull calves," Volk says. The prospects have to show performance ability, easy fleshing ability and eye appeal. "They also have to have good structure, and especially good leg structure. It is a tough area to change, but the bulls have to get around in the rough country. We want to develop cattle that need the minimum amount of high energy feed to look good and do well."

The calves are fed high roughage, low grain ration through the growing phase, aiming for two pounds a day gain, rather than the typical three to four. "Our bulls are in their working clothes," Volk says. "We don't build them up for a production sale, they are just honest cattle."

The bulls are sold primarily as yearlings. "We will have a few coming two-year-olds that are developed during the summer on grass," he says. "We have a few customers looking for the older bulls, but we prefer to sell them as yearlings."

Developing a buyer base has been a challenge. "We went low key with one-on-one customer relations," Volk says. "We let our cattle prove themselves. That has generated more repeat

buyers because they are happy with the cattle they have purchased from us. The bulls have held up, and our buyers get along with them temperament and disposition-wise. Anyone who has problems with the Salers breed has gotten over that hurdle once they have used our cattle. Our goal is long-term relations and customer satisfaction. If there



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is a problem, we will work it out with our customer.”

Because of that low profile, the Volks went from a production sale to a private treaty sale. “It takes the pressure off, lets you make better decisions, and gives you more time to work with your customers,” Volk says. “We can also sell them a little cheaper, because we don’t spend a bunch of money on a production sale.”

The effort they have put into improving the Salers breed has led to several accomplishments for the family. The Volks were named

the 2004 Seedstock Producer of the Year by the Colorado Cattlemen’s Association. During the past decade, they have also ranked each year among the top performance breeders in the American Salers Association, and were named the national winners seven times, since they won their first award in 1994.

