



# FROM THE ASHES

*A California family finds a new beginning after a devastating fire.*

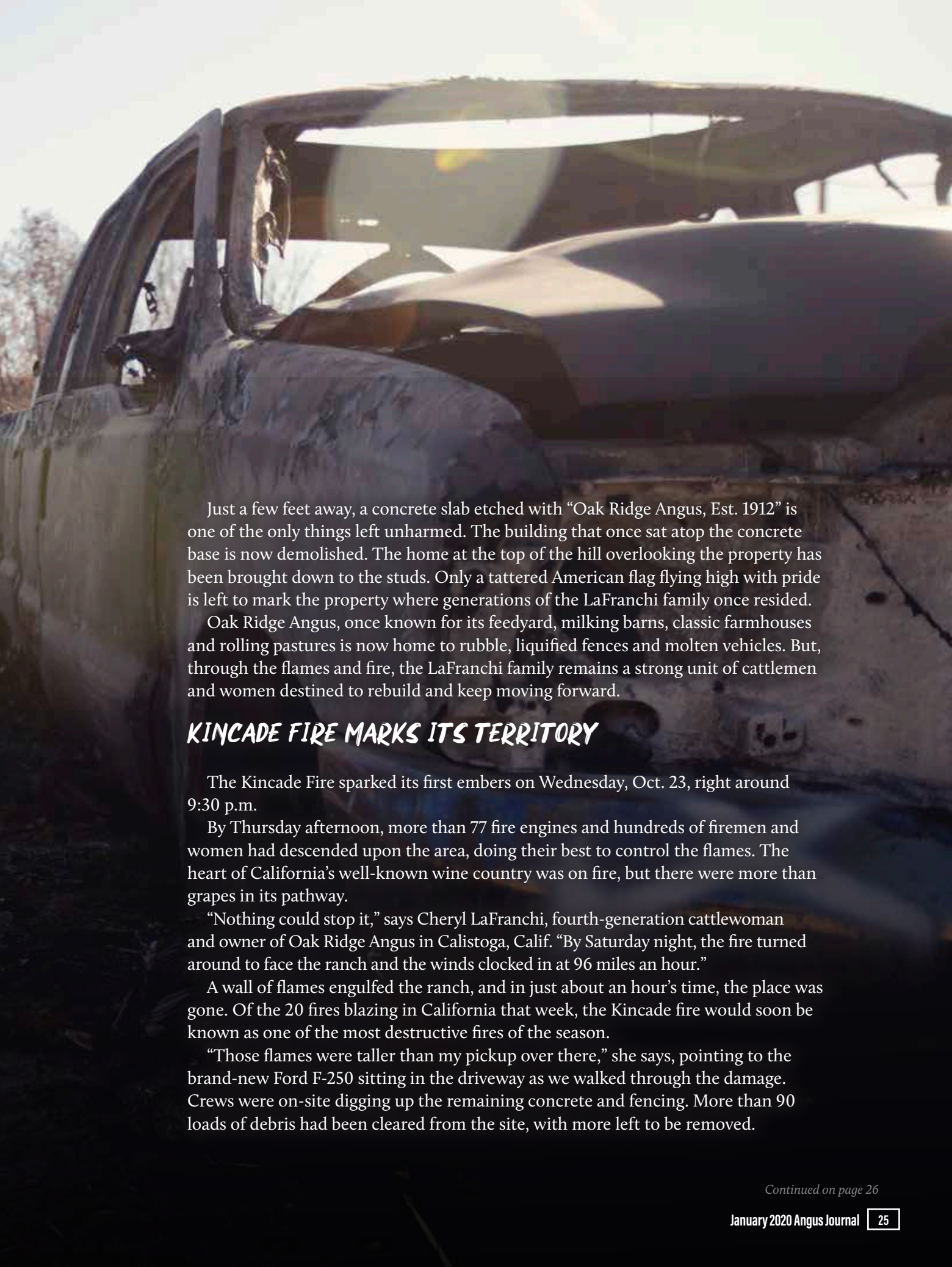
*by Katy Holdener, American Angus Association*

The aftermath of a California wildfire can be summarized in one word: apocalyptic. The smell of burnt forest, melting tin and scorched earth extends for miles beyond the fire site.

Even still, rising up from the flame-damaged pastures is an overwhelming sense of community. A tribe of county residents, locals and families have banded together to clear the rubble and keep spirits high, even when the outlook is low.

While there might not be many physical structures left as you enter the grounds of Oak Ridge Angus — the nostalgia of the ranch established in 1912 is hard to miss.

A 1940s farmhouse has been replaced with a pile of melted appliances and vehicles. Standing tall amongst the rubble is a scorched brick fireplace and chimney. Nails, debris and shattered windows trace the outskirts of the frame where the house once stood.



Just a few feet away, a concrete slab etched with “Oak Ridge Angus, Est. 1912” is one of the only things left unharmed. The building that once sat atop the concrete base is now demolished. The home at the top of the hill overlooking the property has been brought down to the studs. Only a tattered American flag flying high with pride is left to mark the property where generations of the LaFranchi family once resided.

Oak Ridge Angus, once known for its feedyard, milking barns, classic farmhouses and rolling pastures is now home to rubble, liquified fences and molten vehicles. But, through the flames and fire, the LaFranchi family remains a strong unit of cattlemen and women destined to rebuild and keep moving forward.

## **KINCADE FIRE MARKS ITS TERRITORY**

The Kincade Fire sparked its first embers on Wednesday, Oct. 23, right around 9:30 p.m.

By Thursday afternoon, more than 77 fire engines and hundreds of firemen and women had descended upon the area, doing their best to control the flames. The heart of California’s well-known wine country was on fire, but there were more than grapes in its pathway.

“Nothing could stop it,” says Cheryl LaFranchi, fourth-generation cattlegwoman and owner of Oak Ridge Angus in Calistoga, Calif. “By Saturday night, the fire turned around to face the ranch and the winds clocked in at 96 miles an hour.”

A wall of flames engulfed the ranch, and in just about an hour’s time, the place was gone. Of the 20 fires blazing in California that week, the Kincade fire would soon be known as one of the most destructive fires of the season.

“Those flames were taller than my pickup over there,” she says, pointing to the brand-new Ford F-250 sitting in the driveway as we walked through the damage. Crews were on-site digging up the remaining concrete and fencing. More than 90 loads of debris had been cleared from the site, with more left to be removed.

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The LaFranchi family had worked hard to put up hay for the winter; close to a four-month supply had been stored safely in barns at the home-base.

“When the fire left, we had only 11 bales remaining on Sunday morning,” LaFranchi says. “Talk about taking the fight out of you.”

Named for its beginning location of John Kincade Road just north of Geyserville in Sonoma, Calif., the fire was one of many that affected residents, farmers, ranchers and business owners in the Napa Valley region in the fall of 2019.

In total, the Kincade fire demolished more than 370 residential or commercial structures, damaging 60 others and left four people injured, according to Cal Fire.

“...11...12...13....yes, 13 of our structures have been burned to the ground,” LaFranchi continues counting. “Plus, four of our homes.”

## **AN ANGUS FAMILY LEGACY**

The LaFranchi family claims a long and storied history in the cattle industry. Massimino LaFranchi immigrated from Switzerland in 1888 and began milking cows in the Sonoma countryside. He met his wife, Anna Nicklaus in San Francisco and the pair purchased land just outside of Calistoga, Calif., in 1912. They raised their five children on that same property, and the fourth generation of LaFranchis now operate the very same farm. They named the business Oak Ridge Farm, as the property was lined with oak trees crawling the hills of their Knights Valley parcel.

“My dad was the youngest of five children,” LaFranchi says. “This has always been a family farm, where we’ve grown up with cattle all our lives.”

Originally established as a dairy herd in the early 1920s, the LaFranchis managed an elite herd of Ayrshire dairy cattle. The LaFranchi family exhibited their cattle throughout the country by railway, and still hold a love for the Ayrshire breed.

“They had what many people considered to be one of the best herds of Ayrshire cattle in the world,” LaFranchi continues. “One of the females they raised went on to be a national champion at the World Dairy Expo. She was the first cow other

than a Holstein to be named supreme champion.”

In 1975, the LaFranchi brothers dispersed their dairy herd to turn their focus on a new venture in the cattle industry — the Business Breed. Henry LaFranchi, Cheryl’s father, had purchased more land to begin running beef cattle on the rolling Sonoma coastal hills. Since then, the family has acquired long-term leases and rent more than 3,000 acres for their more than 600 head of Angus cattle.

“I’ve just kind of been a cowgirl forever, so it was something I wanted to do, come back to the farm,” Cheryl says. She returned home to the ranch after attending college, a dream she coveted for many years.

Currently, Cheryl and her husband, Frank Mongini, a veterinarian, manage the ranch with help of her brother, their nieces, nephews and a handful of full-time employees. In addition to their seedstock operation, the family also markets beef to their local restaurant community.

“We run about 160 head a year through our branded beef program that we have with the Sonoma County Meat Company,” Cheryl says. “We bring local beef to the restaurant market and it has worked out really great for us.”

The family held their inaugural Angus bull sale in 1979, and continued that tradition until 2017 when they moved to private treaty.

“Probably the thing that has changed the ranch the most and has been the most beneficial to us is our partnership with Bear Republic Brewing Company,” LaFranchi says. “They were a small microbrewery that started out here locally in Healdsburg. We’ve partnered with them for almost 30 years now. They aren’t so small anymore.”

In partnership with Bear Republic Brewing and the Redwood Empire Food Bank of Sonoma, the trio established the “Range to Table” initiative to combat local hunger in Sonoma County.

## **HOW IT WORKS**

Initiated by Oak Ridge Angus, the Range to Table donation program strives to put wholesome beef on the tables of low-income families, senior citizens and others who would go hungry in the Sonoma



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county area. The LaFranchi family volunteered to raise calves on open pasture and in their feedyard, and the feed for the donated calves would be supplied as brewers’ grain from Bear Republic brewing. Their slogan has become, “Grass Fed, Beer Finished.”

“When we first started raising the calves for the food bank, we were getting maybe 1,500 pounds (lb.) of brewers’ grains once a day,” LaFranchi says. “Then, pretty quickly it was 1,500 pounds twice a day. At the height of our partnership, we were getting 30,000 to 35,000 pounds of brewers’ grains a day, six days a week.”

Before the Kincadee fire, Oak Ridge Angus had established barns and a feeding system for their Range to Table program. Not only did they feed their own cattle, but they fed other calves for ranchers in the area.

“We’ve expanded the program from the first few head that we’ve donated, because now more of our

friends are donating cattle as well,” LaFranchi says. “In the last two years we’ve donated more than 22,000 pounds of ground beef to the food bank in Sonoma County.”

In addition to their partnership with the brewery and food bank, Cheryl and Frank are known to host many agricultural field days at their ranch, helping to bridge the gap between the ranchers and residents in the Sonoma community. They routinely bring cattle to seminars and clinics, and are known to give a helping hand whenever possible.

### **A COMMUNITY COMES FULL CIRCLE**

After the fire tore through their ranch, the LaFranchi family knew they had a challenge in front of them. But, they weren’t going to face that challenge alone.

“The farming community is just ... it’s a great community of people,” LaFranchi says with emotion. “I think you see it any time you look at

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Facebook. Any farming community or ranching community that's having a disaster, everybody's there to help."

The Oak Ridge Angus story had been seen and shared by thousands on the social media platform, raising awareness for their situation and inspiring folks to act. Friends and volunteers came to help put up fencing. Hay was brought to their aid.

"My one godson was the first one to get here," LaFranchi says. "He brought up a load of hay right through the fire with the flames going everywhere on Sunday just to get the cows something to eat. Then everyone started showing up just right at daybreak on Monday morning, it was incredible."

The Sonoma County Farm Bureau established a GoFundMe account, helping to raise more than \$50,000 in funds for the family. Their website reads, "Cheryl and Frank are our friends, high school classmates, veterinarian, and fellow ranchers. They have shown up with animals for demonstrations, Ag Days and livestock judging contests. How often has Frank responded in the middle of the night to an animal in need or volunteered his time to help at our local fairs? Cheryl and Frank have always stepped up when we needed them ... and now it's our turn to step-up for them and all those impacted."

Through the spread of their thoughtful campaign, Sonoma County Farm Bureau member Barlas Feeds completed a generous donation of 28 tons of alfalfa hay. Hundreds more sent gift cards for Home Depot, Amazon and local grocery stores. Construction companies have offered discounts on the rebuild of their homes and barns.

"I believe they might've called the governor and said 'we need to do something,'" LaFranchi says.

## **THE FUTURE OF OAK RIDGE ANGUS**

Looking outside the front entrance of Oak Ridge Angus lies rolling coastal pasture for far as the eye can see. Crevices are dotted with black cattle and old oak trees. The property has its own magical characteristics. Although it's situated just an hour north of Napa and two hours north of San Francisco, it feels like you've stepped back in time.

The Knights Valley pastures have been in the LaFranchi family for more than 100 years, and that won't change any time soon. As far as building is concerned, LaFranchi says it's something they will have to put on hold through the winter months.

"Of course, this couldn't have happened in May so we could have had the whole summer to rebuild," she says. "But, we will get through this. We're going to rebuild some things, and then we'll just kind of go from there. I've got to do something to keep myself busy for a few years."

With more than 100 years of history at this location, it will be hard to replicate what once was.

"It'll sure be different though," she says. "You never will ever rebuild all the stuff that was here. We've been super lucky, a lot of people that are helping us get by in the meantime. They're either giving us a discount or doing it from the goodness of their hearts, and that's been outstanding. Absolutely terrific." 