

A woman wearing a white cap and a purple shirt is riding a brown horse through a field. In the background, there is a herd of dark-colored cattle grazing in a grassy field. The scene is set in a rural, hilly area with trees and a clear sky.

step by step

Rome wasn't built in a day and neither was CK Cattle in Hope Hull, Ala. Chuck Madaris fell in love with Angus cattle about the same time he fell for Katie, his wife. He's been living his lifelong dream ever since.

Story by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Photos by Kathleen Evans

“My dad was in the Air Force, so my younger years were spent on military bases as far away as Japan,” Chuck says. “But when we were back in the states, we spent a lot of time at my grandparent's farm on my mom's side.”

This is where Chuck caught the bug to raise cattle, but it wasn't until he was 14 that he made his first bovine purchases. His dad retired from the Air Force and his family moved to the country where he could run a few head of commercial cattle with his grandparent's herd, setting his dreams of becoming a cattleman in motion.

Four years at Auburn University earned Chuck an animal science degree in 1976 and, most importantly, built a solid foundation to make a career in the cattle business.

“I started working for Katie's family, Circle E Farms, right out of college,” Chuck explains of how he got his foot in the door as a cattleman.

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“They had just gotten out of the dairy business but needed a manager for the beef cattle and hay operation. Katie was home from college when I borrowed a flashlight and we met for the first time. She helped me pull a calf that night and I knew I was in the right place. I ended up marrying the boss’s daughter.”

Day by day

In 1978, four registered Angus cow calf pairs began what is now the operation known as CK Cattle. Ten years later, they purchased a large tract of land just 22 miles from their homeplace. This is where the commercial operation began.

“We [Katie and the kids] moved there in 1989, that is when we decided on the name CK Cattle, since we needed another name for the second operation,” Chuck explains of how the CK stands for all the initials of his family: Chuck, Katie and

their children Charlie and Kathleen. Their herd of registered cattle had grown to 37 in those 11 years.

Slow growth has proven key to Chuck’s success.

“I have been real patient, I started small and I think that is a real asset,” Chuck says. “I bought the cattle that worked and have simply expanded on that. I paid close attention to calving internals and weaning ratios when I bought my first cattle. I still do today.”

It takes time and skill to build a customer base like Chuck has. He scoured the country for solid cows that worked in the environment year after year. The longevity and maternal traits were, and are, at the top of his list.

Slowly but surely Chuck’s patience paid off as the registered herd outnumbered the commercial cattle in the early 2000s. He purchased the land from his father-in-law and has been adding Black Belt acres ever since.



Pictured horseback (from left) are Shep Evans, Shelby Kate Madaris, Molly Jane Madaris and Ellis Ann Evans. Picture standing (from left) are Carrie and Charlie Madaris; Katie and Chuck Madaris; and Kathleen and Bradfield Evans.

Their numbers were around 120 at the turn of the century, now they manage over 800 cows, several hundred heifers and marketed nearly 250 bulls.

Be the future

Even in his commercial cattle ventures, Chuck was obsessed with data. Rarely does a calf go unweighed. Just about every animal records birth, weaning, and yearling weights with either ultrasound or carcass data collected, also.

"I put a major emphasis on weighing every calf, though it is the most difficult piece of data to collect," Chuck says. "One of the first things I learned in college, and still believe today, is that birth, weaning and carcass weight are highly genetically correlated to all other weights."

Birth weights and birth weight (BW) expected progeny differences (EPDs) are the most used data of his current customer base.

It's this attention to detail, coupled with his incessant patience, that leaves Chuck with so many repeat customers.

"I decided to raise registered cattle so I could follow the data and get added value for our efforts," Chuck says. "The two most important pieces of data are fertility and longevity, they will keep you in the business longer."

With each piece of the puzzle revealed, Chuck's humble wisdom becomes increasingly evident. He's the type of no-nonsense cattleman who values honesty above all else. Both in himself and his cattle.

"The most important step in this business is getting a cow to breed back and raise a calf every year," he adds. "Then you can focus on growth traits and next carcass characteristics. I may use a bull out of a cow with good maternal traits or growth traits, but I won't sacrifice either of those for a high marbling bull."

He's equipped with a love for travel, and rarely does a cow get artificially inseminated (AI'd) without Chuck first laying eyes on the bull in person. He refuses to chase numbers, simply demanding results in real time.

Pay the cost

With size, comes freedom. Though Chuck's main focus is with his registered Angus herd, he also dabbles in SimAngus and ChiAngus crosses.

"The ChiAngus are the perfect cross, especially for this environment," Chuck says of the heat tolerant cross thriving in the Alabama humidity each summer. "My maternal base is, and it always will be Angus. Their maternal and carcass traits are truly unmatched."

The real strength of Chuck's herd comes from years of strict guidelines for culling.

"He has been really tough on feet, utters and disposition," Katie says with a chuckle.

Too many producers try to fly before they are ready, Chuck adds. They will go out and buy 200 cows, and then expect their bull market to grow over night.

"It can be a very steep learning curve when you have a lot of money invested," he says. "It is much easier to cull an animal born on your place than one you bought."

Starting small and growing, both the cow herd and his bull market, has made all the difference for Chuck and Katie. After all, a customer base is not made in a day.

"If you can't be honest with yourself about if an animal will fit into your own program, then you probably won't be honest with your customer either," Katie says. "You have to be honest with yourself about your business and the animals if you plan to be honest with your customers."

Stronger we stay

As the business grew, so did the work load. Like many before them, Chuck and Charlie are a father-son duo at CK Cattle. That was Charlie's plan for as long as he can remember.

"Charlies has always been gifted mechanically, he can build and fix anything," Chuck says. "He's responsible for the top-notch facilities we currently get to work in." His wife Carrie works as a nurse and they have two girls, Shelby and Molly.

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Kathleen, on the other hand, spent some time as a teacher before putting her marketing degree to use for the family business. Much like Chuck, Kathleen's husband Bradfield was not raised on a livestock operation.

"Bradfield is very much a people person, he has really helped us out in the last ten years," Chuck says of his son-in-law. "He is tremendous in the marketing and customer relations side of things."

Chuck says they simply took the abilities of their children and their spouses and used them as assets to their program.

"When we brought our kids back into the operation, our program evolved to match their abilities," Chuck says of the operation that successfully supports three growing families.

When Katie isn't working side-by-side with her husband and kids, she gets to babysit the four grandchildren. The other two grandkids, Ellis Ann and Shep, belong to Kathleen and Bradfield. All of them live within a mile and a half of each other.

With such a massive herd, part of Chuck's success with data comes from the large contemporary groups he maintains in even bigger pastures.

"All the pastures are connected so we can always rotate them," he explains. "Though that gets to be

tough in the winter when the weather is damp."

The challenge of Alabama comes from the weather extremes. Though the ground rarely freezes, the excess moisture can be difficult for both men and cattle to operate in.

"We supplement for grass primarily in January and February because the mud makes it so difficult to graze," Chuck says. "We still grow fescue down here and as the weather warms up in the spring, it can present a challenge for our cattle."

Regardless of those challenges, Chuck's patience and perseverance keep him pressing forward. He says his operation will continue to grow as long as there are family members that want to perpetuate this lifestyle.

"Angus is where we are and they are where we are headed in the future," he says. "Our entire income is based off what these cattle do for us."

This grass-roots, traditional multi-generational operation might not be unique from a national standpoint, but it certainly is for Alabama.

"I have bred many breeds and I just always come back to Angus," Chuck adds. "They are the best maternally in the country and seem to work in all parts of the U.S. Angus is the complete package." **AJ**

