

Cattleman & Conservationist

*Glynn Williams wears both hats
on his Tennessee Angus farm*

by Jerilyn Johnson

Glynn Williams, the cattleman, understands genetics and production practices.

Glynn Williams, the farmer, understands crops and machinery maintenance.

Glynn Williams, the conservationist, understands soil erosion and other powers of nature.



JERILYN JOHNSON PHOTOS

What Williams, and many other beef producers like him, would like to better understand is how to put all of the above together and still make a living.

Williams Cattle Company is home to a herd of registered Angus cattle, cotton and forage crops, along with the Williams family — Glynn, his wife Wanda, and their two sons, Justin and Mason. Glynn's brother, Gary, is also a working partner in the cattle and crop operations.

The Williams are located east of Jackson, near Luray, in the rolling hills of western Tennessee. This area has fragile topsoil and is infamous for high rates of soil erosion. And although their farm was selected as a Tennessee Resource Management Conservation Demonstration Farm a few years ago, Williams is not satisfied he has accomplished enough.

The Resource Management Conservation Demonstration Farm program is a cooperative effort of the USDA Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). Its goal is to encourage farmers to follow good conservation practices, manage resources responsibly, and still operate their farm as economically efficient as possible.

"Conservation is important to me," Williams says. "Our farm dictates it. If we don't use conservation practices, it will just wash away."

Every summer for the past 14 years Williams has addressed a problem on his farm. Last summer his conservation project was building a grade structure, pan and tank to help maintain water level. Small, simple projects are



Angus cattle graze contentedly on the improved rolling pastureland of Williams Cattle company in Western Tennessee.

beneficial, as well. Williams prevents cattle path erosion by putting out obstacles and rerouting cattle every few months.

Detailed records are kept of every practice and its results, and Williams is always searching for new and better ways to conserve natural resources.

Although government cost-share programs are available to farmers like Williams, he has financed most projects himself. He questions the need for extra government regulations and has found out firsthand that there are too many programs and not enough conservation agents or engineers to carry them out.

Land and water conservation is a Williams family tradition. "I was taught to respect the land by my parents and they by their parents," Glynn says. Credit also goes to Jim McKee, a former Henderson County Extension leader, who influenced Williams to become involved with the Resource Management Conservation program.

"Jim led us in the right direction when we were struggling in the cattle business and he encouraged us to get more involved with a conservation program," Williams says. "We never regretted it."

Complementing soil conservation in Williams' mind is forage management. He believes that a diversified forage system is essential for his farm. The Williams' row crop operation is currently being phased out. In its place will be alfalfa and other forages.

"Integrity of your records is the most important part of being a purebred breeder."

Tall fescue dominates western Tennessee pastureland, so Williams has been experimenting with warm-season grasses, such as big bluestem, and sowing wheat and ryegrass into

bottomland formerly in cotton crops. The result, Williams hopes, will be year-round grazing for their cattle and increased cost efficiency down the road.

Evaluating the type of cattle he raises was also an important part of the total resource management plan. All cattle are selected for their ability to maintain themselves on forage. No extra creep feed or protein supplements are fed on this farm.

"If you don't put enough environmental pressure on your cattle herd to make the lower end cows sort themselves out, then the truly superior females never have a chance to prove themselves," he says.

"Granted, you can't starve a profit out of a cow," he adds. "But what really determines profits in the cow business is how many pounds of beef you can sell per acre of grass."

When it came to breed selection, Williams is confident he made the right decision. "My family raised commercial cattle for years on these Tennessee hills," he says. "We experimented with several breeds — British and exotica — and implemented AI and recordkeeping programs. In the mid-70's, when the



Glyn Willims constantly works to prevent problems on his highly erodible west Tennessee cattle farm. His efforts led to recognition as a Resource Management Conservation Demonstration Farm.

cattle market bottomed out, it was the black cows that supported our farm. Our records indicated they had the highest calving percentage and were easy keepers. A few years later, in 1982, we had the opportunity to buy some registered Angus heifers and cow-calf pairs. It was an easy transition."

After years of doing his homework, Williams has built a reputable herd of 110 females. Tehama Bando Traveler, VDAR New Trend and Scotch Cap breeding have contributed to his program.

The herd is enrolled in the American Angus Association's Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program and is bred for performance efficiency, plus form and function. Williams likes moderate-size cattle with a balance of traits. His average cow size is 1,350 pounds. They are required to produce and wean quality, growthy calves on forage alone. Weaning weight for bull calves averages 800 pounds, while heifer calves average 580 pounds.

"I'd like to develop a herd of outstanding females. My goal is to breed every cow to have a heifer calf better than her," he says.

The top five traits he selects for reflect both his breeding and conservation programs' goals:

Williams' Top 5 Traits

1. Maternal ability
2. Calving ability
3. Fleshing ability
4. Disposition
5. Growth

This cattleman clearly understands his customers and how to market products from his balanced breeding program. This past year he marketed 30 yearling bulls (private treaty) to commercial cow-calf producers in an 80-mile radius of his farm. These producers have total trust and confidence in Williams —100 percent of them were repeat customers and many purchased bulls sight unseen.

Williams has earned this reputation by keeping accurate records and giving his customers extra attention and service. "The integrity of your records is the most important part of being a purebred breeder," he says. "For example, we keep contemporary groups as true contemporary groups. If you just keep EPDs to generate numbers on a performance certificate, it's all for nothing. The only way to identify an outstanding female or bull is to examine the group they were managed in."

Test stations have also been helpful in marketing bulls and gaining respect. Williams has consigned bulls to the Spring Hill Performance Test Station near Columbia, Tenn., where they have been successfully marketed to producers from several different regions of the country.

Williams, who served as president of the Tennessee Beef Cattle Improvement Association in 1990, was instrumental in establishing a new test category at Spring Hill. This category is for low birthweight EPD or calving ease bulls. These bulls are put in a separate contemporary group and are ratioed between themselves.

The idea was to attract breeders who were afraid of consigning their low birthweight bulls to a test station where growth is emphasized. "What we have found is that many of these low birthweight bulls can compete with the top growth bulls," Williams says. "And we have found that Angus bulls usually have the advantage because of the breed's vast genetic pool."

Williams' favorite experience is when potential customers visit his farm and cattle. "When I hop in the pickup with them and I see an Angus Sire Evaluation report on the dashboard or seat, I get high," he says.

If they comment on the farm's well managed resources or ask about a certain conservation practice, Williams gets higher.

"It's a kindred spirit ---here's someone I can talk to and understand."