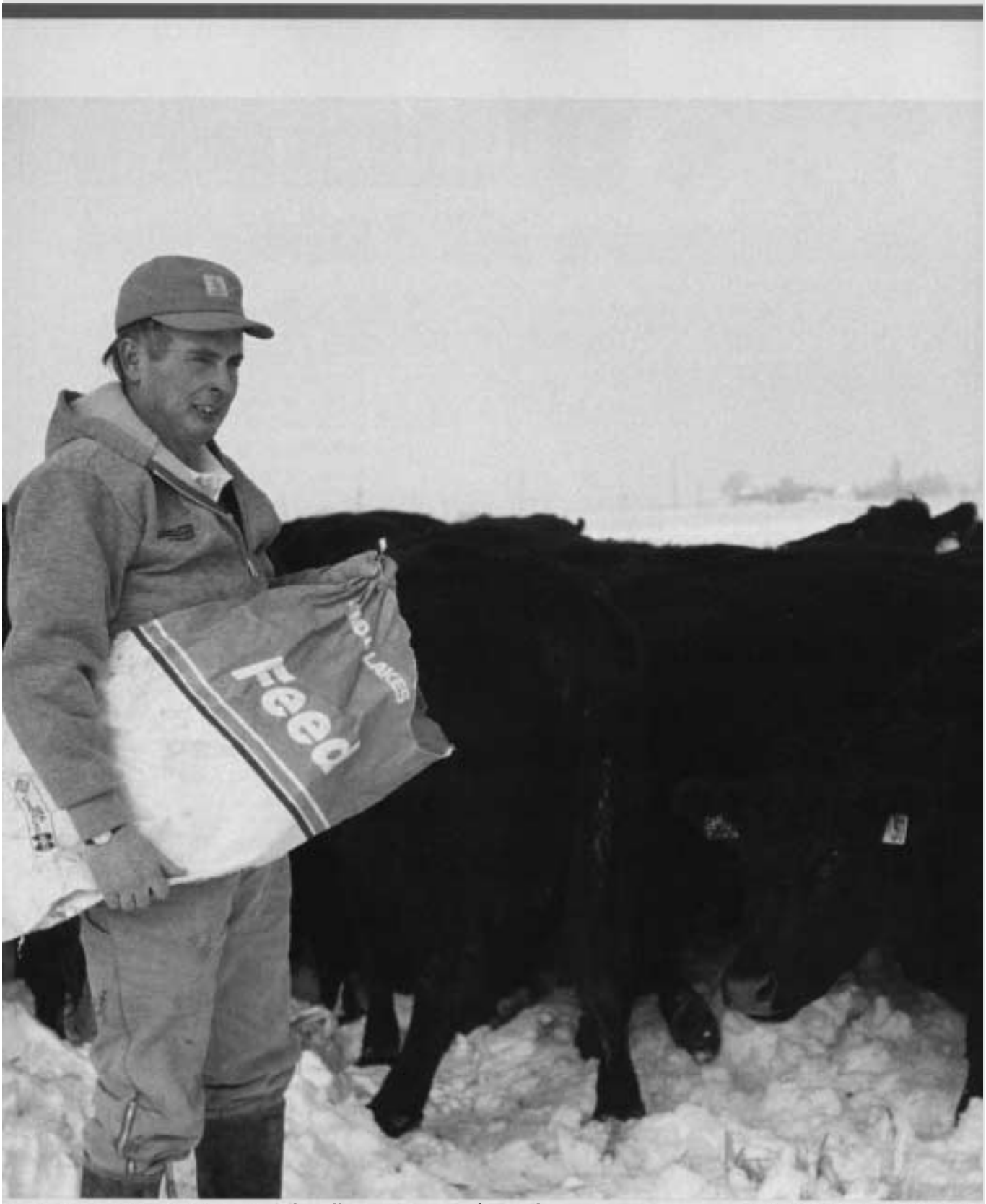

Neal Hadley, cow manager for Production Angus Associates in Iowa.

TROY SMITH PHOTOS

PRODUCTION ANGUS ASSOCIATES

Seven Iowa breeders join forces to create a prototype performance project.

By Troy Smith

True to fame, Iowa is corn country. It's particularly true in Hardin County, Iowa, where corn farming is the primary agricultural pursuit. To complement their grain and soybean enterprises, many Hardin County farmers also have swine operations. There aren't many cow herds, however, and the few that do exist are relatively small. Twenty-five to 30 head is typical.

A standout among the local cow outfits is Production Angus Associates, headquartered near the community of New Providence. Production Angus Associates is unique, because it is a purebred operation and because of its size. Angus brood cow numbers are maintained at 250 head. But it should be noted that the tally represents the collective efforts of seven individual cow owners.

Neal Hadley, a native to the New Providence area, is one of the owners and serves as cow manager, Hadley is the only group member actively engaged in production agriculture. Remaining members have chosen professional careers in veterinary medicine or laboratory research, and the group also includes an Extension beef specialist and an engineer.

"I'm very pleased to be a part of what I think is a very unique operation" says Hadley. "With several owners involved, success depends on good communication. So, we've tried hard to communicate and to be willing to compromise."

Production Angus Associates traces its roots to an investment group founded by Bob deBaca, formerly of Iowa State University. DeBaca and his fellow investors worked during the 1970s to accumulate a set of select Angus females. In 1982 Hadley was brought into the group as manager of its cow herd.

"In response to economic forces of the early '80s, I had dispensed my own cows," says Hadley, "so the invitation from deBaca's group was a good opportunity to get a new start in the cow business. The group had 80 cows by 1986, when deBaca sold out. But the group survived and evolved into the operation we have today."

That evolution yielded Production Angus Associates (PAA) whose members, in addition to Hadley, include Bill Switzer, former dean of research at Iowa State University's veterinary college. Switzer, plays an active role in PAA management as does Daryl Strohbehn, Extension beef specialist at Iowa State. Other associates are Iowa State veterinary diagnostician Howard Hill and Dan Griffin, formerly with the university's college of engineering. Also involved are former Iowan Dan Farrington, who works in research and development for Merck end Co., plus Gene Lloyd, a veterinary practitioner from Shenandoah, Iowa.

Bill Switzer says PAA members have individual as well as collective goals. "Each has his own personal goals that might include economic satisfaction as well as the opportunity to put into practice our concepts and precepts," explains Switzer. "Collectively, we are trying to

Production Angus Associates

contribute directly to the commercial cattle industry through the production of performance Angus seedstock. By pooling assets, our efforts are more economically viable and, hopefully, our contribution is more significant."

Switzer stresses that PAA is a no-frills operation that follows the motto: "Cull on performance, breed on EPDs and type." He and the other associates credit Hadley as a down-to-earth kind of cowman.

As custodian of the PAA herd, Hadley finds it complementary to his own farming and swine finishing enterprises. He owns and leases additional grass for summer grazing and the cows are wintered in Hadley's stalk fields.

"Running a commercial cow's environment," is what Hadley calls it. And he believes maintaining optimum production under these conditions is important to making their seedstock useful to commercial customers.

PAA cows carry eartags color-coded for ownership and are kept in mixed groups. Computerized records are maintained for each cow under a system handled by Switzer. Switzer says the system allows for as many as 40 recorded items per cow, if needed. Primary information for each individual includes: hip height, pelvic area, sire, dam, sire of dam, individual EPDs, number of pregnancies, average weaning ratio, service sire and his EPDs.

Switzer provides a spreadsheet printout to each group member to use in evaluating individual cow performance. He also provides information on computerized sample matings to help his associates with sire selection.

"Each year we sort bulls from the Angus Sire Evaluation Summary, selecting sires that we think will enhance our needs and objectives," adds Switzer. "We may have a list of as many as 40 potential AI sires. Then, we make some contacts and attempt to learn more about each bull's strengths weaknesses and phenotypes of bulls none of us have seen in the flesh. That process usually trims our list down to 25 potential sires."

From that final list, Switzer will run 10 to 15 sample matings for each female in the PAA herd. Using each cow's current EPDs and those for each potential sire, Switzer generates estimated EPDs for their progeny.

Neal Hadley and his son Dustin check the PAA cow herd.

"Each owner determines the matings for his own cows, but the cow records coupled with sample matings make a useful tool," Switzer says. "We think EPDs are extremely important, but you can't rely on them exclusively. EPDs are an excellent place to start, but you have to evaluate phenotype and production performance too. We're seeing our best bull calves born to heifers and younger cows, so that encourages us. I think it tells us that our decision process for saving females and selecting sires is working."

Hadley and his associates have shied away from using uniformity as a selection criteria when evaluating females. There has been some advantage to producing different types of bulls for customers with different needs. Growth bulls, as well as calving ease bulls, have been in demand.

However, the average EPDs for the collective herd seem to be trending toward a balance of traits. Birthweight values have declined to an average of 3.6, while milk values have increased to average 8.0. Weaning weight EPD averages about 25 and yearling weight values average 43.

PAA currently has 80 bulls being developed and performance tested. The bull's average EPDs are 3.2 for birthweight, 11 for milk, and 47 for yearling weight. The bulls go to a nearby backgrounding lot where Switzer monitors the bulls while they are under the contracted care of a local cattle feeder.

The top performing bulls are offered at Production Angus Associate's annual production sale in March.

For his contribution to Production Angus Associates, Hadley receives a share of each calf crop, much like other cow-share arrangements. Hadley's contract with each individual owner determines the split. In addition, Hadley is paid a per head fee for replacement heifer development.

Once the heifers are grown and each owner has determined his replacement choices, Hadley has the opportunity to make selections from each owners string. Some of his associates' culls, when retained by Hadley, have become top producers in the collective herd. It's been the cause for some good-natured rib poking and kept replacement selection on a competitive level.

All parties involved seem pleased with the operation and progress of Production Angus Associates. They are sure that similar arrangements could be fostered among other groups of cow owners. They hope their prototype might encourage others to pursue their own model.

"It takes maturity and a give-and take attitude to make something like this work," says Strohbehn. "There can be no hidden agendas. A unified front must be presented to your clientelle that instills integrity and confidence in your operation. I can't overemphasize this."

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