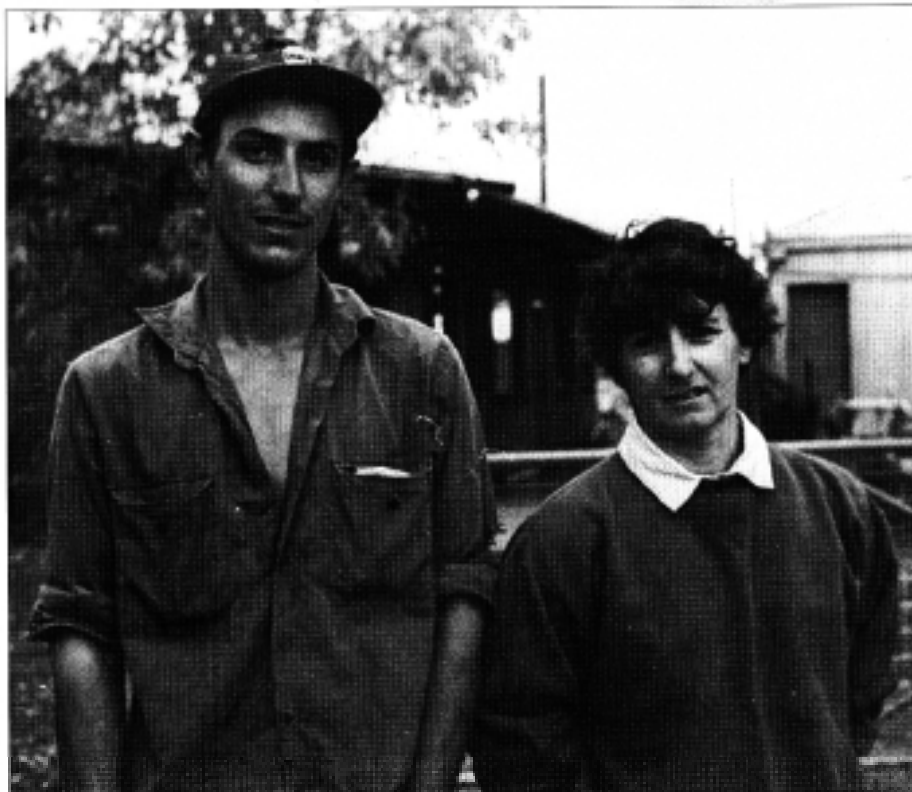


# LIFE ON DE ROSE HILL STATION

*The Fuller Family and their herd of Angus cattle survive  
South Australia's toughest challenges.*

SPECIAL REPORT BY KEITH EVANS



*Barbara Fuller and her son, Allan, help manage a herd of 2,000 Angus cows at their De Rose Hill Station in South Australia.*

## Where's the toughest cattle country in the world?

My vote goes to the arid heart of Australia, where you'll find the Fuller Family's De Rose Hill Station and a herd of 2,000 straightbred commercial Angus cows.

De Rose Hill is located approximately 220 miles south of Alice Springs, and roughly the same distance southeast of Ayers Rock. This is dry, isolated, scrub brush covered country where nocturnal kangaroos graze in the daytime and wild dingoes stalk calves, injured livestock and wild rabbits at night.

Here, where cattle ranches are known as stations, the Fullers' commercial Angus herd grazes over 700 square miles of country. That's an average of 224 acres per cow, and sometimes it is not enough.

Moisture is at best unpredictable and, in some seasons, nonexistent. For example, in 1988 it rained 14 inches in seven hours. The deluge formed a lake in one of the pastures that took six months to evaporate. Then came 1994 with only 2 inches of rain for the entire year. The total jumped to 3.5 inches in 1996, according to Rex Fuller. Yet De Rose Hill Station produces some of the best Angus feeder cattle in the country.

This fascinating beef cattle operation will be on the American Angus Association tour to Australia and the World Angus Forum in October. It was founded by Doug Fuller in 1932 when he came to this part of the world to drill wells and raise sheep. One customer, short of cash, paid him in cattle and Fuller selected Angus. In those days Angus were about half the price of Herefords, so he got twice as many cows. He's been raising Angus cows ever since.

The station, at its current location in South Australia, just south of the Northern Territory border, was established in 1944. It's operated by Doug's son, Rex, and his wife, Barbara, and their two children, Allan, who is out of college and back on the station, and Susan, 19, a student. Doug Fuller now spends a good deal of his time at a home down south near Adelaide, where he can escape the fierce summer heat that can hit 130 degrees Fahrenheit.

The Fuller Family literally carved the cattle station out of the wilderness. "We lived in tents when we moved here in 1944," Rex says.

Isolation and self-reliance are a way of

life at De Rose Hill Station. Until the late 1980s, Highway 87, which runs through the station connecting Alice Springs 220 miles to the north and Adelaide, 730 miles to the south, was a graveled, rough, one-track road. Even today, much of the land is open range, and cattle on the highway are a much bigger threat than oncoming traffic.

A bus runs once each day from both the north and the south. Orders for supplies and food are radioed or telephoned to stores, usually in Alice Springs. Merchants put the order on the bus which the Fullers meet out on the highway. The closest neighbor for many years was some 45 minutes away.

The Fuller children attended elementary school in a little building in back of the house, connected to a teacher by radio, the famous School of the Air. Both children attended high school and college near Adelaide.

There were no telephones at De Rose Hill Station until fairly recently. Short-wave radios were used for communication. That changed for the Fullers a few years ago when the railroad that runs through their property converted to microwave communication. Their home was within sight line of a railroad microwave relay dish, which they were allowed to tap into for telephone communication. Suddenly their telephone connected them with the world.

Paving of Highway 87 in 1987 brought more traffic and a few more people. Today Kulgera, a community 37 miles north of the Fullers' station, sports a combination restaurant, bar, service station and grocery store. Still, the isolation is more than most people could endure.

**Despite the many changes,** water for drinking remains a scarce commodity. The water that flows from the wells is laced with minerals, making it unfit for human consumption. Cattle, on the other hand, thrive on it. As a result, rainwater is caught and stored for drinking and washing.

In order to maintain some green grass, to remind her of childhood near Adelaide, Barbara nourishes a small patch of lawn at the front of the house. Otherwise green grass is found only following rains, and then only in patches. Driving through the area it appears there is nothing available for cows to eat.

Electricity is supplied by a diesel generator which is shut off each night at 10 p.m. Beef is home grown, home butchered



*Rex Fuller sorts cattle at De Rose Hill. Excellent working facilities like these keep labor costs to a minimum.*

and stored in freezers. The station shop is where most mechanical repairs can be made, and where many supplies are stored.

On my first visit to De Rose Hill Station in 1986, about a year before the highway was paved, the shop contained a truckload of Fosters Lager, which Rex had traded for. Most supplies, however, are more practical, although who's to say, given the sizzling summers.

The cattle operation is basically managed by the family, with little hired help. That's possible, at least partially, thanks to an innovative system of fenced watering yards and adjoining working corrals with a loading chute. Access to and from each water yard is through spring loaded spear or trap gates.

There is no such thing as a roundup. Cattle are "mustered" by simply locking the "out" gate. When there is no natural water available, the bulk of the cattle in any one of the large paddocks served by the water yard can be gathered within 24 hours. There are 30 of these water yard and trap systems on the 700-square mile station. The largest one has 120 square miles of grazing area feeding into it.

Like most of the cattle operations in this part of Australia, there is no set breeding season. Bulls stay with the cows year around. In good years cows will calve every 10 months or so, but in dry years when feed is in short supply, cows won't recycle and breed nearly so quickly.

"You can't time the weather around here," Rex says. "It's better to let the cattle work it out themselves."

**Approximately four bulls** are run per 100 cows. They stay with the herd until they die from injury or are culled because of age or infirmity. In fact, Rex Fuller admits, "I don't know how many bulls I have. Maybe 90 or 100. If the season is good then I go out and buy more bulls to be sure the cows are bred. If the season is bad and there is no good feed, then we don't buy bulls."

Bull buying is important, because survival of the fittest rules the herd. "They sort it out themselves or they don't carry on," is the way Rex describes it. Cows get no help with calving; even first-calf heifers must make it on their own. As a result, low to moderate birth weight records are important for the herd bulls.

In addition, the Fullers want bulls with moderate to high milk, plus growth that is slightly above the Australian Angus breed average.

Rex likes good milking cows, which seems to go against the conventional wisdom that cows with low milk do better in dry country. But when there is enough rain, the feed is strong enough to produce more milk and heavier calves. When rain and grass are both in short supply, Rex weans calves earlier, to give the cows a break.

That's different than it was years ago.

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Doug Fuller tells of a different program to save nursing cows during a drought. In the early days, before the property was fenced and the traps were set up, there was no economical way to ship feed in, and sometimes no money to buy it. The standard way to keep cows from starving to death under those conditions was to shoot their calves.

Registered bulls are used exclusively. The Fullers pay around \$3,000 Australian for them. Last year one top-quality bull was purchased for \$8,200 Australian, more than some registered breeders pay. (An Australian dollar is equal to about 78 cents in U.S. currency.)

Until a little over two years ago, the station herd size was 1,000 cows. Steers were carried over until they were about two years old, then sold to operations in the South where the cattle were finished, mostly on grass. But the Asian high-quality beef market has changed all that. Lot feeding, as they call it in Australia, is on the increase to produce beef for Japan and other Pacific Rim countries. As a result, demand for Angus has grown tremendously.

Feedlots today want young Angus cattle. Fuller now sells his calves soon after weaning, thus making more grass available for cows. So over the last few years the herd has doubled in size to 2,000 head. This gives them about 1,000 steers to sell a year. Most of the heifers which don't go back into the herd as replacements are sold to fill the flourishing demand for commercial Angus replacement females.

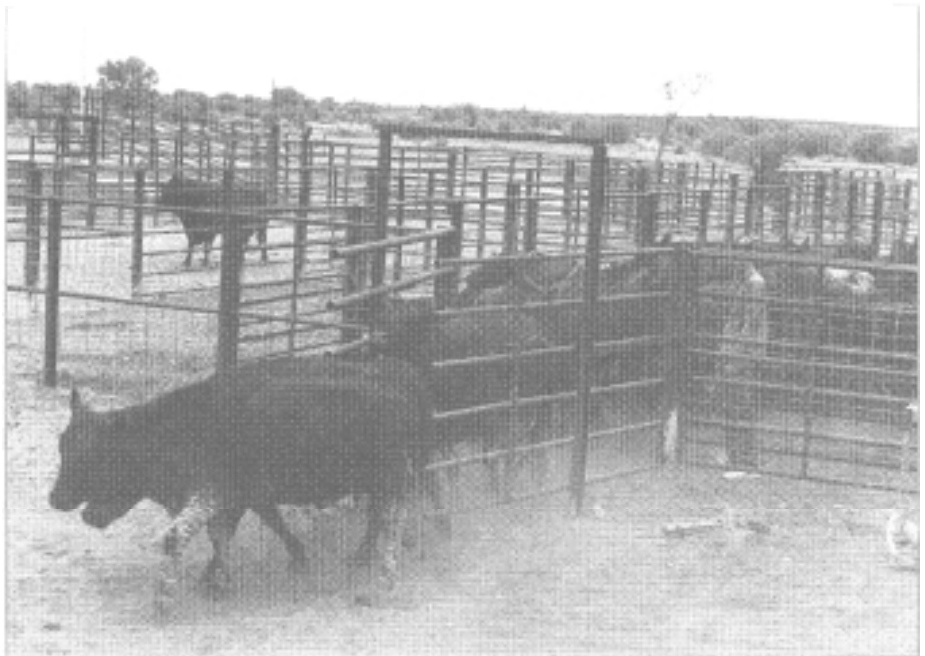
Calves are sorted off and weaned as they mature. Every day, when calves are being gathered for sale, one or two traps are closed. The herd is worked through the corrals and the calves to be weaned, usually between 9 and 14 months of age, are sorted off. Barren cows and injured bulls are also sorted out. The steers are brought to a new covered facility near the house where they remain until they are eating on their own

Farm roads that can handle trailer trucks connect all the traps with the headquarters. In all, the Fullers maintain some 298 miles of graded roads on the station. As truckload lots of steers are gathered they are shipped.

In the past, the lighter end of the steers (from 550 to 700 pounds) have been trucked north to a seaport and shipped to the Philippines or Indonesia. There they were finished in feedlots and were much preferred to the Brahman type cattle that are usually available in that country.



*A bull with a group of cows at one of the De Rose Hill Station water yards. The light colored legs on some of the cows and calves are the result of dried mud from a puddle formed when a tank overflowed. The Fullers buy high-quality bulls, competing with some Australian registered breeders for top genetics.*



*Cows leave from a spear gate after their calves have been sorted off. The gate is simply chained shut in order to gather the herd for working.*

For the past 18 months, however, all De Rose Hill Station cattle have been sold domestically. Most of the steers are trucked south to feedlots around Adelaide. A 12-month-old Angus steer is currently worth only \$300 Australian or about \$234 in U.S. currency. This is down from a value of \$350 per steer two years ago.

**When we left De Rose Hill Station** in May 1995, Rex Fuller told the travel agent and me, "You're welcome to bring your

Angus tour to visit if we are still here."

The "if" was prompted by a land claim against the Fuller property by the local Aboriginal people. The Fullers could lose the property that they have built up over the last half century or so. But it hasn't happened yet, and American visitors in October are sure to get a look at this fascinating Angus cattle operation in what everyone who sees it is sure to agree is some of the toughest, driest cattle country anywhere in the world.

