

# Ginger Hill Works Within the Parameters

BY JANET MAYER

A lot of business savvy and a little luck have led to longevity and accomplishments at Ginger Hill, a Virginia Angus breeding farm owned and operated by the Miller Family.

Having worked in the operation for the past 40 years, Newbill Miller says he attributes the success to the philosophy of breeding for balance while always keeping in mind that the end product is beef.

"My father instilled in me that a breeder has got to work within the parameters of practical economics," he explains. "This means the cattle we breed have to work under

our conditions as well as the conditions of the customers who buy them. The economics of the purebred business to me is to furnish seedstock for the commercial industry and, if you are good enough, to furnish seedstock for the purebred industry as well."

Started in 1949 by Newbill's father, Dick, the original operation was begun with 300 acres of land and a small herd of commercial cattle. Since that time, the acreage has increased to 600, and the cattle have changed to 125 head of purebred registered Angus which have made their mark in both the commercial and

purebred beef business.

Over the past 47 years, the Miller Family has also increased to include Newbill's wife, Carol, three sons, Brooke, Hodge and Jay, their wives and nine grandchildren. Since Dick's death in 1981, Newbill has not lacked for help because his sons gradually became involved in the operation as they were growing up.

"I told my sons I would be happy to have them be part of the operation," Newbill says. "But I insisted they have an outside income. Hodge, who lives here in the farm house, is a fruit broker, and Brooke, who lives nearby, is a medical doctor.

My son, Jay, previously a real estate and timber broker, lives in Twin Bridges, Mont., where he manages his father-in-law's ranch."

Although the fourth Miller generation is too young to participate in management decisions, several members are already working at the farm. Hopes are understandably high that the farm will be perpetuated as it was when Newbill joined his father in the operation in the mid 1950s.

"My father and I became partners about 1956, which was the same time we started breeding purebred cattle," Newbill recalls. "The choice of Angus was based on the fact that our commercial cows were basically Angus, and we had been using mostly Angus bulls. I think my father had always found the Angus breed did so much better than the Shorthorns and Herefords in the herd, so the decision was an easy one."

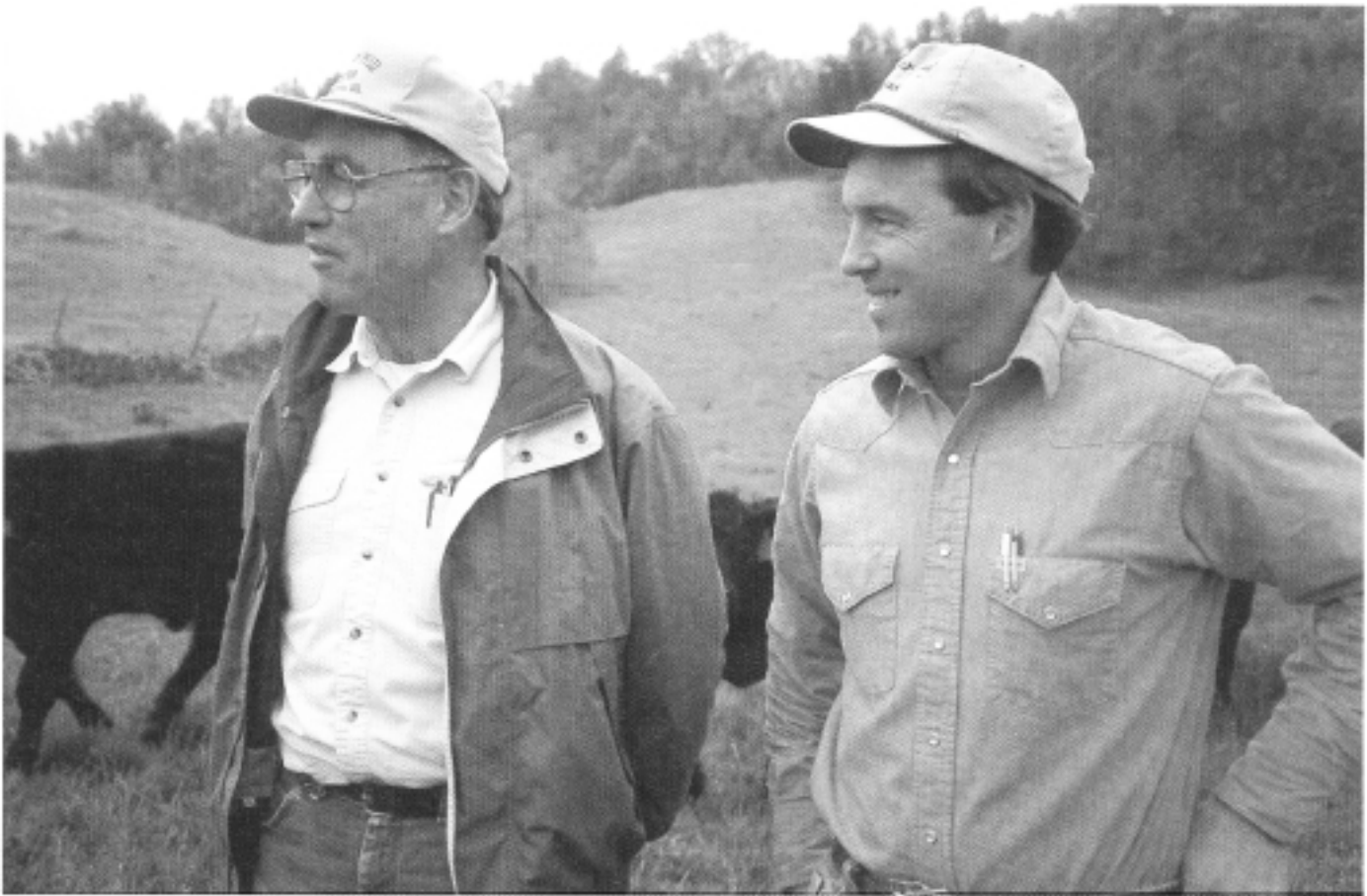
While still maintaining the commercial herd, the father and son set down the criteria that a purebred cow had to be better than a commercial cow to stay at Ginger Hill. "After 10 or 12 years, the purebred herd was doing so well that we made the decision to disperse the commercial cattle," Newbill says.

The Miller Family manages Ginger Hill as what could be described as a no-frills operation. Still located at the original site outside the small town of Washington in northern Virginia, the farm nestles in the lush green hills where a gingery tasting plant grows; thus the unusual name, Ginger Hill.

A simple sign at the end of a short lane marks the way to the well-kept farm, which appears to be geared more to being functional than fancy. From a distance, the cattle grazing on a nearby pasture look to be ordinary black cattle. At closer range they readily measure up to their reputation for being uniform, well-fleshed cows. In the absence of creep feeding, the September and October 1996 born calves were in surprisingly



*This female and her September calf typify the breed quality, functionality and balanced traits of Ginger Hill's breeding program.*



*Newbill (left) and Brooke Miller manage their Ginger Hill Angus Farm with the goal of producing a quality end product - beef.*

good condition after the especially hard winter of 1995 and a late arriving spring.

Without the assistance of outside help, the family is the major labor force at the farm, although everyone involved holds down an outside job with the exception of Newbill, who works at the farm full time. At 60, and recently retired as a real estate broker, Newbill says he is busier than ever. Newbill and his three sons each own about 25 percent of the Ginger Hill herd, and the work in the day-to-day operation of the farm is shared by Newbill, Hodge and Brooke.

"I've been working with cattle all of my life," Brooke says. "Of course, the cattle I've worked with have always been Angus, which was a good choice made by my father and grandfather. I find that the Angus are just easier to sell.

"I feel we are a bit unique for a purebred breeder in the East, because every year we are selling just about all of our bulls to commercial breeders, with just a

few, maybe three or four, going to purebred breeders. Actually, right now, commercial people that have been using other breeds are coming to look at our bulls."

Most of the Ginger Hill bulls are sold to commercial producers in Western states such as Montana. The Millers feel the reason for this market opening up is that bull prices are higher in that section of the country

"A commercial producer can buy a high quality bull from the East, ship it home and still pay less than he would to buy in his own part of the country,"

Newbill explains. "A lot of the top-end bulls out there go to purebred breeders, who are able to pay more than the commercial man can, so this opens the door to us. We have been selling out there for several years now, and the breeders are very satisfied with the quality of our bulls."

In the fall of 1994, Ginger Hill held its first production sale with 49 lots sold to breeders

from 14 states. In 1995 they followed suit with a successful sale of about 50 lots. In 1996 one of the buyers, TD Cattle Company, Hern, Texas, eliminated the need for the production sale by buying 38 Ginger Hill females by private treaty.

"Last May, we sent them a whole potbelly load," Newbill explains. "They are just getting started in Angus and looking to build their numbers, so we called them and faxed them descriptions of the animals, and because they had bought them us in the past, they bought from sight unseen. TD has been in business for quite awhile with other breeds, which they will still keep. They are really nice people who understand the cattle business. Selling to them was most gratifying."

**The Millers have set standards for the Ginger Hill herd that are rigid and simple: they select cattle to be problem free. They say if there is a**

mistake, even if it isn't the fault of that animal, they don't want it, because they don't want to take the chance of perpetuating a problem.

The main herd calves in September and October in the pasture to prevent health problems such as scours. However, embryo transfer (ET), which is done on a limited basis, goes on year-round, making calving on a small scale an on-going process.

For cows to be used in the ET program, they must have good records, have calved several times and proven they are fertile and problem free. Sires used in the program are usually from an outside bloodline. The 6807 and Executive 727 bulls have been used heavily for ET in the past. The majority of cows in the herd are pasture bred, using sires from the Ginger Hill program with a small number bred by artificial insemination (AI).

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"We like to think we have AI quality bulls in the pasture," Brooke says. "We have seen recently that the AI-sired females just don't perform as well as the females by our own bulls. In 1993 we compared a group of 25 Ginger Hill two-year-old heifers against a group of 10 AI-sired two-year-old heifers. The AI group had a ratio of 91.50 and the GH group had a ratio of 101.50 against the whole herd ratio. We didn't feel we were doing ourselves any good using AI. Not that there aren't any AI bulls that could compete; it's just that we know which of our own sires will work for us."

The Millers, however, are quick to credit many AI sires with helping to build their herd, such as Ankony Dynamo, several Wye bulls and Rito 72. Brooke also names Cracker Jack Baros 147 M, called Hungry Jack, a bull from the Erdmann Angus Ranch, Wetonka, S.D., as having had the most impact on their breeding program.

"At the time, most of the cattle industry was pretty well show oriented," Brooke recalls. "We chose to use Hungry Jack, a more performance-type bull with a tremendous amount of body and fleshing ability, and he gave us a tremendous set of daughters. Because of his type, I would imagine that Hungry Jack would be real popular in the breed today."

The Millers feel the Hungry Jack daughters are exceptionally fertile and by breeding them to Shamrock HK, at one time the high maternal bull in the breed, they have produced daughters which prove to be extremely productive with excellent udders.

Owning one-third interest in GDAR Executive 727, a bull that excels in muscle while having a lot of maternal traits, also contributed to the Miller's breeding program as did several other bulls bought from the

Gartner-Denowh Angus Ranch in Montana.

When selecting sires, close attention is paid to expected progeny differences (EPDs), but the Millers say EPDs don't tell anything about structure and soundness.

"I feel that EPDs are the second best tool a beef producer can have," says Newbill. "The first is sound judgment. Before using a particular sire, we try to learn as much as we can about a

*"The repeat customer is the backbone of our bull business."*

sire by looking at him as well as his progeny. We are looking for problem-free cattle which have balance. We don't want something that has got to stand at the feed trough; our cattle are bred to harvest grass and forages. We have a definite idea on what we like to see in a cow and a bull as do the commercial people who buy from us. They understand that we have good EPDs and performance cattle but, foremost, they eyeball the cattle. Actually they keep us on track."

Keeping these prerequisites in mind, the Millers, in partnership with several other farms, purchased the 1995 top indexing bull from the Treasure Bull Test in Montana, WRA Treasure, for \$50,000.

This bull goes back to a Hungry Jack daughter we sold to one of our neighbors 10 or 15 years ago," Brooke says. "The bull had a pin ration of 139 and a 125 yearling ratio."

In the past, Ginger Hill bulls have done well in their own right at the Midland Bull Test in Montana. They had the top indexing bull at the test in 1990, a Traveler son out of a

Shamrock/Hungry Jack daughter, which sold for \$24,000. In 1991 a 727 son was the top yearling weight bull at the test. Since that time, the family has chosen not to send bulls to test stations, however, because of the high cost involved.

Ginger Hill 6807 Traveler 23, otherwise known as Bubba, is another Angus bull the Millers have great hopes for, since his first sons at the Midland and

grandfather before him, and my brothers, and I have all tried to run a practical operation."

Brooke reflects. "In the purebred industry, the biggest challenge you find is doing what everyone thinks is popular at the time versus what you feel is right. In our operation, we try not to look just at what will get us a quick sale, we try to consider what might be deleterious down the road five or six years from now. We intend to keep on improving our cattle, and hope we don't make any mistakes."

In Newbill Miller's opinion, the family has done an outstanding job, and he hopes the operation stays in the same relative position it is now in.

"I sometimes think it's more difficult to stay there than it is to get there. Thinking back through the years since I first got into the cow business, it really has not changed all that much. The commercial man always wants to get repaid for the bull he is buying, and rightly so. If the bull's daughters are fertile and will calve regularly and if they produce enough milk to wean a heavy calf, then he is going to come back to buy again. The bottom line here is that the repeat customer is the backbone of our bull business, and we always try to keep this in mind."

In life as in cattle breeding, Newbill and his family try to live by certain philosophies. "Since I'm not an intellectual, I will bypass the philosophy of life and share with you the one I use when breeding cattle. My father always stressed to me, as I do to my sons, to have a knowledge in what you are competent in and what you are not. I just don't think you should try to take shortcuts. Especially if there is significant potential for harm.

"I think too many people in the Angus business are like the greyhound that chases the rabbit and doesn't realize that the rabbit can't be caught. My advice to anyone new in the industry would be don't ever chase the rabbit."

**AJ**

Treasure Bull Tests averaged \$5,350. Two-thirds interest in him as a yearling bull was sold to a group of breeders in the East and to Fairview Ranch in Montana. Breeders who have used him proclaim his calves to be some of their best ever.

"We put bulls on test here at the farm," Newbill says.

"Although the animals in the group now on test are all growing rapidly, I'd have to say the calves sired by Bubba are the best set we've ever had by a herd bull. We're excited about them. If his daughters milk and breed back, I will have to say he is the best bull we have ever used."

**The Miller Family hopes** their Angus breeding operation will continue for many years to come, which is a good possibility with nine Miller grandchildren waiting in the wings.

As Brooke says, "Who knows, the location might be a shopping mall sometime in the future," as urban sprawl is ever encroaching. Whatever the outcome, the family is justly proud of its accomplishments.

"My father and my