

A Southern TRADITION

Though a tradition for the Simmons family, raising Angus isn't what it used to be.

BY JANET MAYER



Agriculture has been a way of life, a family tradition for the Tom Simmons family of Franklin, W.Va. The original Simmons homestead was built the year before the Civil War started, three years prior to West Virginia becoming a state. Located near the south branch of the Potomac River, family members lived in the house and farmed there for the next 125 years,

The homestead was sold after the death of Tom's Aunt, but the sale of the farm didn't end the farming tradition for Tom and his family. His father, Edwin, was an Angus breeder until shortly before his death this past summer. Tom and his wife, Nancy, own and operate Glenfield Farm, located several miles from the homestead.

Introduction to Angus

A third-generation Angus breeder, Tom enjoys recounting his family's history and how his grandfather bought his first Angus cattle. At the time, black cattle hadn't been introduced into their area of the state. Tom's grandfather, his father and an uncle were farming together. The operation bred some crossbred cows and calves, mostly Hereford-Shorthorn, and fed steers.

"It was about 1940 when my grandfather bought a commercial Angus bull and several heifers from a breeder in Virginia," he says. "They made the first part of the journey, as far as Harrisonburg, by train. From there, the small herd joined a number of other cattle, and all were driven by men on horseback across the steep Shenandoah Mountains to the Simmons farm near Franklin.

"When my grandfather drove those first Angus across the mountains by horseback, I was just a kid," says Simmons. "We used horses to drive the cattle to pasture." A lot of the cattle that were finished on grass in the area were driven by horseback to the train in Harrisonburg, he adds. From there, they were shipped to Baltimore.

Tom says the operation used only commercial females until the mid-1950s, but they did use some purebred Angus bulls to breed them.

"I wish we had kept up with pedigrees on those first bulls," he says. "After my father's death this past summer, we went through some of the old papers and found that he had bought purebred bulls as far back as 1948."

The move to purebred

During the 1950s, Tom and his sister, Carolyn, both 4-H members, showed steers at a cattle show in Petersburg. He placed third in the junior show and fourth in the open show. Realizing that the commercial steers they were showing were larger than most of the purebred cattle they were

competing against, he and his sister made the decision to each purchase a purebred Angus heifer.

They attended a dispersal sale at Cavalier Farms, Luray, Va., in 1956. An Angus fieldman directed them to a pen of smaller-type heifers, he recalls. "Having been on the judging team, I picked out what I thought was the best heifer. I paid \$145 for a Blackbird heifer with little-bittie short legs. My sister paid \$147.50 for the heifer she chose. I really thought I had something," he adds with a laugh.

Throughout Tom's years of high school and college, the family's purebred herd grew in size through the purchase of additional purebred Angus cows and the use of purebred bulls. All heifer calves were kept to help build the herd.

Tom married Nancy while attending West Virginia State University, where he earned a degree in animal science in 1967. Afterward, Tom took a job working for a beef cattle operation in Virginia. Feeling that their roots were still in West Virginia, in 1969 the couple purchased a farm a few miles from the Simmons homestead. For the next 10 years, Tom worked in Virginia while his father farmed the acreage that Tom and Nancy had purchased.

"There were a lot of changes in the cattle industry during that time, and working in other operations was a real learning experience," Tom says. "I can remember when I suggested to my dad that we use artificial insemination (AI) to breed our cattle. It wasn't too long after I had graduated, and AI was something relatively new to him." Tom says his dad wasn't real convinced it would work, so he only let them inseminate five cows the first year. Those breedings resulted in three calves.

"The next year we used AI on a larger number of cows," says Tom. "From that time on it has been the major part of our breeding program."

Tom and Nancy moved back

to the area in 1978 to farm in partnership with his father. Their family had grown to include daughters Tammy and Karla. A few years after the move, Whitney was born. The couple built a house and moved onto the 189-acre farm they named Glenfield.

At first, Nancy taught school, and Tom worked as a distributor for ABS Semen Service in the eastern part of the state and in a few counties in western Virginia. After several years of overly long days, Tom quit his outside job to devote all his time to running the farm.

Over the years, the operation has grown to include another 700 acres of leased land, about 150 bred heifers and cows, and 50 ewes.

Current objectives

"My main objective has always been to have easy fleshing cattle with good udders," says Tom. "Daddy always said we should stay in the middle of the road in breeding our cattle, and I think he was right. We have always looked for a moderate cow that will do good on grass.

"In a drought year, if you go through your herd, you can sure sort out your best cattle," he adds, "because they are the ones that have raised a calf and still have good condition."

In the past, young females from the herd were sold as bred heifers or cow-calf pairs. During the last few years, Tom has been keeping them to put back into the herd and selling the older cows instead. By this method, he hopes to achieve his main objective of producing functional cattle that will do well on silage, grass and hay without creep-feeding the calves.

The herd has basically been closed since 1983, with all new genetics introduced into the herd through AI. About 85% of the calves are sired by AI bulls. Four or five yearling bulls from the herd are used for cleanup. Tom credits Traveler and Rito bulls for helping build the herd.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



SELLING ANGUS

MARKETING for Tom Simmons purebred herd is done mostly by private treaty. The one exception is the West Virginia Beef Expo Sale, where he usually sells two cow-calf pairs, with the calf being a heifer. The Franklin, W.Va., cattleman reasons this puts more breeding power into a purchase, which most breeders like. And that leads to satisfied customers.

Most of the purebred Angus calves are fed as bulls. Tom says he doesn't feel he can accurately pick the best at 3-5 months of age. About 40 of the best bulls are sold off the farm each year. A small amount of advertising is done in the local newspapers, but Tom attributes his good market to word of mouth and repeat customers.

"Right now we are having a hard time filling bull orders because of repeat customers," he says. "We sold out early this year and could easily have sold another 12 or 15 bulls."

Most of his customers are small, commercial breeders with 20-30 cows that live in a 50- to 75-mile radius of their farm, he says. "They are basically looking for a black calf with a medium frame that weighs as much as possible, if you aren't selling a black animal, you are talking a 12- to 15-cent discount, especially if the animals are red or spotted."

One of his best customers has been a group from Romney, W.Va. The group is pooling and preconditioning their calves as an alliance. Tom hopes to be able to get some carcass information back from them.

Two years ago, Tom and two other breeders, Samuel Ellington and Darrel Puffenbarger, started an on-farm bull test at Ellington's farm. They tested 65 bulls last year; 59 are on test this year.

"We got real successful and sold all of the bulls," Tom says. The fact that almost all the bulls were AI-sired created a lot of interest, he adds. The bulls were also semen-checked and ultrasounded to determine backfat and marbling.

The bulls were fed silage, corn and protein for a 3-lb./day gain. The actual gain was 3.07 lb., with the top bull at 4.00 lb./day, Tom explains, "We are feeding them not to be fat, but to grow them enough to go out and be in good condition to breed."

A Southern TRADITION cont.

This past year, he used EXT and Rito 2100 heavily.

When choosing sires, he extensively uses expected progeny differences (EPDs) and the sire summary published by the American Angus Association. He also likes to talk to other breeders about the bulls they use.

Tom makes it a rule to use only proven bulls. He prefers using those with daughters already in production so he can observe the milk EPDs.

“I like to use proven bulls because I have had some not-so-good experiences using new bulls in the past,” he explains. “Because of this, I usually run about a generation behind everyone else.

“I am also starting to look at the carcass EPDs more,” he continues. “I like to have a plus in marbling and ribeye and a

good scrotal circumference, which is a pretty hard combination to find.”

Sidelines

In addition to the purebred cow herd, which calves in December, Tom breeds about 35 cows to Chianina or Maine-Anjou bulls each year to supply club calves. These females calve in March and April. The majority of the cows used for crossbreeding are low-indexing or late-calving purebred females.

Tom sells 15-20 crossbred steer calves yearly, with about a dozen going through the state 4-H/FFA roundup sale. According to Tom, steers from the herd placed high at five state fairs. He is especially proud of one Maine-Angus cow, flushed for embryo transfer (ET), that produced five calves. All five

earned recognition. Tom says one was judged a grand champion steer, another a reserve grand champion steer, another was a champion heifer and still another two were class winners at the West Virginia State 4-H/FFA Roundup. The five calves earned a total of about \$19,000 for their owners.

Can the tradition continue?

Tom is rightfully proud of his family’s background in agriculture as well as his achievements since he started in the cattle business. The dusty 4x4 pick-up and cattle hauler parked near the Simmons home are a far cry from the arduous cattle drives over the mountains on horseback of years gone by. The functional cattle standing in the field and his savvy management methods don’t really resemble those of a half

century ago. But, according to Tom, not all of the ways of today are for the best.

“I hope my daughters might take over this farm, but I don’t know if they should or not,” he says with a shake of his head.

“Right now, I don’t see a very bright outlook for agriculture. I was telling someone the other day that I was either going to have to get bigger or become a hobby farmer, because 150 cows just doesn’t cut it anymore.

“Many people in the industry have to have an outside income in the family just to keep on farming, and that just isn’t right. For us it is my wife, who still teaches. Farming just gets tougher and tougher, and I don’t know if it will ever get better. It is sad to say that most people can’t make their living totally from farming anymore.”

AJ