

drake farms



They Believe in Doing Things Right



Meet the Drake Family. From left they include; Nancy (Joe Tom's wife), Whitney (Bob and Kay's daughter), Bob and his wife Kay, Joe Tom (also Bob and Kay's) and his daughter Tabitha, Ash, Judi and Tom, Paige and Stacey (both Tom and Judi's), and Mrs. Clifford Drake. The group gathers each day for lunch at Mrs. Clifford Drake's—they've been doing so for seventeen years.

by Nancy Ann Sayre

If it's not worth doing right, it's not worth doing. The Drake family has based their cattle operation around such a philosophy—the results have spelled progress. The performance program at Drake Farms, the annual production sale, the advertising and promotion, the herd sire line up and the group of 400 Angus brood cows are all evidence that the Drakes are bent on doing things right. Success at Drake Farms speaks for itself.

Tom Drake, his brother Bob and their mother Mrs. Clifford Drake own and operate Drake Farms in Davis, Okla. The brothers grew up in the Arbuckle Mountains and have been in the Angus business since their father, W.H. Drake, purchased his first registered Angus females in 1953. That initial purchase included 43 females from Ben Sneur of New Mexico and 10 from Carlton Corbin.

W.H. Drake had originally run a Texaco station and Ford dealership in Davis; he bought his first 140 acres along the Washita River bottom in 1941. Drake Farms still has its headquarters and barns there, but since

“Performance is first and foremost. The word performance though doesn't just mean weights or pounds. It means saleability and marketability (income or lack of it); it means milk; it means structural correctness; it means type: it means birth weights and calving ease. Performance covers the old adage “conception to consumption.”

“Performance starts the day you breed the cow-on that day you take your first step in performance. You yourself perform by selecting the right mating (if you are using A.I., you select from 1,000 to 2,000 available bulls). If the cow conceives the first time, she and your nutritional program have performed. You wait nine months and check the birth weight, later you check the weaning weights; put the bull calves on test and the heifers on grass-feed them all the same, treat them all the same—check yearling weights, make sure sons and daughters are fertile... do the same thing all over. Hopefully you've got some steers you can check on through the feedlot. Performance means from conception to consumption.”

Performance governs every phase of production at Drake Farms. The operation now includes 400 registered Angus females, 200 commercial Angus and a small herd of Brangus. All cattle are managed basically the same and this helps insure that bulls produced there will meet the needs of a commercial breeder.

In fact, the base of the registered herd today was handled strictly as a commercial herd in the 1960s. Tom and Bob took over the farming operation and herd of 200 Angus cows when their father died in 1964. Within the next few years they experimented with some other breeds and crossbreeding; their Angus cows were compared against commercial cattle and by 1970, Drakes were convinced that the Angus female was their best bet. They then purchased some Canadian-bred bulls to use on the 130 registered females and remaining commercials.

From that point Drakes were interested in performance-bred cattle. They bought several Emulous bulls,

including CRR Emulous 26-17 “Big E” and CRR Emulous Pacesetter. These sires are strong in the bloodlines of the current herd.

Drake Farms first tested bulls with the Iowa Beef Improvement Assn. (IBIA) in 1973. Since that time they have tested close to 100 individuals with IBIA as well as a number of bulls at Wardensville, W.Va., the Midland test in Montana and Oklahoma Beef, Inc.

Unfortunately, in 1977 Drakes purchased a bull that was found to type non-traditional. It set them back a whole calf crop—heifers and bull calves were sold as commercial cattle once the problem was discovered.

“That really hurt the strength of our young herd,” comments Tom, “but we took our medicine and that was that.”

Since then Drakes have been making

that time the ranch has expanded to include some 6,000 acres that support the purebred and commercial herds.

It's a family-run operation today; Tom takes charge of the cattle management while Bob is business and general manager. They have been in business close to 30 years and plan to stay in it for quite a while. Important to their continued success and acceptance is a quality reputation built on performance and integrity. They are emphatic about both and Tom willingly discusses the operation and his thoughts. Whether you're talking about the cow herd, the bulls on feed test or marketing approaches, all angles of performance are considered. Customers' needs and wants do the guiding.



Tom Drake, partner and cattle manager at Drake Farms. His comments on their performance, merchandising and management programs make it obvious that he believes in doing things right.

"With merchandising one of the main things is to be honest with yourself and you'll be honest with your customer. Be sure to give him a choice."

Merchandising, getting the product sold, is important in determining the bottom line of a cattle operation. That end of the job is done well at Drake Farms. Their successful promotion and selling deserve specific comment. Tom Drake, partner and cattle manager of Drake Farms, offers a few of his thoughts and practices in this area.

"Our bulls are sold at private treaty after each one of them is tested—they are priced according to their yearling weights since that is something I can get my finger on and easily explain. Fact: Most buyers come in and look simply at the bulls and the prices—they seldom study the figures, but a person knows before he comes here that he'll get performance. Our program guarantees any bull offered has already met performance requirements otherwise he wouldn't be sold.

"But we have all the figures a person could want, if he asks. We make a sheet available on every group of bulls that comes off test and we put performance figures in our catalog too.

"There's a careful balance, though, between giving enough information and giving too much. If you list all the weights, ratios, gains and breeding values that we gather on every individual—no matter what shape or form you list those figures in—you're going to scare a lot of people off. Whatever you present must be simple and straightforward."

And Tom Drake could add that at Drake Farm everything is presented first class, at least when it comes to advertising and promotion. Take for instance the sale catalog: Professionally done, full of information and very attractive—with a touch of class.

"We want to give a potential customer a catalog, or an ad for that matter, that they will want to look at. You only have a very few seconds to catch a reader's attention. The same idea carries over to our quarterly newsletter—hopefully a breeder will want to look at 'Drake Country'."

Drakes publish a performance-oriented newsletter called "Drake Country" and send it on a quarterly basis to some 6,000 breeders—the vast majority are sent to commercial cattlemen in Oklahoma.

"We started 'Drake Country' last year with hopes of getting more performance information to the commercial breeder, our potential customer. And we wanted to do that in a simple, straightforward manner. There's so much information that comes out now—we want to answer some questions of the breeders so they will know more of what we're doing.

"And of course it's a form of merchandising. 'Drake Country' carries our name, promotes our ideas. People have been reading it, I think it's well accepted. The comments are very favorable, we're proud of it."

As for their annual production sale (their fourth female sale was held in March) they are proud of it too.

"That's harvest day and you had better put your best foot forward. We try to put something in the scale for everyone and plan on a third, third, third basis. One third that you don't want to sell, for the man who wants our best; one third that you do want to sell, for the breeder who doesn't want to pay for the best; and one third that you don't care if you sell or keep in the herd—they'll take care of themselves."

"You've got to find your buyers, and the ones interested in the bottom third are just as important as the buyers bidding on the top animal. You've got to realize the value of all bids on every animal that comes through the ring sale day."

Tom believes in their program and is proud of it. He promotes the cattle in whatever he does . . . that ranges from placing bulls on central tests to giving a sale-&y speech or just plain visiting—"If an interested breeder comes by the farm, we find out how much time he has and we don't waste any of it."

The customer is always important in Drake Country. Remembering that helps the Drake family to "Git It Done."

maximum use of a strong A.I. program, using Drake-bred bulls and a variety of outside sires. In their selection of herd sires they stress frame size; they feel increasing frame is the most rapid way to increase performance.

Their breeding program is geared toward the commercial breeder. Tom explains:

Sure, I'm tickled to death when purebred breeders come to buy our top bulls and many of our females have gone into registered herds. The reports are favorable and customers return . . . but we can't forget the commercial man because 95% of all the bulls we sell go to commercial herds. The commercial man is the one that got us where we are; we are producing for him.

"As long as we remember what our commercial customer is, who he is, what his goals are—as long as we try to produce for him, keeping everything based on performance and production while breeding some-

thing that will improve his herd, then we'll come up with the kind of bulls that he'll want.

"You have to stay on top though, and not have a closed mind to any ideas."

In other words, do it right if it's worth doing. Right now Drakes feel the seed stock producer must aim to improve the average commercial cow and they feel the average cow needs more frame. Their program is built to add that frame with performance in mind.

Drakes have invested in part ownership of several young herd sires in the past few years. Drakes believe good animals are by far the best investment—whether they're on the buying or selling end of a transaction—and it's evident that they have searched for the good ones. Calves dropped this year are sired by Thomas Elevation and Cracker Jack Baros SA 860, "Jack Son." Three more bulls have joined the list of Drake sires this year: SVF Power Pack, KAF Gold Strike and Mr. A Plus of Verola. The

measurements of all five young sires earn frame scores of seven or better. Selection was based on frame, bloodlines and performance.

Female counterparts at Drake Farms have been selected on their performance as well. Range conditions similar to commercial management; an A.I. program which includes some pastures where cows never see a bull; calving in the pasture after the first calf; no creep feed; selection of replacement females based on yearling weights and breeding value ratios—these practices have helped keep the Drake females functional and productive.

The Drake program results in calves bred to perform themselves, and progress each year is evidenced by improved weights. The first year Drakes tested bulls only a few made the 1,000-lb. mark at a year of age; now they test very few bulls that don't exceed that weight. A bull now must have a yearling weight of 1,250 lb. or better

to be considered as herd sire material in the herd.

All progeny are compared against their contemporaries so that selection based on growth is more meaningful. Weight ratios and actual weights are considered together in all selection decisions. Drakes feel that weights and ratios together tell you where you have been and where you are going.

Top bull calves at weaning go on test either at Drake Farms or a central test station. They are weaned on a monthly basis so that they come off 140-day test as close to their yearling birthday as possible. Contemporary groups are smaller under this system (bulls are only ratioed against those in their monthly test group), but Drakes feel that an accurate yearling weight is most important.



After completing a feed-test, bulls are evaluated for their growth and also must meet criteria for structural soundness and testicular development. If a bull is inferior in any area, he ends up at the local butcher shop. And Drakes don't hesitate to send them that way—they have a strong demand for young bull meat and most importantly, they only sell what they feel they can stand behind on the basis of structural soundness and performance.

"If we're not proud of a bull, we can't sell him. A bull has to meet the requirements."

Heifer calves are handled as one group after weaning—commercial and purebred calves alike. Yearling weights are taken after a winter on wheat pasture. Selection is based on weaning and yearling figures combined with a grade score. That score emphasizes frame and structural correctness—these can't be ignored in females either, according to Drakes.

The majority of the calves are not measured at Drake Farms since it is difficult to get consistent accurate measurements. They do feel strongly, though, that measuring is a selection tool that should be used when possible.

Steer calves at Drakes' are carried on wheat pasture until mid-June. At that time they are sold as a group, either off the farm

or through the auctions in Oklahoma City. Heifers that are not kept as replacements, offered in the production sale or sold as commercial females, go the same route.

Drakes would like to be able to follow their steers through the feedlot and gather carcass information, but economics have prohibited that. And economics dictate management at Drake Farms.

"We try to give the cattle the best possible care at the least possible cost. We are constantly striving to increase efficiency and are always in search of more economical ways to do things."

"Anything we can do to increase profit through performance we should be looking at. Decreasing costs plays as strong a role as increasing pounds—we must keep these

cattle functional, you have to be able to afford to feed them."

Economics have signaled Drakes to calve the bulk of their cow herd in the spring. They have found that cows cycle in May and June with less problems and the cost of wintering a spring-calving cow is about half the cost of feeding one that drops a fall calf. Drakes retain a few fall calvers, again for reasons of economics—their bull market demands some older bulls in the spring and early summer. Tom adds, "The only way to sell them is to breed them." A few February and January calves allow additional options for selling bulls.

Most heifers calve at two years of age, but heifers born in either May or November are bred to calve at 30 months of age. Again Drakes have based this practice on past production records and fit their management program accordingly.

Careful pasture and grass management has helped Drakes improve production and allowed the progress made through improved genetics to be expressed.

In the 1960s Drakes began sprigging Bermuda grass and clearing ground on the ranch land. They cleared a few thousand acres and have divided that into relatively small pastures (averaging 250 acres and managed to handle about 35 cows). This

allows regulation of hay production and grazing as well as closer management of breeding and calving groups.

In 1977 Drakes discovered the value of Plains Bluestem grass and were impressed with its increased production, longer growing season and other advantages over native grasses and Bermudagrass. Most of their pastures have been or will be planted with some of the Plains Bluestem.

Long grazing seasons and use of round bales to maximize pasture growth help keep costs low for the cow herd. Cows are supplemented in the winter with grain and protein to meet their requirements.

Hay is a cash crop as well as part of the cattle operation for Drakes. Alfalfa is raised easily in the fertile river bottom land and hay crews work from mid-April through October—one more reason that brood cows must make it with a minimum of care.

Perhaps a little unique to a cattle operation is the work schedule at Drakes. "We don't breed cows on Sunday, we don't feed on Sunday, we seldom check a cow on Sunday or Saturday afternoon for that matter. The only things that get attention then are cattle in pens and first-calf heifers."

Mature cows calve in pastures located such that several people see them in a normal day's travels and other management is also geared to reduce labor. Gomer bulls are relied on for the A.I. program (which boasts a 70% first service conception rate): cattle are checked and bred only once a day.

Perhaps these practices go against many suggested management programs, but Drake keeps an eye on results and at the same time considers the demands put on employees.

Drake has complete confidence in the ability of his herdsman, Stan Hefley, and nephew Joe Tom (Bobs son). These two are responsible for weighing, grading and day-to-day management of the cow herd. If Tom can't be around the cattle for several days, he knows everything will be done and done right. That's important to him and he feels the years his employees have worked for Drake Farms speak well for the outfit.

Glen Brownlee, the mechanic (vital to any operation that bales hay seven months a year), has been there 30 years; Minnie Pullen, their bookkeeper, has been there better than 40 years; and Hefley has worked with the herd for 13 years.

In summary of the operation at Drake Farms, Tom comments: "Performance is whether or nor you make money—if you make money, you've performed and so have your cattle."

"You know, we have a GID factor in our program. It's right in there with weaning ratio, weight per day of age, factors for breeding value, factors for this, factors for that—the GID factor can apply to each animal in the performance program, each man, each pasture, everything... it stands for Gittin' It Done."

The GID factor at Drake Farms is high.

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