

Loran (left) and Bascom Wilson won't settle for less than top dollar for their Angus cattle.

At Their Prime

Bascom and Loran Wilson say marketing cattle is like picking tomatoes or peaches --you have to know when they 're ripe. Timing is everything. That's how they earn a 50 cent premium for finished cattle and sell all the bulls they have to offer.

by Susan Shoup

“I’s not a showy place, but it works.”

That’s how Bascom Wilson describes his and son Loran’s 120-cow Angus operation near Orleans, Ind. The same can be said of Wilsons’ marketing techniques. They’re not elaborate, but they work.

And indeed they must. Wilsons get top dollar for their straightbred Angus finished cattle sold directly to Dawson-Baker Packing Company in Louisville, Ky. That top dollar is, on the average, a 50 cent per hundredweight premium over the Louisville Stockyards’ top market price.

Selling direct offers immediate rewards for both the Wilsons and Dawson-Baker. Wilsons avoid yardage and commission fees, and Dawson-Baker is guaranteed fresh-out-of-the-feedlot, quality Angus cattle that fit into their program.

To help market the few bulls they sell each year, Loran wrote and recorded the farm’s own radio advertisements. The radio spots along with a classified ad in a daily newspaper quickly moved the 13 coming 2-year-old bulls that averaged nearly \$2,000. Not only did the advertising sell bulls, it also sparked interest and inquiries from area cattlemen, some of whom were not even looking for a bull.

Loran decided to try the radio advertising when a bull test sale was scheduled in the neighboring county just 20 miles from their farm. Wilsons feared the bull test could flood the bull market in their area, so they decided to try some additional advertising.

The ads started in March, about the time most Southern Indiana cattlemen begin thinking about breeding season. They ran on the local country FM station which carries the market reports at noon. “Everyone who’s going to be interested in buying a bull listens to the markets,” he explains. “But if you’re like me, I switch to Paul Harvey on another station once the markets are over, and if you’re like Dad, you turn it off after the markets.”

Loran negotiated with the farm broadcaster to have the ads run after the grain markets and before the livestock markets. “Placing an ad is like sending a kid to school,” Loran compares. “If you don’t want your second grader to forget her lunch box, place it where she has to stumble over it.” And that’s why Loran placed the radio ads between the market reports.

Advertising is just the first step in marketing their bulls. Every bull for sale is semen tested and given a breeding soundness evaluation. “At \$25 per bull, that’s the best investment we make,” Loran says. “That assures our buyers and assures us that the bull’s a breeder.”

Wilsons sell an average of 12 bulls each year, always selling all they have to offer. They are selective in determining which bull calves to

Tom Dawson (right) shows Bascom Wilson the kind of carcass that suits Dawson-Baker's customers. Wilson cattle fit the bill with an estimated 50 percent meeting CAB certification. That quality earns them a premium price by selling direct to Dawson-Baker who appreciates the fresh, consistently top quality Angus.

leave as bulls. 'We would rather sell 12 bulls for a good price and have happy customers that send their neighbors back,' Loran says.

He says the biggest mistake cattlemen make once they're in the purebred business is to leave all their bull calves bulls. "As soon as they get 12 registered cows, they leave everything bulls just because they have purebred cattle," he says. "We'd all be better off if they'd only keep their best bulls and make the rest steers. They're selling bulls for less money than we sell our fat cattle for."

Finished cattle are certainly a staple of this registered Angus farm. The premiums Wilson cattle earn, however, do not come without thought, conscious effort and a good knowledge of their market. Wilsons are well aware of Dawson-Baker's specialty market and they try to breed cattle and feed cattle that will fit that market.

The Southern Indiana cattlemen try to find heavy-muscled, easy-fleshing bulls to use on their moderate-sized cows. Loran says they stay away from the long-legged, framey bulls because, in his experience, they don't produce easy-fleshing calves.

Wilsons divide their cows into five groups. One group is bred for fall calves; the other four are bred for spring and early summer calves. That spread in age means calves at different stages of finishing, and cattle are marketable throughout the year. That spreads out their marketing risk.

Much care is put into selecting finished cattle to deliver to Dawson-Baker. Wilsons carefully evaluate finish by visual appraisal and try to market animals around 1,100 pounds. They may select just a dozen cattle for a trailer load or take two loads, whatever is ready.

Angus breeders for 33 years, Wilsons compare feeding cattle to growing tomatoes or peaches. "When it's ripe, it's ripe," Loran says. "A lot of the art of marketing cattle is knowing when they're ready." In fact, Loran cringes when he mentions a neighbor that sends all of his calves to market at once... whenever the last one is finished.

Loran believes you must produce a product to fit your market and that requires keeping an open mind and sometimes avoiding traditional ways of thinking. "You can't raise a particular kind of cattle or a particular breed because that's the kind your dad raised," he says. "That kind of thinking won't work today. You better be raising what your market wants."

The Wilson and Dawson-Baker relationship has been long in the making. Dawson-Baker often paid top market prices for Wilson cattle through the Louisville Stockyards. Three years ago, buyer Bowen McKinney approached Wilsons about buying their cattle direct.

Since that agreement, Wilsons enjoy a premium that gives them an incentive to feed the kind of cattle that Dawson-Baker will continue to buy.



This father-son team appreciates the working relationship with Dawson-Baker, and so does Tom Dawson, the company's vice president.

Dawson says there is better communication between the packer and the cattle feeder than there was 20 years ago. "Communication is what we're looking for, and being able to understand one another's problems has led to a better product," Dawson says. "When I can explain to Mr. Wilson what kind of cattle I need and can take him in the cooler and show him what I'm talking about, that helps."

The ideal animal in Dawson's mind is an Angus, Yield Grade 2 with high Choice or low Prime grade and a 600 to 700 pound carcass. "We have no use for 900 pound carcasses. When you sell to a grocery store day after day, you can't show up with a carcass that's 200 pounds heavier than the one you brought them the day before," Dawson says.

Dawson says he's partial to Angus because they yield the kind of beef his customers want. "The Angus breed has such a good fit in where our business is," he says. "We're committed to quality. That's where the potential growth for beef is. We specialize in buying for customers who want top quality beef, mainly Certified Angus Beef (CAB) or Prime," he says. At least half of Dawson-Baker's product leaves the plant in carcass form or boxed, and heads for Chicago, California or Japan.

Loran and Bascom are keeping an open mind and are continually learning through their relationship with Dawson-Baker. Bascom remembers Tom Dawson taking he and Loran into

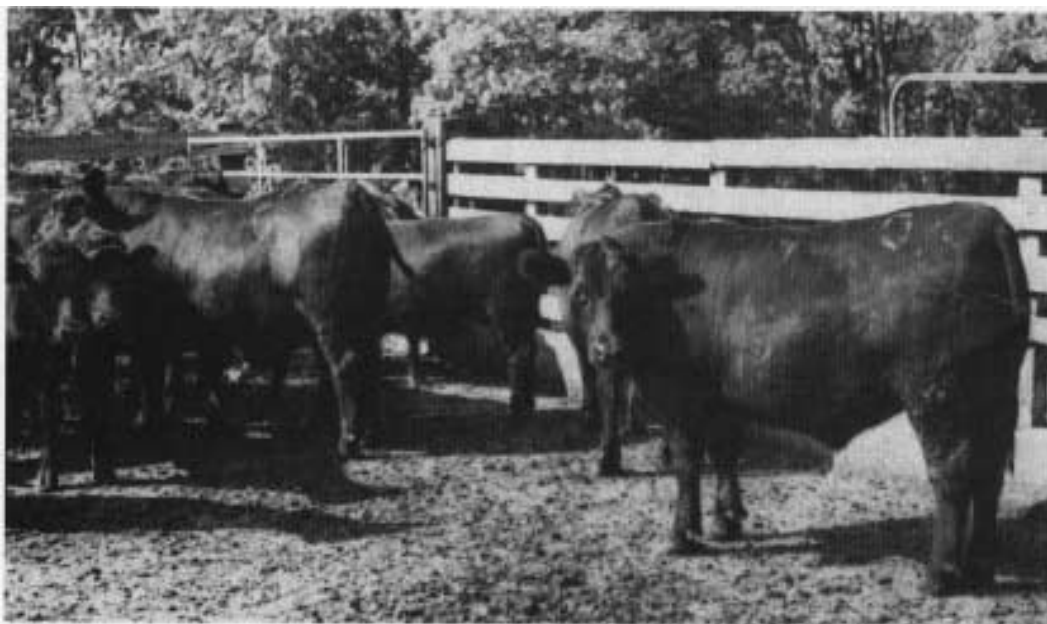
"We're committed to quality."

*— Tom Dawson
Dawson-Baker*



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These kind of cattle fit Dawson's ideal beef product. . . Angus Yield Grade 2, high Choice or Prime grade and a 600 to 700 pound carcass.



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the plant's cooler and showing them carcasses of some Wilson cattle. The carcasses were much bigger than the other ones in the cooler. In fact, Dawson went on through the plant to show them that the primal cuts from those carcasses were too big to fit into the shipping boxes. To Dawson-Baker, the product was unacceptable.

Dawson is concerned with some segments of the industry's overemphasis on size compared to what the consumer wants. "The consumer does not want the biggest piece of beef he can find," he says. "A 1,200-1,300 pound live animal yields a large rib eye that is a huge steak. The retailer doesn't want to merchandise that product because the price per package is higher than his customers care to spend. The sticker price may be \$8 per package, as opposed to \$5 per package for a more moderate-sized steak."

He adds, "Breeders and packers must realize that people aren't eating as much beef at one sitting as they once did. Consumers are telling us what they want and don't want in their product. Producers need to be more educated to consumers' desires." And that's what Dawson-Baker is trying to do.

Dawson says consistency is the key. "We buy cattle from the same people time after time, and we don't make many mistakes with people with that kind of reputation," he says. "Many people would be amazed at how many cattle we buy without seeing. Those types of purchases are based solely on the reputation of the feeder."

The Wilson cattle have acquired quite a reputation with Dawson, who estimates that 50 percent of the Wilson cattle meet CAB certification. Dawson-Baker consistently has one-third (34 percent in 1991) of its total kill receive the CAB roll of acceptance. That's the highest certification rate based on total cattle slaughtered for any CAB packer and has won Dawson-Baker CAB's Procurement Proficiency Award for the past three years.

Dawson says that kind of acceptance is not without effort. "We consistently buy what our customers want. Not what's cheap," he says. "And if we can find feeders that will give us that, we'll offer a premium. After all, they're our backbone."

If feeders are Dawson-Baker's backbone, then Angus are Wilson's. Loran says the fact that the cattle are Angus certainly helps them bring top dollar. "Black ones always bring five to six cents more," he says.

Such testimonials are repeated in the Wilson's radio ads.

"With today's strong demand for feeder calves, there's never been a better time to be in the cattle business, and anyone who follows the markets will tell you that the cattle topping the sales as both feeders and slaughter cattle are the black ones sired by registered Angus bulls," Loran states in one ad.

Top market price is just one reason Wilsons breed Angus. "We really appreciate their good disposition and moderate birthweights," Loran says. "We're not just saying they have these advantages because we raise Angus . . . we raise Angus because they have these advantages."

Bascom agrees. "Angus cattle and Angus crosses are so much more efficient at converting corn into CAB, and I can feed those cattle cheaper than a 1,500 pound steer," he says. Bascom says the name of the game is converting feed to quality beef and what it costs to do it.

RADIO SPOTS

Spot A: Mr. Cattleman, Would you like your next set of calves to be uniform, rugged and growthy? That's the kind of calves cattle buyers have come to expect from today's modern Angus bulls. Hello, I'm Loran Wilson of Wilson Angus, Orleans, Ind. With today's record high feeder calf prices, there's never been a more affordable time to replace your old herd bull with a young herd sire from Wilson Angus.

Spot B: Mr. Cattleman, As spring calves are arriving, now is the time to consider your chance to improve next year's crop. Before breeding season starts, consider the benefits of a modern Angus bull. With today's strong demand for feeder calves, there's never been a better time to be in the cattle business. And anyone who follows the markets will tell you, that the cattle topping the sales as both feeders and slaughter cattle are the black ones sired by modern Angus bulls... let us set up a time to show you the wide selection of thick, muscular, fertility-tested Angus bulls that we have to offer that can put pounds on your calves and dollars in your pocket. Stop by soon or call. Evening calls are welcome.