



# THE THOMPSON BROTHERS

by Nancy Ann Sayre



*J.R. and Bruce Thompson have been breeding Angus cattle since 1955. The heart of their business is the commercial bull market in southern Florida and those cattlemen demand big, strong, adaptable bulls—Thompson Brothers have been supplying that kind of cattle consistently.*

**S**ome say you cannot raise big Angus cattle in Florida. Thompson Brothers, though, seem to ignore that theory with convincing results. Their Angus are big, stout and strong. Adaptable. Really no surprise—they have been bred that way since the herd was started in 1955. The reason hinges simply on the fact that commercial cattlemen in southern Florida demand bulls with a little extra size and “lasting” power. Thompsons have been breeding cattle to take advantage of the market.

It's true cattle do not usually get as big in Florida. It's hard to put on extra pounds when they have to tolerate the heat, insects and low-quality roughage (the grass is “wet” and Thompsons profess their area is the nation's worst for hay-making).

That sort of environment is a way of life in pastures near Marianna. Thompsons have not tried to change it, they have just made their cattle adapt. And that is exactly what sells their bulls.

Area cattlemen are willing to pay a premium for Florida-bred bulls, especially those with “a little extra leg under them and some meat on them.” Bruce Thompson describes his product as such, and his customers keep coming back for it.

Bruce, his brother J.R., and J.R.'s son Ronald make up the Thompson Brothers team. They move 40 to 45 bulls annually—mostly as 2-year-olds and mostly to commercial breeders within the state. That market is the bread and butter of their cattle operation; always has been and always will be.

## They Know the Market

Natives of the area, Thompsons used to be in the commercial business themselves (until a few purebred calves out-did their contemporaries by a long shot). They can relate, therefore, to the market, the customers and the product. Bruce and J.R. are now located within 10 miles of where their grandfather first homesteaded. It is not a



*Yearling heifers represent the influence of many popular bulls—growth is the most important selection factor.*

heavily populated part of the state—they live just five miles out of town and it was 15 years before the mail service reached their driveway—and farming has always been their life.

With 917 acres to farm, the herd of 100 registered Angus females is just a part of the total operation for Thompsons. They plant between 250 and 300 acres of soybeans and also grow peanuts, corn, oats and hay.

Farm-grown crops provide all the cattle feed (except a protein supplement of course). Only the young cattle see any corn and oats; they are creep fed as calves until the spring grass comes on, then fed one percent of their body weight as a growing ration after weaning.

Calves are fall-born, dropped from September through November. Compared to an early spring calving season, this system demands more careful management and feeding on the part of Thompsons. However, it is designed to best suit their bull market by providing 2-year-olds when the fall buying season starts. Florida cattlemen look for big, rugged bulls that they can kick out and forget about; in general they lack facilities to buy yearlings and carry them a year.

## Product that Suits Earns a Premium

Those customers will, however, pay a premium for bulls that best match their demands. Florida-grown cattle with extra frame and pounds fill that bill. Thompsons select for superior growth, finding commercial buyers will compete right with small



purebred breeders for the good calves, year after year.

Private treaty sales (many to repeat customers or by word-of-mouth advertising) account for a large portion of Thompsons' business, but they consign to several state and local sales as well. A solid reputation at such sales has built a firm market; as a direct result, Thompsons can move nearly every bull raised.

In Bruce's mind, selection for the same qualities over several generations, combined with a strong A.I. program, has made it possible to sell such a large percentage of each bull calf crop.

*Thompson Brothers females make quite an impression—they are big. The northern panhandle of Florida is not the most conducive environment for added growth, but these cattle are well adapted.*

Proven and popular bulls are the key, says Bruce, but before a sire sees heavy use in the Thompson herd they must know he will work for them. As a result, they sample several nationally-known bulls each year. And bulls that interest Thompsons are those recommended by other breeders or those whose progeny have impressed them. (Featured herd sires range from popular show winners to performance leaders.)

After deciding to try a certain individual, Thompsons mate a sampling of cows to him (no more than 20). If calves look good the following year, the bull may be used harder. Sometimes, though, Thompsons may wait as long as three to four years before determining if a bull will really work for them. They want to see if daughters in production excel. (Their use of Columbus Adventure 310 is such an example.)

#### Growth is the Rule

The most important selection factor in this operation is simply growth—whether Thompsons are considering the next herd sire, sorting sale bulls or choosing replacement females. The reason goes back, once again, to what they can sell.

"The worst thing in cattle is non-growth," offers Bruce. "Shortness is the hardest trait in the world to breed out of cattle. We're always looking for a good bull, one that will add growth. And our customers are looking for the same thing."

A.I. use, of course, has broadened the genetic base available for that purpose. Thompsons first started inseminating cows artificially in order to get better replacement females. Now they A.I. every cow in the herd at least once (over a 30- to 40-day breeding season). Bruce will add, since they are now set up to A.I. so many cows, they are committed to continue the A.I. program. Cows are run in groups of 50 to 65 head; pastures are no longer efficient for natural service.



*J.R.'s wife Lorene operates a flourishing greenhouse business. They like to kid that she makes the money when cattle times are tough, but Thompson's market is solid . . . they breed just what area cattlemen want.*

An association with Paul Hill while he was with Briarhill Angus Farms, Union Springs, Ala., got the Thompsons started with A.I. Bruce and J.R. went to Briarhill for a bull, but they could not justify spending the amount for the quality they wanted. Hill convinced them of advantages in using superior bulls through A.I. and they have been going full-force ever since.

Ronald does all the breeding work; the rest of the work load is shared among the hard-working and close-knit family. They have shown cattle as well as consigned to area sales—successfully, too; they received the state-wide premier heifer award for two



*Ronald Thompson is responsible for the A.I. program at Thompson Brothers.*

years running. That is just an added form of advertising, though, and no selections are made strictly on the show record. Thompsons remain concerned first of all with reaching the commercial cattleman and supplying the bulls he wants.

J.R.'s wife Lorene has an impressive greenhouse business and the family will say she brings in the money during times the cattle market is poor. They say it with a smile, though—the Thompson Brothers are doing quite well. They provide what the market can use . . . and have a steady demand as a result.

**AJ**