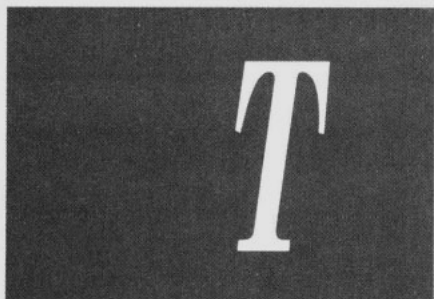


Melville Sledge's A



Those that know her, this incident seems in character for Miss Melville Sledge, owner of Prairie Eden Angus Farm, near Newbern, Ala. . . . Seems there was this cow, a good cow but with a little age on her. Anyway, things were not right with cow #115.

"Her udder had been terrible looking ever since the vet and I pulled a 117-pound calf (sire shall remain nameless) at midnight," Melville relates. "And during the scuffle, she hurt her udder, contracted mastitis, and almost died.

"The vet assured me the udder was probably gone for good. He doubted she could ever suckle another calf. And I said, 'If there's a cow that can do it, she will.' So I put that cow in the chute twice a day every day for over a month and massaged that udder, put ointment and other stuff on it and injected antibiotics. When she came back, she really milked."

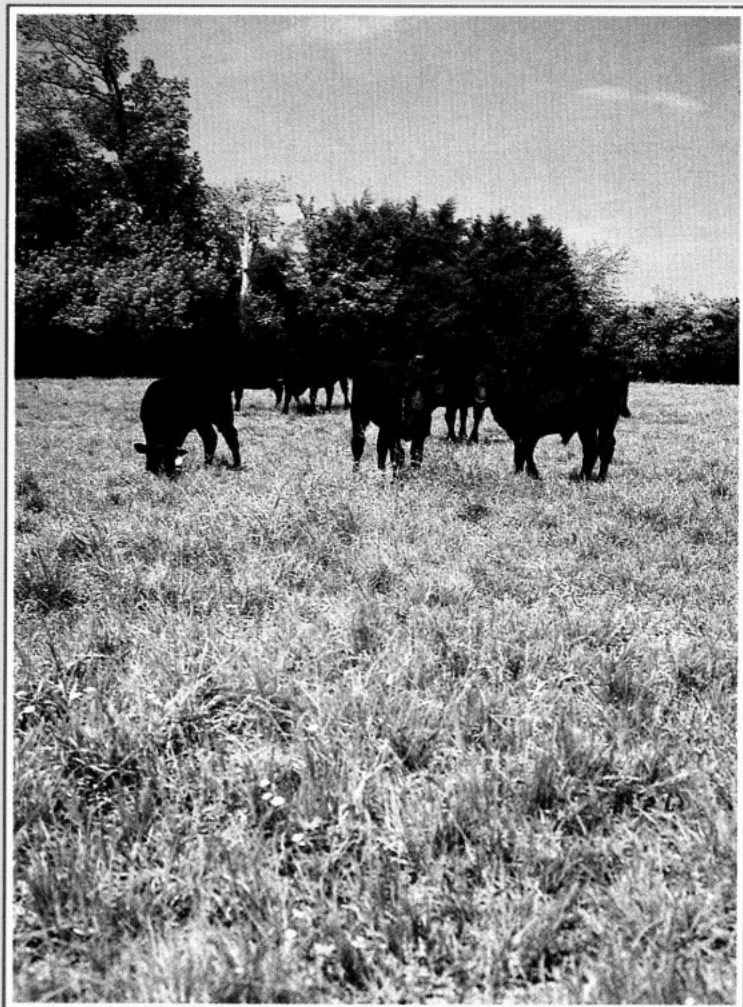
Another victory in a chain of hard-fought struggles. "I'll tell you it was a scuffle," says Miss Sledge of her beginnings. "We essentially had to start from scratch. Borrow things, get a little equipment and then I started doing some custom work, baling mostly, to keep ahead."

The Sledge family has a long history here in this productive Black Belt-ed soil region of central Alabama. King Cotton ruled the lives and economy of the region for decades, but when the king was dethroned, many farmers and landowners suffered, some never to recover. The Sledges were among the casualties.

"All this country was cotton, nothing but cotton," she says, contrasting then with now. "People had a few cows on the side, but they were just a sideline. When the boll weevil got so bad plus bad weather and so forth, the cotton deal went by the wayside. And we about lost everything we had."

Melville in the meantime had rented a shop in Greensboro and started restoring furniture and making reproductions. Crafting fine furnishings was her other trade and experience besides cattle. She brought the same insight and abilities to the furniture trade, and her fame grew as a master. She can recall more than one incident of restoring beautiful pieces to grace the homes opened for the Natchez Pilgrimage.

During these years, her aging father found keeping the place running at peak efficiency a greater challenge each year. She remembers telling her father: "Daddy, I'll rent the place from you . . . but I'll not come back as a day laborer." It's understandable, I suppose, but he thought of me as a little child without judgment or ability. The place went to rack and ruin, and after he died, it was in horrible



She calls them off in a cadence: "Pine Drive out of a Power Play dam . . . Leachman Hoss calf out of a Pacesetter daughter . . . Hoff Scotch Cap out of a Kadence Shoshone 520 dam . . . A Premier Valedictorian out of a Power Play daughter . . . # 223 is a Nichols Promise out of a Kadence Shoshone 520 daughter."

**by Jim Cotton
Editor**

Prairie Eden Angus

shape. Every building was falling in." She recalls her father selling some cattle averaging \$29 a head at the depths of that period. "If you could have seen it then, you would have thought, 'what on earth has happened here!'"

Mr. Sledge died in 1957. After his death, Melville continued to raise commercial cattle on a small scale, but soon the realities of a small operation became apparent. She would have to find some specialty to make the place pay greater returns per acre or per unit.

"I was going to have to sell higher dollar cattle. I had always admired Angus cattle and that seemed the best way to go."

So the die was cast for three decades of devotion to Angus, thirty years of work, sacrifice, and study that eventually rewarded a dedicated lady. She and a friend started in the Angus business with two heifers hoping they would produce bulls and start some cash flowing. The heifers had a different plan. "Those two heifers decided they were going to build us a herd right then. It was two years before we had one bull calf." During this time, Melville was custom haying to help meet farm expenses. Not a life for the leisurely inclined.

Like the loaves and fishes, those two heifers continued their pursuit and multiplied until the herd at its peak numbered 75 brood cows. In recent years, Melville has been trying to cut back on cows and the workload, but it seems the herd is resilient, bouncing back after every culling.

Some of the "coups" of her Angus career include topping the bull test at Auburn University. Her 1986 consignment, Prairie Eden Power Play 7, emerged as the top-selling bull that



One of the pleasant asides of visiting breeders collecting the local flavor and especially how their farm or ranch acquired its name.

Could there be a more inviting or descriptive handle than Prairie Eden? According to owner Melville Sledge, the neighbors of the community were looking for a place to gather as a community and socialize, a place to get acquainted and relieve the drudgery and isolation so common to small communities of those days. A site was chosen and the group began discussing a name. Her mother suggested "Prairie Eden" and it became an immediate favorite, a name that has stuck to the area ever since.

The place is certainly green, but Melville alerts us to not be impressed, at least not this early in the spring.

"We call that stuff 'ol' swamp grass. It grows in the low places especially. They'll (the cows) nibble on it this time of year, until the permanent grass comes out. We're just beginning to see a little of the dallasgrass. There'll soon be patches of bermuda and bahiagrass.

Haying begins if season provides so much vegetation that the cows can't keep ahead of it. Vetch, clover are legumes. Cutting times are varied so each grass or legume can provide its full potential.

"Basically, the hayfields are Johnsongrass. That's what makes the best hay and grows the best in this country. In the last 8-10 years, there have been quite a few Mennonites settling through this part of the country and they are entirely rowcrop folks. They can't understand why we plant Johnsongrass and we fertilize it.

"Sometimes, they get right indignant—"Why don't you plant something decent for hay?" But we tell them you can't beat that Johnsongrass."

year. This bull went on to sire a young bull that, in the most recent test, broke a 39-year-old record at Auburn in three categories: ADG, WDA, and yearling weight. It was purchased by Dr. Doug Smith at Circle S Farm, Dothan, Ala.

Another Prairie Eden-bred bull consigned by Homestead Farms, Hatchechubbee, Ala., led the sale in 1987, and it was to become the highly respected "Sledgehammer" bull. He is now owned by Macedon Farms in Madison, Ala., and bears the record of being the largest framed bull recorded in the annals of the



Auburn Bull Test. Melville consigned the second high-selling bull behind Sledgehammer in 1987. This particular bull also posted the highest weight per day of age of that test group.

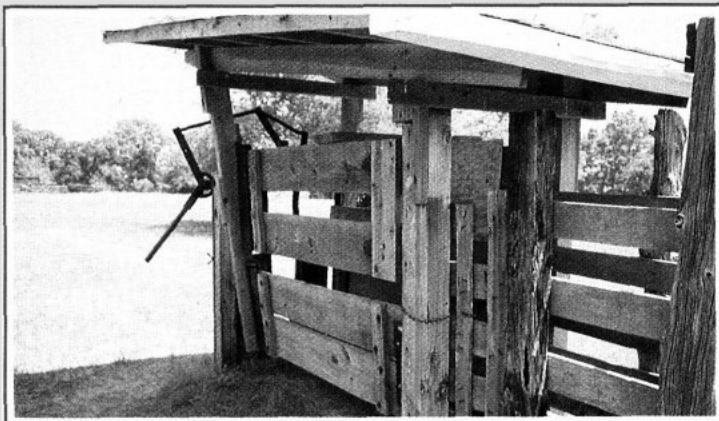
While she doesn't presently own Sledgehammer, it seems fitting this bull bears her name, and if he continues to send reverberations clanging down through

There remains in any enterprise with some history, favorite or foundation bulls or cows that charted the course of later success. Melville's devotion to Angus centers on the family of Sledgehammer as the trunk, roots, and some of the major branches of the Prairie Eden family tree.

"The first bull used on our registered females was a straight Eileenmere-bred bull, far ahead of its time. That bull left one super female. She, in turn, was bred to the first Emulous bull ever used here and produced Prairie Eden Emulous. I was especially crazy about this old cow—she was 17 years old.

"She was later bred to 'Rito 149' and produced the sire of Sledgehammer's dam."

Now here's a cow. Melville says she produced until 21 1/2 years of age, *never having a heifer calf*. Several of her granddaughters sired by the Prairie Eden Emulous bull have been a fountainhead strain. "Unfortunately," she says, "we sold the son of Rito 149 at an early age breeding him to only three cows and getting two bull calves and the dam of Sledgehammer." She also sold the bull Prairie Eden Emulous after resisting repeated offers from Bill Corbin at Eureka, Kan. "Finally, he made me what



"All my life, I've wanted one of those fancy squeeze chutes, the kind where you could control an animal and do anything you needed. Those things are \$1,200 and that was too steep for me. So I got to thinking about it and I said, 'well, I believe I can build something that will do everything except the actual squeezing.' So I bought me a headcatch and built the rest."

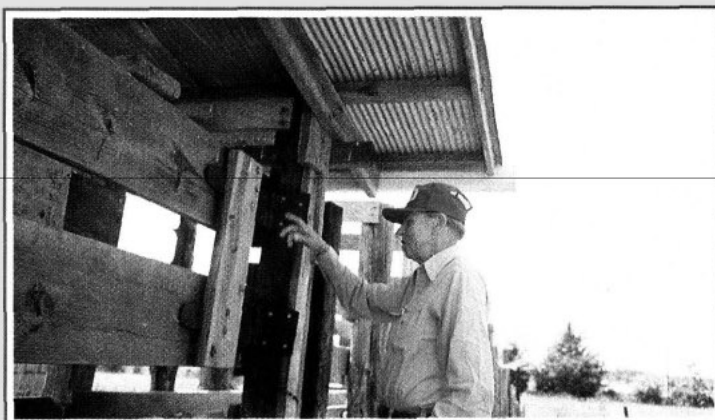
the Angus channels in the region, then there's satisfaction.

Like any breeder who's reaching the levels they've dreamed of, selling that longed for genetic package is like opening a bottle of especially fine wine. There's no recalling once the bottle's decanted. Such the case when there was opportunity to sell Sledgehammer's dam to Homestead. She was one of the first females Melville had bred to Pine Drive Big Sky.

"I had a feeling that calf was going to be something special," she says. "People ask me now if I'm sorry and I say no because all I want is a satisfied customer. I think Homestead Farms is very satisfied with what they got."

She's noted averages from a recent sale where the bull's breeding was featured and the Sledgehammer cows sold higher than cows of other breeders. Still there's a nervousness, understandably. "I just hope he'll give a good account of himself."

Sledgehammer's dam, Prairie Eden Miss Rito 3 continues as a donor cow at Homestead. At Prairie Eden, the cow left three daughters, three granddaughters, and one great granddaughter. She is also related to 65 percent of all the cattle in the Prairie Eden herd which Melville tries to hold to around 50 head.



was at the time I thought a fabulous offer, and I couldn't afford to keep the bull any longer.

"I only got five or six calves from him. I got three daughters from him, outstanding daughters, and I've still got one. I sold one last year because I had so many daughters in the herd from here. I just think the world and all of that breeding."

Good selection at the beginning of one's herd can exert such impact. Melville tells more of the story of the fabled 21-year-old cow whose lineage began in Mississippi.

"I looked all over for what I thought was a good bull and finally found one over at J. M. McReynolds in Mississippi. At the same time we bought two heifers.

And as mentioned earlier, "we prayed for bull calves" and finally some bulls were born that Melville decided to enter in the state association sale at Auburn. "And I thought they were pretty decent bulls—they were the long, rangey type. Everyone else had the little short

compact bulls. They graded those little short bulls at 14 and 15 and they put 11 on mine.

"So, I thought to myself, 'Well, they know more about it than I do. I'd better get rid of them. But I saved that one daughter and she became the dam of Prairie Eden Emulous.'"

Ah, the impact of lessons learned. Some come at a dear price, but Melville forged on and confirmed her earlier conviction. She never looked back but continued on until the public began to notice her bulls on test.

The "test" has been symbolic for Melville and her herd. Sending top ranking cattle through it has proved an affirmation for what she's put together through careful planning and hard work. There's been a "testing", a crucible and Prairie Eden has emerged a herd and enterprise to consider and measure against.

"When you start out by your boot strings and end up competing with the big boys, it makes you feel good."

If the Prairie Eden story is inspiring to fellow breeders, it hasn't come as a surprise—totally—to Melville. She answers "Yes and no", when asked about it. "I knew they would perform well (in the test), but never did I dare to hope they would top the sale."

Her criteria for test candidates includes performance, pedigree, and "at least some eye appeal". She says the dam's previous record is also a factor.

The assumption sometimes drawn from high testing bulls is that their heiferfemales will also prove to be high performers, and it's hoped, easy-keepers. Melville's experience tempers this conclusion somewhat: "That's not always true because unless they're full sibs, the dam's influence may negate this trait. However, most of my females, excepting a very few, are easy keepers. The few exceptions are extra heavy milkers which require extra feed for a few month's after calving."

She has recently consigned to the West Alabama Grazing Test, which started in 1984. The grazing tests are

Ms. Melville Sledge Prairie Eden Angus Newbern, Alabama

gaining popularity in the South where grass is abundant and grain not so much so. Proving cattle on what will be their lifelong diet imparts some practicality and a specific, tailored sense of realism to the testing period.

Some feel it tells what cattle will do in the close-to-real world.

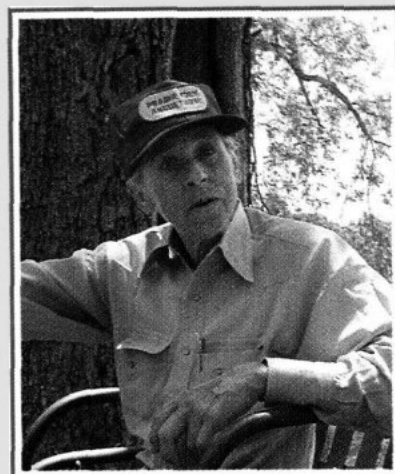
"It tells what your cattle will do basically," Melville cautions, "but you've got to be careful what you put over there (on test) and be careful of the treatment they get beforehand. They'll take calves born from November on through March," she says of the grazing test.

"If you have a good milking cow, by the time that March calf is weaned to go to test, it will have a lot of milk bloom on it. When it gets to the test with nothing but all that green grazing, it will fall off terribly. Actually you are going to be penalized because you had such a heavy weaning calf.

"The thing to do is have an older calf that can be weaned and hardened up before you go."

Now, performance tested cattle are making an impact and the South has established several important test centers to supply the demand.

"You know, people down in the South had never really thought about performance breeding or anything. Most cattle operations in the South were almost a pastime, just a habit. Everything was rowcrop. If you had cattle and they did



"And we're blessed with good vets too. The cattle business here just wouldn't survive without good vets. With all the new diseases and strains around, it takes somebody that's really on the ball to keep on top."



No, these cattle aren't fleeing heel flies, just on a romp for the photographer's benefit. Speaking of flies, they're a problem here as well. Melville gets the cattle up in April and sprays. She also makes use of backrubbers and Barfly blocks.

Eartags were a godsend the first year. "The next year, it was wasted effort. Didn't do one bit of good. If you spray in April, you still have the heel flies, but you do not have the grubs."

all fine, that was all right. And if they didn't, it was still all right."

Times change, thinking as well. And those producers patient enough will reap some rewards as Melville's story attests.

One of the management principles she's clung to is calving first calvers at 30 months of age rather than as two's.

"That was always my thinking on it. The people at Auburn are still advising to calve them as two-year-olds. And I do calve a few, then if they're extra large at yearling age, I'll go ahead and have them bred.

Two calving seasons are to her advantage, she thinks. She can concentrate better on recordkeeping and as her herd is small, the two seasons do not become unwieldy.

"The two herds are run as separate units, according to their nutritional needs. Sometimes too through no fault on the cow's part, we fail to get one settled. So, instead of whole year's loss, we just transfer her to the next breeding season.

"But you better be prepared to provide that heifer with extra feed. If you don't, you are not going to have her breed back on schedule and you'll have to carry her back to the next calving season anyway. So why not give it to her on the front end and let her get a little more growth and development?"

The Prairie Eden herd, which has been closed for several years, then is a cow factory where cows are given opportunity for more growth the first time around in hopes they'll breed back easier the second go-round.

Melville prefers spring and fall calving to meet the market. "Sometimes, people want a specific age bull. By calving in both fall and spring I can try to meet everyone's needs." Don't look for a two-year-old bull on the place. They're gone. Adjusted weaning weights have averaged lately at 700 pounds for the bull calves and 630 for the heifers. No creep.

A. I. is a keystone to Prairie Eden's program. Pine Drive Big Sky, Hoff Scotch Cap, Hoff Esso, Hoff High Spade, Premier Vaedictorian and Independence, and a trial run with Grubbs MacKenzie are sires used recently. Melville does the detection and a local veterinarian, the breeding.

She likes the maternal values imparted from bulls such as Premier Independence and is increasingly conscious of calving ease. "Commercial cattlemen don't

have the time to spend pulling calves. They're not too interested in frame size other than enough to get growth. But they want maternal value and as much growth as they can get without too high a birthweight. So you've got to walk a tight line.

"Now, I'm going to Hoff High Spade because he has relatively low birthweight as well as high EPD values otherwise."

No natural sires are used. She regrets not going to A. I. sooner.

"Instead of using the best herdsire I could afford as recently as 12 years ago, I should have used A. I. entirely, using only the best proven

sires. It's small economy to use a \$10 bull which may or may not improve the herd when another \$10 or \$20 added assures you of improvement with a good chance of some really superior animals."

Melville advocates every breeder learning A. I. techniques even if he or she never intends to use it. "Knowing the basics helps tremendously in getting a high conception rate. My technician, one of the best around, fully agrees." Melville has complete confidence in her A.I. tech and credits him with a good measure of her success.

Nutrition is critical. "More and more I realize how vital nutrition is, just prior to and during breeding season. Cows may look good but they need to be actually gaining weight during breeding."

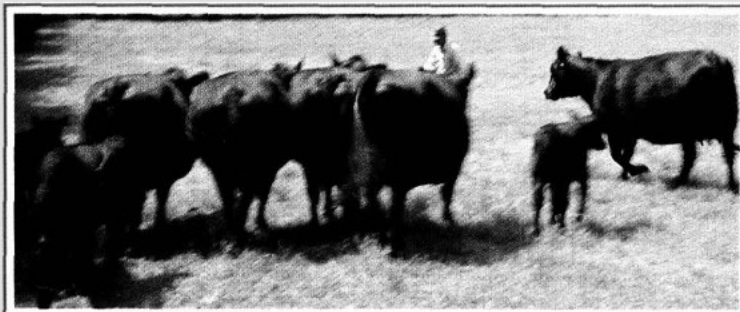
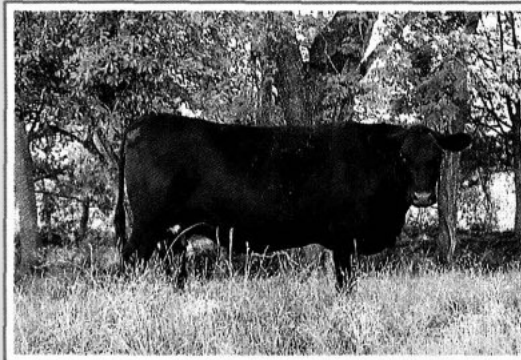
In accordance with her insistence on good groceries, Melville has a special formula prepared locally. All cattle are fed the same mixture as she has one grain bin. All cows nursing calves through the winter get grain and spring calvers receive mineral and hay.

"We are blessed," she explains, "here in the Black Belt with highly productive soils which with proper management produce an abundance of lush forages for grazing, hay, or silage. Fall calving cows are fed hay and grain until grass comes out in spring. Spring calvers are wintered on hay and minerals alone. After calving, they



Hoff Scotch Cap, Leachman Hoss, Rito 9J9, Tehama Bando, and Premier Independence are sires represented among these herd replacements.

Melville says of one of her young cows: "She's a High Voltage daughter, and I'll be darned if I don't believe she won't be the heaviest milker of the bunch. High Voltage daughters are not supposed to be heavier milkers, normally. But then she goes back to the oldest cow currently on the place. And that old cow has produced and produced and produced—she has never had a dog."



Some of the matrons of the Prairie Eden herd.

"If one really loves cattle, this is the most enjoyable life imaginable. However, without that love, I can see that it might seem pure drudgery and entrapment. I think that looking forward to the next calf crop is what keeps a lot of us going."

receive limited grain until May and June breeding season is over."

Her A. I. selections are carefully scrutinized with respect to EPD values. She finds those with high accuracy values as "very helpful in planning a breeding program. I do feel that the maternal EPDs are not too accurate—when applied to my herd. Maybe that's because, for many generations, I have bred for heavy milk—almost to a fault. As time goes on and we have

more complete records, the accuracy is going to keep going on up and up," she says of EPD selection.

"AHIR," she adds, "surely shows us what we are doing and what we ought to do." Melville confides she regrets not enrolling in the AHIR program sooner. "This program points out very plainly, without any figuring on my part, what each animal is doing. This along with personal knowledge toward eyeballing and temperament and those things, helps in deciding which bloodlines I push and which I slowly abandon. By using

AHIR, the herd can only get better in future years."

Speaking of eyeballing, Melville points out she's always sought thickness and depth in the individual's profile. "Not always getting the results wanted," she notes. "Now that we are obtaining carcass information through sire evaluation, I will certainly use it in selecting bulls to use in the future. My goals have been, are, and will be to produce practical, performing Angus from all viewpoints."

Others have noticed and appreciated her efforts. In 1983, Melville Sledge was the first Angus breeder in Alabama to sell a bull to South Africa when breeders Schalk and Carla Botha picked one of hers to import. Evidently pleased, the Bothas came back in 1984 and are planning future purchases. The Bothas experienced a 100-pound boost in weaning weights, thanks to Prairie Eden input. Since the purchase too, the Bothas have been doing exceptionally well at shows and sales in South Africa.

"Their calves from my bulls are doing so well, the president of the Angus association there asked them why they were using A. I. because the Prairie Eden calves were so much better."

With experience such as that, is it any wonder why Melville Sledge was named in 1987, Alabama's Most Progressive Angus Breeder by the state association?

Sweet recognition at last. She says salegoers can't be faulted if they buy cattle from the firms that have been promoting. But, folks are taking a look, giving a call. She cites one telephone conversation she had recently with a prospect who was seeking some heifers.

She told the buyer she never sells a top heifer. "But there are times when I get enough heifers from a top cow, that I would sell the cow.

"He told me, 'Sounds like you've got a real down-to-earth operation.'

"And I said, 'It has had to be down-to-earth. It's been a matter of trial and error.' "

Or, if we might add, "trial and effort", effort that's paid off in the way many small Angus operations hope for.