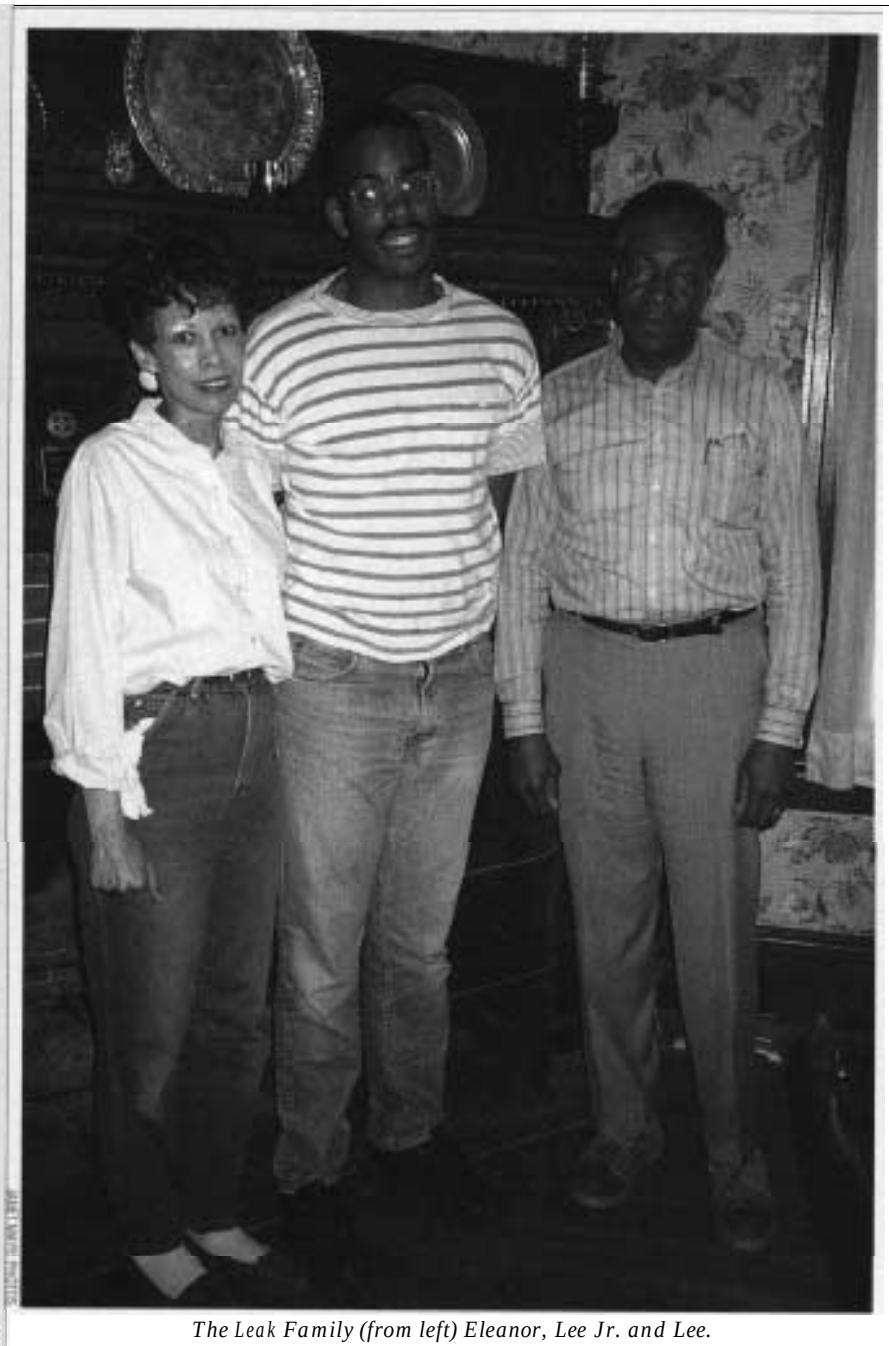
Art & Science of Angus Life

The Leak Family has discovered it on their Maryland farm.

by Janet Mayer



The Leak Family (from left) Eleanor, Lee Jr. and Lee.

Angus Americana

The journey to Trundle Hall Angus Farm culminates at the front gate, where you cross a bumpy cattle guard and thread another quarter mile on a dirt road.

Around a slight curve and over a small rise, the roof of the barn is visible. Finally, the fine old Victorian house and the equally old bank barn lay before you.

The buildings stand as a testimonial to the craftsmanship of the builders of another era. To the left of the road, scattered over a hillside and through abundant patches of multiflora rose, is a small herd of Angus cattle contentedly grazing on a fine pasture of red clover and orchardgrass.

Dr. Lee Leak and his 25-year-old son, Lee Jr., are in a lower pasture herding a few head of Angus ahead of them to put in with the main herd.

Both men finish their job and leave the field, closing the gate behind them. Both have red mud on their boots. Western Maryland, like other parts of the East Coast, received a lot of snow this past winter as well as heavy rains throughout spring.

"I can't remember having had this much mud for a long time," Lee Jr. says. 'You can hardly get around; sometimes it just sucks you in. I occasionally had a boot pulled off. It's especially difficult for the cattle."

Crossing the lawn to the grand old house, we gain entrance by mounting wide, deep steps and crossing a porch that wraps around the front of the house. Eleanor, Dr. Leak's wife, waits inside the front door in the large foyer, graciously telling everyone to come in and sit down and not to worry about the red mud that clings to my shoes. The spacious high-ceilinged rooms are decorated with antique furniture from the same period as the house.

"We bought this furniture when we lived in Potomac, Md., before we

moved up here," Eleanor says. "When we moved here in 1978, our furniture fit the period of the house very nicely. We had no idea at the time we bought it, of course, that we would ever be living in this old farm house or having a cattle operation either."

The Leaks started out a long way from the farm. It was a round-about and unusual route that led them to becoming Angus cattle breeders.

"In fact, neither of us has a farm background," Dr. Leak says. "I grew up in a small town in South Carolina and my wife is from the city. But some of my relatives had farms, and some of my fondest memories from my childhood have to do with the time I spent there."

After earning a bachelor's degree from South Carolina State College, he spent two years in the army in Austria and Germany. In 1962 he earned his Ph.D. in cell biology from Michigan State University. From there he went to Harvard Medical School to do a post-doctorate at Massachusetts General Hospital. It was here he met Eleanor. A graduate of Xavier University in New Orleans, she was attending Boston University School of Fine Arts. They were married a year later.

"I was appointed to the faculty of Harvard Medical School in the department of anatomy, where I worked until 1971," Dr. Leak says. "Howard University in Washington, D.C. offered me the position of chairman and professor of the department of anatomy, which I held for 10 years. That is how we came to Maryland."

He currently holds the position of research professor in the same department at Howard. Eleanor works as a music teacher in the Montgomery County school system.

"After we moved to Potomac, I immediately planted fruit trees and grape vines on our property," Dr. Leak recalls. "I guess it was my background that made me want to grow things. I spent a lot of time on my great aunt's tobacco farm in North Carolina; I also had an uncle in North Carolina who had a farm with a vineyard. My three brothers and I would go up there and help him pick grapes, which he sold to the winery. My grandmother had a milk cow, so I guess you could say that was my early exposure to cattle," he adds with a grin.

Lee's grandmother had also made wine when he was a boy, so naturally enough when the new grapes began to appear, he decided to make wine.

For Dr. Leaks next birthday he received as a present a home winemaking kit complete with instructions. He began to make wine and later joined a local chapter of the American Wine Association in the Washington, D.C. area. He attended meetings that led him to enter his wine in various competitions on a local level, where he won several awards. He finally branched out into national competition, where he did equally well.

Angus cows graze contentedly at Trundle Hall Angus Farm in Maryland.

"About this time, I got the idea that it might be nice to have a small winery out in the countryside near Washington, D.C.," he says. "It would also be a good place for us to raise our family. One Sunday we were driving around looking at land, and we came into this area. It was nice and only about an hour's drive from Washington.

"On Monday, we called a realtor in the area, and he showed us this farm. It was 200 acres, which was larger than we wanted. But by process of elimination, we ended up buying it and moved here in 1978."

The first thing Dr. Leaks did when he moved to the farm was order and plant 300 vine cuttings. In the meantime, before the first grape crop, some other venture was needed to support the farm; this is where cattle come into tbe picture. The family made the decision to go into the cattle business and to purchase initially about 10 cows. The search was on and six commercial cows were bought as the family Christmas present in December of 1979.

"We didn't know what breed to buy when we decided to get into the cattle business," Dr. Leak says. "As a neophyte in the cattle business, I wish I had had someone to direct me in buying cattle. We didn't know where to look. If only we had known enough to contact our Angus regional manager or someone in the state association. As it was, we drove all over Virginia looking for cattle, and we also watched the papers for cattle advertised."

Luckily, someone gave him a catalog for an Angus sale in Maryland. They also gave him the phone number of Dr. Emmit Full, a veterinarian who was the president of the Maryland Angus Association. Dr. Leak called him, and he invited the Leaks to come to his farm. On New Year's Eve of 1979, the family drove to Full's farm and looked at their first Angus cattle. They purchased 10 bred females.

These cows were the start of the registered Angus herd at Trundle Hall. The first Angus calves were born in March of 1980. That same spring the family joined the Maryland Angus Association. Tbey also attended the Wye sale at the University of Maryland and bought a bull.

The Leak children — Lee Jr. and his sister Alice, who is 15 months older — had joined the Montgomery County 4-H Club shortly after moving to the farm. 'We had been involved in growing vegetables, so now it seemed natural for us to join the county beef club," Lee Jr. says. "In 1981 we showed our first steers at the Montgomery County Fair."

By the time the operation had been through two calving seasons the whole family was involved with 4-H project animals. This was also the season that the vines produced their first crop of grapes.

We collected the yield and sold them to a local winery," Dr. Leak says. "By now our family's involvement with the cattle herd, making hay, and preparing the 4-H project animals for show, was more time consuming than we had anticipated. Something had to give, so the wine business was put on hold."

During the first few years, the Leak children showed steers and had also tried several heifers, but the heifers didn't do as well in shows. In 1985, nearing the end of their years in high school, Dr. Leak decided to try to provide better heifers for his children to show.

"That was the year that we attended our first Cow Power Sale," he says. "We purchased a PS Power Play daughter, Bipperts Eriana 400, at the sale. A little later, we went to Huntingdon Farm in Pennsylvania, where we bought Summitcrest Blackbird and HF Duchess."

In 1987 both Lee Jr. and Alice showed in their first big show at the Eastern Regional Junior Angus Show in West Virginia. In 1988, they again showed in the Eastern Regional, this time held in South Carolina, and later that summer at the National Junior Angus Show in Springfield, MO. They also showed at the Atlantic National and the Maryland State Fair.

"I guess we started too late, because by the time we got animals that were good enough, it was time for us to quit because we were going to college," Lee Jr. says.

Lee attended Bates College in Maine where he earned a bachelor's degree in physiology. He recently graduated from Howard University College of Medicine and plans on doing a residency in general surgery in Virginia. Alice earned a bachelor's degree in music and education from the University of Maryland. When Lee Jr. moved back to Maryland to attend Howard, she went to Boston to work toward her master's at the New England Conservatory of Music.

In the late 1980s, when the Leak children went off to college, the Leaks sat down and decided what their long-range goal and objectives would be. They knew there was a need to streamline the operation so Dr. Leak could handle it alone, and they also wanted to set goals for the herd itself. They wanted cattle that would be uniform, easy calving, good fleshing, with good milk and maternal traits. The cattle would need to be maintained on a good pasture of grass and some legumes without having to pour feed into them.

Over the years, the Leaks made many changes in their herd, and according to Dr. Leak, they were not always good changes. Although their first cattle were good commercial-type cows with reasonable milk and moderate frame size, they felt they needed to get more frame into their animals, especially in the mid-1980s when this was the trend.

In order to achieve this goal, they started breeding for taller, framier cattle. About the time they started to reach the desired frame size, the breed had started back in the direction to more moderate frame size with more fleshing ability.

"You have to watch out for trends and bad advice. Following either can hurt you and set you back two or three years in your breeding program," Dr. Leak says.

In 1985 the Leaks started to use artificial insemination (AI) and ET in their breeding program. "We realized that ET was the answer to turning the herd around in a short period of time," Dr. Leak says.

They continued on with this program until 1987, when they ceased because of inadequate facilities. They resumed ET this past year because they felt it makes a real difference in tbe calves.

"A good number of our calves this year are from ET," he says. "Thus far, we have gotten only one heifer out of about six or seven embryos. One of the bull calves out of a R&J Lucy cow sired by the Expresso bull is probably the best animal we have had in a long while."

Milk and maternal traits are top priorities in sire selection. The Leaks pay close attention to expected progeny differences (EPDs) and to the National Sire Evaluation put out by the Association.

"Since we set down our herd goals and started to pay attention to EPDs, we look at the evaluation to see which bulls are high in milk and calving ease versus growth, weaning and yearling weights," Dr. Leak explains.

Tbe bulls used at Trundle Hall last year include mainly Maxima and Expresso, with some Prompter and Hoff Hi Spade. Tbe Leaks say they will basically use the same bulls again this breeding season with the exception of Prompter.

When the operation began to use AI for the cattle, Dr. Leak decided to take an AI technician course with American Breeders Service. "I thought this would be the thing to do," he says. "But I quickly realized tbat I couldn't AI them myself In order to do that, you need a lot of experience. on a steady basis. With our small herd of 25 brood cows, I quickly knew that I just wasn't going to gain that experience. I haven't done AI on a cow since I ended my course. However, tbe course did aid me in detecting heat cycles."

Tbe Leaks use heat synchronization on their females to aid heat detection. Plans this year are to synchronize six heifers. Lee Jr. says they have found the one drawback to heat synchronization is a lower conception. "I don't know why this happens, but I suspect maybe the estrogen levels aren't as high in a forced heat as in a natural heat."

In the early days of the operation, Dr. Leak would have had to call his wife to help him get an Angus cow in for breeding. They would herd the animal in the barn, then halter and tie it along the wall of the barn.

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Leak Family

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Eleanor finds the new system more to her liking. "Since a new holding pen was installed in the barn a few years ago, preparation for AI is just a matter of running the animal into the chute for breeding," she says. "I was really getting tired of Lee calling me out to help him get cattle in for breeding or whatever. For this reason, I agreed to renovating the barn before we finished the house."

Streamlining the operation to aid Dr. Leak in handling the cattle alone was the main reason for the renovation of the barn area. In addition to the holding pen, a whole corral system was installed. "The corral cuts our labor in less than half when we are checking or treating the herd," Lee Jr. says. "We can now run 30 head through in about an hour; before, it would take us all day."

Buying grain for the cattle instead of growing it on the farm is another measure the Leaks have taken to ease the workload on Dr. Leak. Until a drought two years ago, all of the feed for the herd was grown at the farm; now hay is the only crop grown there.

A special mineral mix with selenium, especially formulated for beef cattle, is fed to the herd. Having had to deal with the problem of placenta retention caused by a selenium deficiency, Dr. Leak feels the addition of selenium has solved the problem. He was told the soil in their region is low in selenium.

Calcium diphosphate is also mixed with the minerals. This is done to prevent milk fever, which can occur after calving.

Heifers also receive special treatment. They are maintained away from the herd, where they are fed grain and protein until they are about two years old. The Leaks believe this allows them to reach maximum growth before calving and to ultimately produce a better type calf.

The new corral system has not only facilitated the breeding of females, but helps in twice-a-year herd health treatment.

Dr. Leak keeps health records in longhand in the back of a ledger type book, which also contains a detailed record of each animal in the herd.

"I keep my herd records almost the same as I do my research lab book. It's just easier for me to follow this way. Under each cow's name, I can readily find information on her bloodlines, the sires she has been bred to, calving information, dates and so forth."

The Leaks also work hard at marketing. Feeders and cull animals are sold through the sale at Westminster. Club calves are sold by private treaty. Still others are sold through association sales such as Cow Power.

"We sold a good heifer calf through that sale two years ago," Lee Jr. says. "She was out of the R&J Diamond Duchess cow. The gentleman who bought her saw us at a sale last year and told us how well she was doing and what great calves she had given him. He was very pleased and so were we. That is what we are striving for."

In addition to working at their respective professions and at the farm, the Leaks are active with both the state and national Angus association. Dr. Leak is past president of the Maryland Angus Association, and chairman of the Merit Fellowship at the Atlantic National Show. Eleanor is a member of both the state and national Angus auxiliaries.

"We feel we want to give something back, so we do this by working with the Association and their different programs," Eleanor says. "Our children have had a good time being associated with the Angus breed. I feel our family has gained a lot from being in the Angus business."

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