

*When it comes to raising good Angus cattle,  
North Carolina breeders Joe and Robin Hampton...*

# GO THE DISTANCE

*by Janet Mayer*



**W**hen Angus breeders Joe and Robin Hampton weigh and tag a newborn calf at their farm, the project involves a little more effort than walking into an adjoining pasture. In fact, most times it requires getting into the pickup and driving 75 miles to get the job done.

This is the distance between their farm, located in Rowan County, near Mooresville, N.C., and their home 75 miles to the northwest in the mountains at Laurel Springs, N.C.

In 1984, when the couple bought the 87-acre farm christened Back Creek, they thought they would be living there the rest of their lives. Neither Joe, who works for the North Carolina Department of Agriculture research division, or Robin, who works for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, anticipated having to relocate because of a job transfer.

But four years ago, Joe was trans-

ferred to the Upper Mountain Research Station in the northwest corner of the state at Laurel Springs.

"We were surprised," Robin says. "We had planned on living in the old farm house at Back Creek the rest of our lives. It was built in 1850, originally of logs, so the first thing we tackled after buying the farm was an extensive remodeling project. We also made a lot of plans for developing the herd and restoring the rest of the farm. Moving 75 miles away was definitely not part of our long-range plans."

"We really didn't have much choice in the matter," Joe says. "When your boss tells you to move, you move. We have had

to make a whole lot of adjustments because of it."

Instead of selling the whole farm, Joe and Robin, both 36, decided to sell the house and 10 acres of surrounding land. Later, they bought a mobile home and put it on the farm not far from the narrow paved Back Creek Church Road, which winds along the farm's front border.

In Robin's job as a loan officer for Farmers Home Administration she commutes 60 miles each way from Laurel Springs to her office in Statesville. Adding to an already hectic schedule, a year ago her territory was increased, because of budget cuts, from one to three counties. Add to that the couple's active involvement with 4-H, church and various organizations such as the North Carolina Angus Association — Joe is 1993 president — and it spells lots of hours spent behind the wheel of a vehicle.

"It has been a real lifesaver having

*Angus  
Americana*

the mobile home at the farm," Joe says. "Not only do we stay there on weekends and any other time we get off to work with the cattle, but Robin uses it during the week, especially in bad weather. In fact, it works out real well having her there during the week, especially in cattle breeding season."

Both Robin and Joe are proficient artificial insemination (AI) technicians. With Robin working just 15 miles from the farm, she gets the job of breeding the cattle during the week. Joe gets his turn on weekends.

Breeding and calving seasons are probably the most difficult times of the year for the couple. Joe's parents, who live on a farm about a mile from Back Creek, check the cows at least once a day during this time.

"Aside from my parents, we don't have any other help," Joe says. "We do all of the feeding and if the cows get out, we have to make a trip down to put them back in. During calving season, we put the cows in pastures by the road to make it easier for my parents to check them and get a head count. When a calf is born they call me, and I come down to take care of it. It is important for us to have a low maintenance herd of cows with us living so far away. If we have to pull a calf, we get rid of that cow."

Joe and Robin met while attending North Carolina State University, where they were both poultry science majors. Joe, who grew up on a dairy farm, had a few commercial cows. After their marriage, the couple began to add to the herd. In 1981 they bought their first Angus cows and put them in with the commercial herd.

"At that particular time, even though we had purchased Angus, we weren't exactly sure what direction we were going," Joe recalls. "Between 1981 and the time we bought Back Creek in 1984, we looked at several breeds. But after we saw how Angus performed with commercial cows, we were satisfied they could meet our needs. The Angus Herd Improvement Record (AHIR) program and National Sire Summary were also contributing factors."

By the time Back Creek was purchased, they had made the decision to go into breeding Angus seedstock. To achieve this goal, Joe and Robin decided to reduce the number of commercial cattle and in-

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crease the registered number over a period of several years. About this time, Mother Nature intervened with a drought, necessitating the sale of commercial cows more quickly than had been planned. After the drought, registered Angus were bought as replacements.

The couple set goals for their operation early-on. "You have to know where you are going in the beginning," Joe says. "You can't just go out and say, 'Those are real pretty cows we just bought; now what do we do?' You have to know where you are going, where your market is, and what you are trying to produce."

"We didn't come into this operation having been given anything — not cattle, equipment or land," Robin says. "We have accumulated everything, both on and off the farm, through hard work. This is a real partnership, with most decisions made together. Neither of us wanted things to happen exactly as they did, but it has been sort of a cooperative effort from the beginning."

The main goal at Back Creek is to have a herd of registered Angus cattle that could also be good commercial cows. "I think we have a unique operation because we treat our registered cattle as if they are commercial animals," Joe explains, "and, therefore they need to look like commercial cattle. Our cows have to perform in that environment. They are not super big, tall, show-type cows, but functional, middle-of-the-road 1,100-to-1,200-pound cows. To many in the cattle world, our cattle would seem too small, but we don't consider them small. Our bulls are mostly five and six frame, and customers that buy them are well satisfied with their size and performance. Most customers are looking for calving ease our cattle can provide."

The Hamptons believe they are traveling in the right direction with their breeding program and feel there is real value to

the type of Angus cattle they're breeding.

"In the cattle world, some cattle are valued for being the most of something, such as the longest, tallest, heaviest and so forth," Joe says. "That is not real value. The real value is what you can get for your cattle when you market them. We try not to fool ourselves into thinking our cattle are worth more than they really are. If in the end

they sell for more, well then, that is profit. We always try to be realistic in the value we place on our cattle."

The Hamptons believe the key to staying in the seedstock business is to sell for a fair price bulls that will later perform well enough to make money for the buyer. If the bulls don't make money for the customers, then the customer won't be back. Considering they have sold a third bull to some customers, their theory must be proving right. In fact, business has increased through customers and county Extension agents referring potential buyers to Back Creek.

Most of the Back Creek bulls are sold by private treaty straight off the farm. Others are put through the bull test stations in Virginia, North Carolina and South Carolina. Regardless of where the bulls are sold, they go to their new owner with a guarantee. The customer must be happy with the bull and with the calf crop or the purchase price is refunded or the animal exchanged.

"If the Back Creek prefix is on an animal, no matter if it is a bull or female, we want to make sure it works for the customer buying it," Robin says. "It is better to have a good steer over a sorry bull. We believe one unhappy customer can make a whole bunch of sales go bad for us. We try very hard not to allow that to happen."

So far, they have exchanged one bull because he wouldn't go through a head gate and another that was injured a year after it was sold. "If somebody trusts us enough to buy a bull, then we trust them enough to not ask for a refund unless they deserve it," Joe says. "Up until now, we have not felt anyone has taken advantage of us. We guarantee our females in the same way."

Feeder steers and females that don't meet the strict standards at Back Creek are sold at the livestock auction near Turnersburg. Until this past year, most females

were kept to build the herd. With the herd numbering about 50 cows, pretty close to the maximum number Joe calculates the farm can support, however, they have started to sell females both by private treaty and through state-sponsored sales. The herd is on the verge of being closed in order to control disease, but the Hamptons still buy an occasional female to support the North Carolina Association sales

Because of their poultry background, Robin and Joe are probably stricter with their health program than most cattle breeders. "We vaccinate and worm more than most veterinarians recommend," Robin says. "But we have experienced bringing animals into the herd that have infected the entire herd. This is costly and not very appealing. We have geared our breeding program to closing the herd in the near future."

The main goal of the Hampton's breeding program is to be 100 percent AI. Both are hopeful they can achieve this goal but doubt that they ever will. For now, the cows are heat synchronized and each cow is given two heat cycles to get settled AI. They are then turned out with a clean-up bull for 30 days. This is done twice a year to split calving into a fall season in September and October, and a spring season in February and March. The reason for the split season is to enter into the bull tests that start at different times of the year.

Choosing bulls for the breeding program has caused Joe and Robin to have some of their most heated discussions. "Instead of golf, our hobby is cattle," Joe

says with a wide grin. "We talk about what bulls we will use for about six months before the breeding season. Since we are so far away when our cows calve, it really pays to do your homework before you choose a bull. We rely a lot on expected progeny differences (EPDs) to select our sires, with special emphasis on strong maternal traits and moderate to low birthweights. I am looking forward to the carcass data becoming more available and complete. I firmly believe that even though the other breeds are breeding black cattle, they will never out-do the Angus when it comes to the carcass."

In order to save money, the Hamptons are using their cows as a "young sire herd" for Select Sires Breeding Service. The program involves progeny testing with Select Sires' young bulls. Bulls just entering the program, as well as a few of the proven bulls, are used to breed about 80 percent of the Back Creek cows. Through AHIR, performance data on the progeny of the bulls are gathered. This in turn helps Select Sires determine the future of the bulls.

"Select Sires knows our program and what our goals are, and, in turn they send us semen they feel will complement our program," Joe explains. "Based on pedigree, these bulls are acceptable, but the progeny are the determining factor. This will be the fourth breeding season for the program, and we are real pleased with it."

In addition to the young sires from the program, other bulls used on the Back Creek herd in the last few years are Am-

bush, Scotch Cap, Bando and Hi Spade.

#### **Easy calving, low maintenance**

cows are an important part of the Back Creek program. The couple believes more than genetics play a role in keeping birthweights low. No grain is fed to the cows before they calve in the belief that feeding grain increases the birthweights. Over the last eight years, there has been only one or two calving problems. Calves have birthweights in the low and mid 70's, with weaning weights of 550 pounds for the heifers and 600 pounds for the bulls.

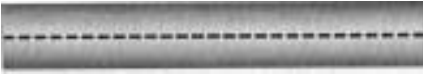
In this forage-based operation, a cow must be able to raise a calf, breed back and raise another calf without any grain. The only group to receive supplemental feed are the two-year-old heifers being conditioned to be bred back. Cows are sometimes offered grain to coax them into pens for checking heat cycles or breeding.

Calves are never creep fed, but Joe says he should have made an exception two years ago during the drought. "I always make it a rule not to buy feed, but I made a mistake when I didn't do it two years ago. Our calves weaned about 50 or 60 pounds lighter at that time, and I had to steer bulls that could have been good sires. Last year, we built a shed to keep back more hay in the event that we have another drought and need extra feed."

Many years before the Hamptons purchased Back Creek, the farm had been used to grow cotton and later was leased out for pasture. Prior to 1984, a timber

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company had cut the trees and the former fields and pastures had gone a long time without fertilizer and lime. Today the main crop at the farm is grass.

"We consider ourselves grass farmers who turn grass into money through our cows," Robin says. "This makes our pastures a most important part of the operation. When we purchased the farm, the majority of land was cut-over timber. The place was a real mess. We concentrated a lot of effort on revitalizing the fields."

To prevent erosion of the highly erosive soil, the Hamptons have worked with the Soil Conservation Service to bring the farm up to standards. "We have planted pine trees on hills too steep to put in grass, or to use the brush hog on," Joe says. "We have established the entire farm in what they call permanent vegetative cover. It is the same thing we call pasture. It really worked well because they wanted us to establish a cover, and we wanted to establish a pasture. The Service sets down guidelines to work by, but works toward your goals. If we were crop farmers, the emphasis would, of course, be different."

In an effort to preserve the natural creeks that run through the farm, the couple has worked with the North Carolina Agricultural Cost Share Program. Fences have been set up to prevent cattle from entering creeks except in designated areas set up with gravel and filter cloth. This prevents cattle from eroding creek banks and lets natural plant growth occur on land surrounding waterways.

Using sheep for weed control is another part of the Back Creek program that has proven an environmental success and a money-making endeavor. "We have a herd of 26 Katahdin sheep," Robin explains. "We chose this breed of sheep because they are hardy, disease resistant, low maintenance and do not have wool. This is a breed of sheep that cattle producers can get along with. The sheep prefer different type of plants than the cattle. They eat the plants we call weeds, such as multi-flora rose, pigweed and horse nettle. When we increase our rotational grazing program, they will fit in very nicely."

Wethers from the herd are marketed as commercial lambs. Ewes are being sold to neighbors who are also in the cattle business and want to try the sheep for weed control. Pastured along with the sheep are about 20 goats that eat woody type plants the sheep won't eat. Strangely

enough the Katahdin sheep don't need Skeared but the goats do.

"We aren't advocating sheep and goats being the solution to everybody's weed problems," Joe says. "They are something new we tried, and so far, they have been a successful solution to our weed problem."

**The Hamptons have** always felt that if the registered business didn't do well, they could take the Angus bull out of the herd and turn in a bull of another breed and raise commercial feeder calves to make money.

"We have taken the approach with our farm that we can change over to the com-

mercial field," Joe explains. "We feel the commercial business is the real cattle business, and we don't ever want to be too far from it. People that have \$5,000 and \$6,000 cows as the heart of their herd can't afford to do that. Robin and I used to think there was a right kind of Angus animal, and everybody who bred a different type was wrong. But now, we believe that the right ones are those that you can sell and make money.

"Fortunately, right now everybody needs a black bull, and we feel the Angus breed holds a great future for Back Creek as well as for other Angus breeders."