



Clear Dawn Farms celebrates its 60th anniversary under the helm of Bill Eaton. He carries on the tradition of raising moderate, functional Angus started by his parents, Lion and Mildred.

A Customer's Best

FRIEND

Exuberant Illinois breeder Bill Eaton has his dog, his cattle, even his customers eating right out of his hand.



Passions drive Bill Eaton. A passion for Mother Nature and all her creatures, a passion for the beef industry, and a passion for breeding and marketing quality Angus cattle at Clear Dawn Farms

Eaton owns and manages the Schuyler County farm in western Illinois which was started by his father, Linn, and mother, Mildred, 60 years ago. This longevity, along with Bill's passion for the business, earned him 1993 Seedstock Producer

"Mom and Dad set the table for all of that,"

Eaton is quick to credit. "They gave me an excellent staling point."

That starting point has now led to a 100.cow registered Angus herd and much respect and admiration for its second generation caretaker.

Tommy Williams, Tulsa, Okla., who has auctioneered

every Clear Dawn sale, is one admirer. "Clear Dawn is one of the model Angus programs in America in every respect," he says. They service their customers with cattle that work."

Dave Seibert, animal systems educator with the University of Illinois Extension Service, is

STORY & PHOTOS BY SUSAN SHOUP



another avid supporter. "Bill has been very involved in performance testing. He's a meticulous individual. He studies the bulls and knows his customers and their needs," Seibert says. "Studying his sale catalog, you can see Bill always wants to build his nucleus around a top set of sound, functional cows."

Let's take a pasture tour. Along with his keen knowledge of genetics and customer service, Eaton reveals another interesting side to visitors of Clear Dawn Farms - a gentle compassion for and understanding of animals and nature. Jumping into the car to guide a pasture tour, and instructing his dog, Blazer, to stay at home, Eaton quickly interprets his canine companion's lowered head and stillness. "He'll probably never forgive me for leaving him behind."

This is the same dog whose amusing antics are featured in Clear Dawn Farms' sale catalog where he's billed, "Blazer the Amazer - Our Tree-Climbing Australian Shepherd." (Nonbelievers can check out the sidebar story on next page.)

The tour begins, minus one dejected dog, on a road that leads to a Clear Dawn pasture. Nearing our destination, Bill suggests to park the car and walk the rest of the way. On a stroll out to find the cattle, he spies a baby killdeer, barely two inches tall, darting across his path. "Look there," he says, his attention diverted. "Come here, fda," he softly says while bending down and scooping up the young bird. Bill admires the prairie bird, lightly stroking him and warmly talking to him. Then, he

sets him down, free again, in the pasture.

Upon reaching the herd, Bill speaks of the cows' contentment on lush, spring grass. He scratches the bull's back and talks to him while mingling among the docile cows.

His response to a bawling calf: "He lost his mother which he thinks is the end of the world right now. Well, to him, I guess it would be."

This compassion is not limited to his animals. Bill helped fill sandbags to help control the floodwaters near Quincy, Ill., last summer. Contact with other workers and victims prompted him to help organize Illinois Beef Relief. Various cattle groups from throughout the state donated money to distribute \$3,000 worth of beef to workers and victims during the flood and at Christmas time.

Bill has also given his time to the Illinois Angus Association, serving as president and chairing its promotion committee for years. The Illinois Spotlight Show was his idea. Now in its 15th year, the Spotlight offers an Angus show, college mini-courses, and Angus socializing for those

who buy a Spotlight steer or heifer.

"It's been great for kids and parents who are just getting started and good for the University of Illinois," he says. "It's a great day when everyone can participate and no one's a loser. That's what I Like about it"

Bill currently serves on the Illinois Beef

Council which administrates the state's check-off dollars. He is on the University of Illinois animal science advisory committee, serves on the county Farm Bureau

Bill's gentle compassion for animals allows him to communicate with and easily handle cattle. Clear Dawn's cows are known for their docile nature, a trait that's passed on to the calves. "We like them that way, and hope our customers will too," he says.

board, and the Schuyler County Soil & Water Conservation District board.

Once reaching the pasture's grassy knoll, you get an even better perspective. Bill explains that Clear Dawn Farms has existed more than 60 years with one herd in one environment. The wooded ravines and rolling pastures on much of this farm are such that cattle are the only thing that makes the land productive.

"There is something to Mother Nature helping you sort out the good ones," he says. "It's applying the laws of biology and survival of the fittest. Perhaps it's really just standing back and letting Mother Nature do her thing."

Clear Dawn cows have to survive and reproduce on time. "Cows that excel in this environment, ones that do well and produce well, are best adapted genetically. If we keep the environment about the same, their progeny should be best adapted to the environment too," he says. This should help "fix" some low heritability but advantageous traits in a long-term herd.

More and more Clear Dawn cattle have "moderately linebred" pedigrees. "Linebreeding is an attempt to concentrate the genetic influence of a particular ancestor or two believed to be proven superior for desired traits. We've found it can work well for us and our customers," Bill says. "Genetics is always being selected for, whether we know it or not.

"if genetics aren't adapted to the environment, you can help them out, but that can be expensive," he explains. "If the environment and land, labor and facilities demand easy calving but your cattle aren't, you can hire a vet. If they can't survive and reproduce on your roughage, you can buy more feed. But that will cost you."

Clear Dawn's calf crop is the primary source for its own replacement heifers and herd bulls. Clear Dawn cows are out of Clear Dawn cows with the Clear Dawn prefix recurring in bottom-side of pedigrees.

"Over the years, we've evolved into an almost closed herd," Bill says. "We've only purchased five or six females in the past 20 years."

Nor have they purchased a bull since 1976. New genetics are introduced through artificial insemination (AI).

Walking along the cow path, the tour and education continues. Bill acknowledges another constant at Clear Dawn Farms is keeping customers in mind. Most of their customers are commercial cow-calf producers with 20 to 50 cows, with a few in the 200-300 cow range. At their spring sales, 55 to 70 percent of the cattle sell to repeat customers, a statistic Bill is proud of.

Auctioneer Williams says Bill Eaton epitomizes what customer service is all about. "He keeps up customer relations in a fabulous fashion," Williams says. "Everybody who gets a sale catalog has a personal

note in it from Bill, and these notes are not just 'How are you and how are your wife and kids?'

"He'll reference cattle they've purchased in the past and will make specific notes on cattle throughout the catalog and how they might work for their particular program."

Noting that most of Clear Dawn's

customers are within a 100-mile radius of the farm, Williams says. "Bill knows his customers very well. People look to him for advice. When his neighbors purchase cattle, they know they'll make an economic impact that's positive."

Clear Dawn sells to commercial producers who want good growth with the traditional Angus traits of maternal excellence, calving ease and carcass potential. "Area feeder and packer buyers now discriminate against growthy, Continental cattle," Bill says. "My customers see that. Angus lit the market."

Turning back for home, Bill retraces his steps. "We have always looked for a balanced animal," he says. "Twenty years ago we may have been looking for more relative growth without going too far and getting too big. Today we might accept less

growth but emphasize more maternal quality than we once did."

Bill prefers thick, full-bodied, good-doing and easy-keeping cattle. That ideal steered them clear of the large-framed, show ring AI sires of the '70s and '80s.

"For our customers and our situation, I could see no value in breeding cattle with an excessive mature size," Bill says. "They'd be high maintenance, trouble-trait cattle that wouldn't work. Still, everyone else was using them and getting lots of money for them. We weren't. Sometimes we felt pretty lonely."

Bill sets sight on the horizon as the pasture tour concludes. He doesn't see many changes for the breeding goals of Clear Dawn Farms. Fertility, fast early growth and maternal ability in an easy-keeping, profitable package are what he's after - basically the same thing they've been after for 60 years. Though the tools to achieve it will likely change.

This breeder would like to obtain more carcass data on his cattle. He hopes to test some bulls' progeny for carcass data in the future. This spring Bill is flushing a few Clear Dawn cows and doing embryo transfer work for the first time.

"All of us in the beef business will have to adapt ourselves to a new and changing environment of a consumer-oriented production and merchandising system," Bill says. "Thank goodness that, as a breed, Angus has major lead time for the data needed in many respects.

Bill utilizes as much information as he can in making breeding decisions. That information includes weights processed through American Angus Association's Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program.

His passion for the industry entails enthusiasm for the whole beef business, not just Clear Dawn Farms. His long-range goal echoes that enthusiasm.

"First, I hope there will continue to be a healthy demand for beef. Then, I hope there will still be a strong demand for Angus. Finally, I hope I'll be able to produce functional and superior cattle that can help my customers profit in the cattle business.

Then they'll be able and willing to pay me a premium."

Back at the homplace, Blazer the dog did forgive Bill. In fact, he welcomed his master back home with zeal. In return, he was greeted with friendly words and a warm pat.

A loyal dog, a loyal breed and loyal customers...what more could a person want?