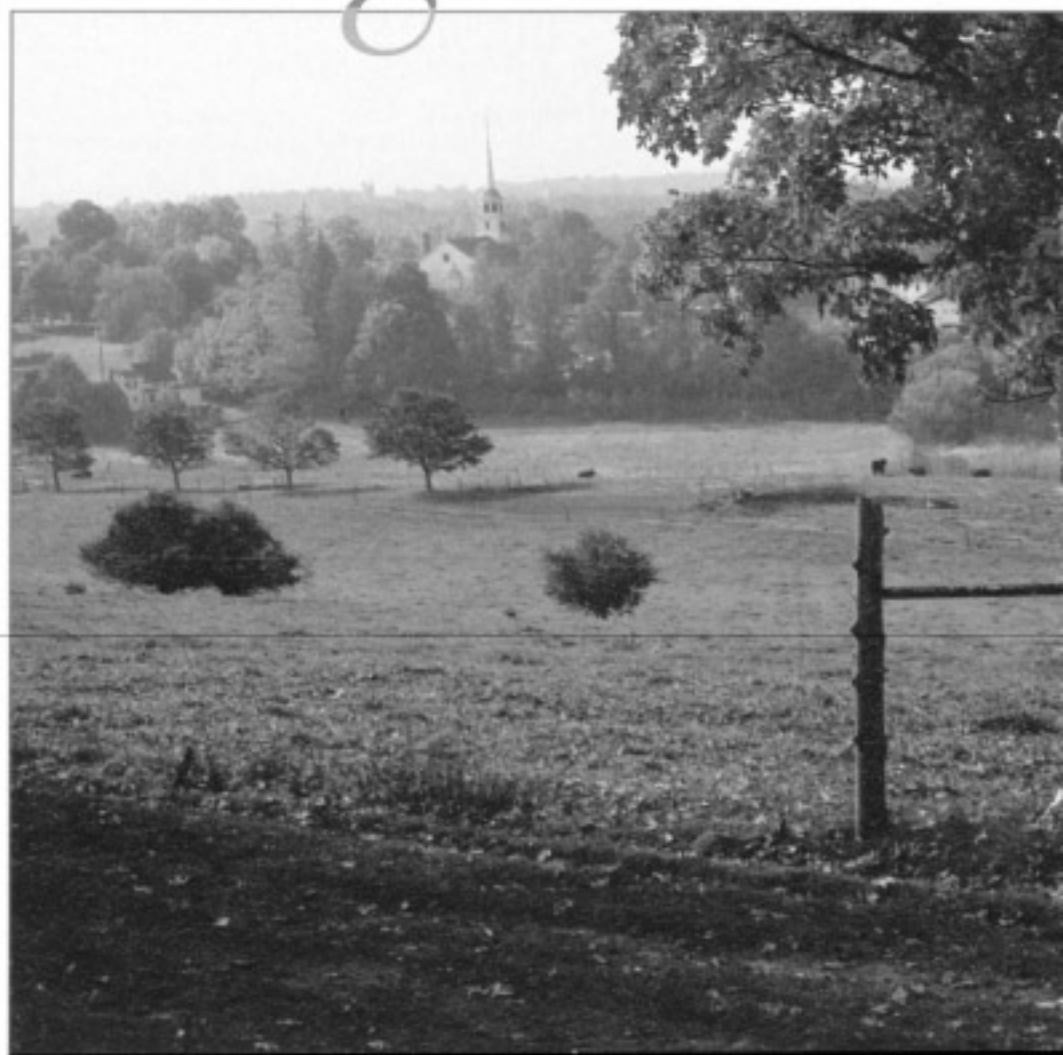


New England Et

Gibbet Hill Farm is a survivor in a state where urban encroachment and environmental regulations have tightened the noose around the agriculture industry.



Above: Angus cattle graze on Gibbet Hill pastures surrounded by New England's fall splendor.

Massachusetts, once the home of many prominent beef cattle breeding operations, has been seeing a steady decline in numbers for some time. Experts in the field say this is largely due to an ever-expanding sprawl of urbanization.

As one of the survivors, Gibbet Hill Farm, a Groton area Angus breeding operation, has managed to stay both viable and successful in the midst of the steady encroachment.

The owner, Marion Campbell, is quick to point out that despite the success of her own farm and what she considers a bright future for the Angus breed, she sees a far less rosy picture for agriculture. "Actually the whole farming

picture in Massachusetts is dire," she says. "The dairy and beef cattle industries are both in a decline. At one time, the New England Angus Association had about 150 active members, with 10 to 12 small cattle breeders in this area alone. There was a lot of interest in cattle then, but now we are the only one left. I would have to say that specialty vegetable, flower and fruit growing is the major agricultural enterprise in the state today."

William Conley, farm manager for the past 44 years, voices equal concern about the future. He sees urbanization of the area as a complication that threatens not only the future of agriculture

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in the state, but also complicates the daily routine of the Gibbet Hill operation. Conley says everyone who moves into town talks about the great expanse of open space that makes up the farm, but they don't realize what it takes to keep it that way.

"Just let noise from weaning calves or smells from corn silage or manure get to the people, and they complain," Conley says. There are some very strict bylaws in the town against dropping manure or even corn silage or hay on the highway. If it happens, you could be subject to a fine of \$200."

Spraying is also restricted. Some of the farm's best corn acreage is within a restricted area two miles from the municipal well, making spraying inappropriate. Conley has tried using many types



of herbicides, all of which have proved inadequate; so, corn is no longer grown in this area. To complicate matters, part of the farm is located on the opposite side of town. This necessitates that Conley and his crew of three employees travel between the two areas with equipment and supplies.

Although the operation of the farm was far simpler when it was established in the late 1940s, Gibbet Hill Farm has been consistent with its industry-wide reputation for breeding high performance cattle. The pride of the operation is reflected with justification, in the advertising slogan: "We did performance before performance was cool." It is a documented fact that the herd was enrolled to participate in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) as early as 1959, long before most breeders even thought about performance.

Campbell readily admits her initial endeavor in raising beef was done in an effort to beat meat rationing during World War II, not to get into breeding performance cattle. "I bought two steers that I kept at my mother's dairy farm," she recalls. "After our family ate the two steers, I tried to purchase more, but found none for sale. At this point, I purchased four cows and a bull. Well, one thing led to another, and my mother informed me my cattle were taking over her farm, and I should go find my own," she adds with a laugh. "So, I bought this farm."

Gibbet Hill, meaning gallows, appears on several old topographical maps of the area that now hang on the wall in the farm office. To

Mrs. Campbell and her manager, Bill Conley Sr., have worked for the past 44 years to make Gibbet Hill Farm New England's top source for Angus seedstock.

Gibbet Hill, meaning gallows, appears on several old topographical maps of Groton, Mass. The hangman's platform has always been used as the farm logo.

New England Endeavor

Campbell, this seemed to be a distinctive name for the 1,100-acre farm. The hangman's platform has always been used as the farm logo.

The first Angus cow came to Gibbet Hill in 1948. Conley joined the operation in 1950 after graduation from the University of Connecticut. At that time, the herd consisted of 25 Angus cows. When the herd hit its peak some years ago, the number had increased to 225. It now numbers 140. "During the 1960s and '70s, we had a fairly vigorous cattle market," Conley says, recalling those peak years. "When the herd was smaller, we sold mostly by private treaty, but as it grew, we got into more regional consignment sales. This included the New England Association Production Sale, the Duchess County, New York Sale and one held by breeders in New Jersey. We also fed quite a few steers for a local supermarket."

Four of the New England Association sales were held at the farm, and Gibbet Hill was one of the original participants in the Cow Power Sale, with sales three through seven being held at the farm.

Today, all feeder calves are trucked to Lancaster, Pa. The bulls are marketed at an annual production sale at a farm Conley owns in Clarksdale, Mo. Conley's son, Tim, manages the operation. "We have a tremendous market in Missouri," Conley says. "Our spring sale averaged \$2,700. We sell all of our yearling bulls out there. It is a good repeat customer market, with some people buying three to five bulls on a yearly basis. We never did that well here, even at our peak. Now the demand is just not here in the New England states because the number of breeders is down."

The base breeding for the herd came from a purchase of 10 cows by Campbell from a herd in Ontario, Canada, in 1949. From this group came two cow families that have been maintained throughout the years in the Gibbet Hill herd. One of the most outstanding is the Belle family, with 279 female descendants registered to the herd. The other family is Dido, which is responsible for producing many bull descendants.

"Most of our pedigrees are entirely Gibbet Hill breeding on the female side," Conley says. "It is rare today to find a pedigree completely from one program. We registered calves this year that were 12th generation of our own breeding."

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TO:

*Northeast Angus
Breeders*

PS Sasquatch 904 is one of the bulls instrumental in building the genetics in the Gibbet Hill herd. The operation purchased him in 1979 as a calf. He later was a stud for Select Sires for 11 years. By using Sasquatch heavily as a sire, as many as 104 Sasquatch daughters were in the herd at one time. "Practically everything in the herd shows him on one side or the other," Campbell says.

For many years, the operation used Wye genetics heavily, to which they credit putting size into the herd. But when the Wye herd was turned over to the University of Maryland, the decision was made to switch to other bulls. "We have a solid, uniform herd that is not inbred, but closely related," she says. "You can see what happens as you change bulls; it's a very clear response to a program."

Campbell and Conley have found it is best to stay away from fads in breeding their cattle. "Actually, after a couple of changes such as size, we decided it was just too much bother. We stuck with our basic program," Conley says. "We've found our cattle are very saleable with the breeding program we have."

A large portion of the herd is bred by artificial insemination (AI). As many as 15 different bulls are used in a breeding season. Since the expected progeny differences (EPDs) are pretty well balanced in the herd, Conley looks mainly at birth weight EPD. They also look for moderate frame and thickness.

"I have found people are aware of AI bulls and their EPDs, probably more than you think," he says. "But our commercial bull buyers don't pay that much attention to them; they just kind of eyeball bulls and ask if the sires promote easy-calving."

Over their years in the beef business, Conley and Campbell say they have seen a lot of peaks and valleys. "It really takes very little to upset the delicate balance in the beef business," Conley says. "Once the commercial thing gets rocked a little bit, the condition quickly escalates into the purebred world."

One such reference he makes is to the time when Gibbet Hill began selling cattle in Missouri. The market for crossbred animals was strong at the time, but prices for Angus were not good. At that particular time, Conley feels the breed was going through a discriminatory phase with the packers. But once the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program took off, demand for Angus became greater and prices escalated.

"People always said benefits from the CAB Program would come directly to the breeders. I think it is finally taking off," he says. "We see a big difference in people selecting Angus bulls over a second or third crossbred program."

Campbell also likes what she sees in the CAB Program and the progress we have made as breeders. "We all look forward to a great future for the Angus breed," she says. After spending a moment in deep thought, she continues, "I just wish there could be as bright an outlook for the agricultural industry in my own state. I don't want to appear to be negative, but I don't see any future around here. We are the only farm left in what once was a rural community. It is sad." AJ

