



Kevin and Lydia Yon enjoy life at Congaree Farms with their children (l to r): Sally, Corbin and Drake. They have been farm managers for Congaree for the past six years.

The future belongs to those who believe in their dreams. Kevin and Lydia Yon live the life many young couples in rural America only dream about. It wasn't that long ago, however, that they were the dreamers.

Before graduating from Clemson University in 1989 with degrees in animal science and getting married, Kevin and Lydia made a pact to have their own farm where they could work together and raise a family. They felt it was probably far off in the distant future, but still worth pursuing.

Shortly after their graduation, by luck or by destiny, a professor from Clemson University advised the Yons there might be a job opening with Curt and Ann Gwinn at Congaree Farms.

Located near Eastover, SC., the Gwinns for many years had bred purebred Arabian

A Promise Kept

CONGAREE FARMS IN SOUTH CAROLINA
HAS BECOME A REPUTABLE BREEDER OF
ANGUS CATTLE, THANKS TO THE VISION AND
HARD WORK OF ITS YOUNG MANAGEMENT
TEAM, KEVIN AND LYDIA YON.

BY JANET MAYER

horses and Angus cattle at the farm, in addition to owning and operating the Congaree Construction Company. They were looking for a manager to take charge of the herd of 50 Angus cows, with the goal of breeding a herd of performance-oriented, reputable Angus.

Just one month after their graduation, the Yons were hired to manage the Congaree herd. They were asked to take complete charge of the cattle and haying operations at the farm. In return, the couple was to have a free hand in managing the farm, an interest in the cattle, and use of the house on the property.

After six years of working seven-day weeks and the addition of three members to the Yon family — Sally, 4; Drake, 3; and Corbin, 1—the arrangement has worked well for all involved. With a

Continued on next page

Promise

knowledge of cattle, marketing savvy, and maturity far beyond their years, Kevin, 29, and Lydia, 30, could easily be described as having fulfilled their dream.

The Congaree Angus herd has grown to number 150 head of cows, and is fast becoming known as seedstock which can perform efficiently on forage. Even though the young couple had many things to learn in the beginning, the Gwinns attribute much of the success of their Angus breeding operation to the Yons.

"Lydia and Kevin are top-drawer people," Curt says of his managers who he seldom sees, but who keep him abreast of what is happening with the herd. Although the Gwinns live on the farm, they only have one business meeting annually with Kevin and Lydia to go over goals and proposals for the year ahead. The owners are otherwise kept updated with monthly letters and by telephone.

"We have pretty much of a free hand with what we do," Kevin explains. "But this farm has never been just a hobby for the Gwinns. They expect it to pay the bills and to make a profit."

Partners in Production

The Yons say their job has been difficult at times, but they love what they do. "This arrangement has really been fortunate for us," Lydia says. "Although it has taken hard work, dedication and the help of God, we probably never would have the opportunity to work together if we hadn't come here. We can treat this place as if it were our own, and we have learned so much."

Lydia grew up on a farm where her family bred Shorthorn and commercial cattle. Kevin worked at his grandfather's farm where there were a few head of



A strong forage program and quality Angus cattle keep Congaree Farms in the green.

Angus cattle. Both participated in 4-H and FFA projects.

"We know what a wonderful experience this was for us, and we wanted to share this with our children," Lydia says.

Although Kevin isn't sure how the Gwinns came to the decision to try Angus when purchasing their first cattle in 1984, he's thankful they chose Angus cattle.

"It's nice to wake up each morning and to be producing a breed of cattle that folks are coming to you to buy," Kevin says. "Angus cattle are real easy to market. We don't have to beat the bushes and persuade people to try our breed. In turn, we feel we're helping them by selling them cattle that will contribute to their program."

Kevin and Lydia have laid down goals for breeding cattle to fit the environment of the farm. Since half of the 2,000-acre farm is in pasture or forage crops, the Yons essentially consider themselves grass farmers. They use the herd of cattle to turn the grass into edible protein.

"We tend to forget why God put cattle here, and that is to

convert forages into edible food," Kevin says with conviction.

Bermudagrass and alfalfa hay are grown at the farm to feed the Congaree cattle and the few remaining Arabian horses the Gwinns keep for personal use. Kevin says the area does not readily lend itself to the production of alfalfa because of the sandy soil. Still, the extra effort he's taken to grow the crop on an area of the farm with clay soil has paid off. Hay targeted for cash crop is put up in square bales and sold to area horse farms for premium prices. Lower-quality hay is put into round bales for the cattle.

Grasses grown in the pastures at Congaree include Bahia grass, Bermudagrass, and several other native warm-season grasses. In an effort to provide year-round grazing and to offset the Bermudagrass going dormant in the fall, the Yons no-till drill winter rye, ryegrass and various types of clover in the Bermudagrass area. They've found this method greatly increases the grazing season.

Producing Angus seedstock which can function and perform efficiently on forage

with a balance of all the economically important traits is the ultimate goal in Congaree's breeding program.

"I think with value-based marketing coming and with consumers demanding quality beef when they go to the supermarket, there will always be a place for Angus," Kevin says. "We need to be able to identify those lines of cattle that will meet the needs of the packer and the consumer."

On the other hand, Kevin believes that breeders need to be mindful of reproduction traits and traits which enable cattle to survive in their environment.

"If we get so wound up on these carcass traits that we don't make sure our cows have a live calf every year, it won't matter if the end product is palatable," he says.

The Yons cite programs which allow breeders to retain ownership of steers, such as the Georgia Beef Challenge, the South Carolina Quest, and the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Value Discovery Project as great educational sources on carcass traits for the breeder as well as for the commercial producer.

Artificial insemination (AI)

is used extensively in the Congaree program. Heifers and select groups of cows are usually heat synchronized. All of the cows are eventually turned out with a herd bull. Kevin and Lydia work as a team, deciding on the sires as well as doing the inseminating.

"I used to be the No. 1 heat checker, and I did a lot of the inseminating," Lydia says. "Now, because I spend so much time with the children, most of this falls to Kevin."

"However, we're teaching the children to look for cows in heat. We bring the females we want to AI to the barn, and the children are there playing with their toys when we are doing our twice daily heat checks. They're still young, but we feel it's good for them to learn early; I'm sure we'll have plenty of help in that area soon," she adds with a smile.

The Yons' selection of sires is based on producing calves with good expected progeny differences (EPDs). Special attention is paid to a balance of calving ease, volume, muscle, growth, strong maternal traits, structural correctness, and to producing calves which match their farm's forage system and environment.

"We try to use older proven bulls," Kevin says. "We really do look for calving ease bulls, because our customers have requested this. Most of them have small herds, and they will use one bull to breed their heifers as well as their cows. They can't afford to have calving problems."

The Yons put a lot of thought behind their sire selection by employing what they feel is a systematic way of choosing bulls each year. Lydia is in charge of all of the operation's computerized records. By using a program that Clemson University helped perfect, information charts for each cow are put on the computer.

The chart lists the cow's



Kevin Yon visits with Chris Cookston of Oregon, who completed an NJAA summer job internship at Congaree Farms last summer.

EPDs and potential sires to be considered for that particular mating. The computer figures what each of those matings would produce as far as the numbers go. Adding in the history of that particular cow, and the visual information on the available sire, the couple chooses what they feel is the optimum mating.

Calving season at Congaree Farms is during the months of December and January to facilitate the winter forage program. The cattle have access to the winter growth of grass, which helps them cycle and rebreed. This also coincides with the peak of lactations.

Heifer calves have been averaging 575 pounds at weaning time; bull calves, 600 pounds. The Yons are quick to point out that the calves are not creep-fed and this growth is based only on forage and milk.

Partners in Marketing

Producing bulls which will fit the needs of both commercial and purebred breeders is one of the main objectives at Congaree. "We've always tried to match our customers to the type of bulls they want," Kevin explains. "It's kind of the same as selling them a truck. Some want a town truck, and others need a four-wheel drive model."

The Yons have also found

that cattle producers are now paying greater attention to EPDs "Often we send potential buyers a brochure on how to understand EPDs. I think it helps them a lot," Kevin says.

In an effort to provide good Angus bulls to both types of customers, and to provide the operation with an economical way of marketing, the decision was made to start a performance test sale at the farm.

"We didn't have enough cattle for a production sale, nor could we afford to hire a sale manager and auctioneer, so we came up with the idea of having an Open House Bull Sale," Lydia explains. "We put the first group of 11 bulls on test in 1990 and held the first sale in February 1991. It has proven to be quite successful. This year was our fifth sale, and we sold 21 bulls for a sale average of \$2,400."

To initiate their bull test and sale, the Yons enlisted the aid of David Gazda, South Carolina's regional manager for the American Angus Association, and several Clemson University beef specialists to form a screening committee to help in selection of the bulls and to set prices.

Prior to the test, the bull calves are not creep-fed, and they start the test after their weaning weights are taken in

July. Each bull is hand-fed measured amounts of grain and free-choice hay for 168 days in a common environment.

Sale catalogs with information and a set price for each bull are sent to prospective buyers prior to sale day in February. Buyers turn in a bid sheet before 12:45 p.m. the day of the sale, indicating what bulls they are interested in buying. Buyers interested in the same animals bid against each other in \$50 increments until the final buyer is decided.

"Kevin acts as the auctioneer, so you know the bidding is low key," Lydia says. "I think one reason for the success of our sales is the fact that we guarantee our bulls. If for any reason a buyer is not satisfied, we'll replace the bull or refund their money for one year from the date of purchase. Of course, the bull must have received proper care."

Marketing of females from the herd has not been difficult since most females are kept to build the herd. However, Congaree does sell a limited number of females each year for cash flow and for promotional purposes. The Yons feel selling Congaree females lets other breeders see what type of cattle the operation is producing. The females are sold through several South Carolina and Georgia consignment sales, as well as through the South Carolina Futurity Sale. Others are sold by private treaty from the farm. A small group of younger bulls are also sold by private treaty

Partners in Education

The Extension agricultural agent for Richland County, where the farm is located, says the Yons do an outstanding job at Congaree, but probably equally important is their support of agriculture and

Promise

education.

Both Kevin and Lydia have been active members of the South Carolina Farm Bureau, the South Carolina Angus Association, and the South Carolina and National Cattlemen's Associations.

In an effort to make the general population, who the Yons consider to be their ultimate customers, aware of agriculture and how food arrives on their tables, the Yons invite numerous groups from nearby Columbia to tour the farm.

"We hope that people will have a greater understanding of what agriculture is all about after they've toured our operations," Lydia says.

The Yons also support young people entering the field of agriculture by providing opportunities for on-the-job training to interns from both Clemson University and the National Junior Association summer job program.

"We feel this not only gives these young people an insight into cattle breeding, but it helps us," Kevin says. "So far, we've had 14 interns. It certainly has been good for us because we have to keep up on everything. I hope it has been good for them too."

All of the Yons hard work and dedication hasn't gone unnoticed. The South Carolina Farm Bureau honored Kevin and Lydia by presenting them with the South Carolina Farm Bureau Federation's 1993 Young Farmer Achievement Award. The Yons later competed for national recognition in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., and were chosen as one of four runners-up for the American Farm Bureau Achievement Award.

With so much achieved so quickly what does the future hold for this young couple and the Congaree herd?

"It's an ongoing challenge," Lydia says. "I've heard that the smartest day of your life is when you first get out of college and think you know everything. Every day thereafter, you realize just how dumb you are. Being at Congaree is a fine challenge for us, and we feel fortunate to have it."

Kevin feels just as blessed, adding, "Often we have made decisions that were questionable, but the Gwinns have stood by us and have been very supportive," he says. "We set out with the goal of breeding a herd that would be respected, and I feel we have achieved that. Now that we've been associated with Angus for the past six years, we're totally committed to the breed. It's what we want to do for the rest of our lives."