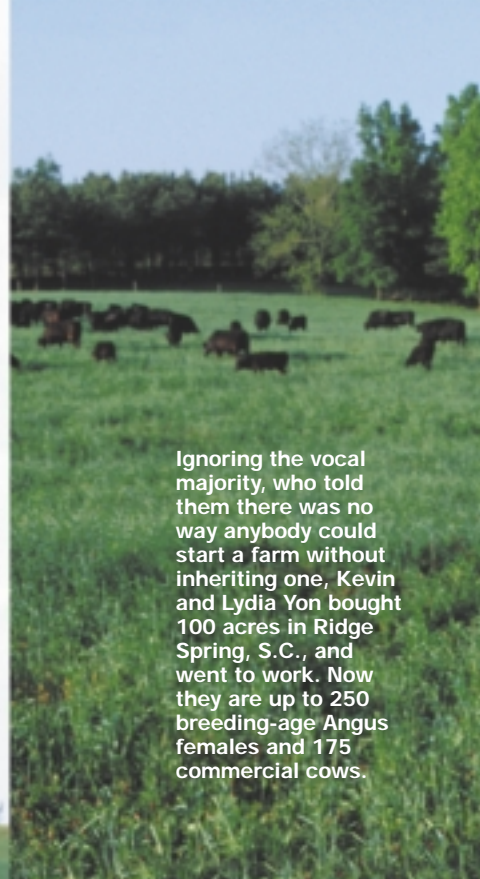


Family First

Kevin and Lydia Yon are convinced there's no better place to raise their children than on the farm.

by Becky Mills



Ignoring the vocal majority, who told them there was no way anybody could start a farm without inheriting one, Kevin and Lydia Yon bought 100 acres in Ridge Spring, S.C., and went to work. Now they are up to 250 breeding-age Angus females and 175 commercial cows.

If one has any doubts about the importance of family to Kevin and Lydia Yon, take a look at their farm sign. There for the world to see, at least those who travel Highway 392 to Ridge Spring, S.C., is a sandblasted and brightly painted statement — Yon Family Farms.

Still in doubt? Ask the young couple why they farm. “The obvious reason is the young ‘uns,” Lydia says.

The “young ‘uns,” specifically Sally, 9, Drake, 8, and Corbin, 6, were introduced to farm life literally from Day One. When the children were born, Kevin and Lydia were managing partners at Congaree Angus Farm outside Columbia, S.C.

“We were fortunate that the people who owned Congaree were agreeable to them being with us. All three of them went to the barn with us from the start,” Lydia says. “I’ve got pictures of them in the baby seat in the feed cart.” Whoever got the cab tractor also got the baby and the baby seat. An empty cattle pen housed the playpen.

Family relations



Lydia says it is highly unlikely a woman would have been able to get a job as a herdsman when she graduated from Clemson in 1989. As it was, Kevin graduated first and took the job as manager for Congaree. She stepped in beside him after they were married.

Farm-raised advantage

When asked about the challenges of trying to co-manage a purebred operation while riding herd on the children, Lydia jokes, "After they ditch the diapers and the bottles, they're self-sufficient."

On a serious note, she says, "To this day, having grown up in a situation where they were forced to entertain themselves, they are easy children to be with. It stimulates their creativity and imagination, and they find pleasure in the simple things."

"They're amazing," says county agent and friend Phil Perry. "They have so much fun together."

While they can and do entertain themselves, the kids, along with Kevin and Lydia, participate in a number of organized activities. There is the South Carolina Junior Angus Association and the South Carolina Junior Cattlemen's Association. In 4-H they have a pullet project, show lambs and beef heifers, and they plant wildlife food plots.

They also tag along with Kevin and Lydia, who serve as

volunteer 4-H leaders, as officers in the state and local cattlemen's associations, and as active members in Farm Bureau at the local and state levels, not to mention the school Parent-Teacher Organization (PTO). Kevin also is a volunteer firefighter.

"Obviously, we go to a lot of meetings," Lydia says. "They fight over whose turn it is to go with us if they all don't get to go."

They also go to cattle sales together. "They are still at the age where they think we're kinda fun to be around," Lydia says. "We're taking advantage of that."

She adds, though, "We worry about them getting burned out. We're not going to cram cows down their throats."

Diversified interests

As an antidote to bovine overdose, all three kids participate in Little League, which Kevin coaches, as well as church activities. Sally and Drake take piano lessons. Their artist grandmother, Barbara Yon, makes sure all three get a regular dose of culture.

Kevin and Lydia also plan at least one nonagricultural vacation a year, like a trip to the beach or to the mountains, in addition to an annual community canoeing and camping trip. And, when they do go to a meeting or sale, they'll make side trips for an afternoon of go-cart racing or other kid-friendly fun.

Colbert, Ga., cattleman Randy Daniel laughs about seeing the Yons at an April cattle sale. "I saw them coming out of the motel, but before they went to the sale they had to go to Wal-Mart to go Easter Bunny shopping," he says.

Perhaps the most obvious example of the kids' versatility was when Sally announced she wanted to be in a beauty contest.

"That was out of character," Lydia laughs. "When she was up on stage and they asked her what she likes to do, she said work with her lamb, show cows and play ball." She won. And she entered another one and won it, too.

Well-grounded

Still, their hearts are at the

farm. Listening to an enthusiastic game of bicycle tag outside the combination farm headquarters-feed store, Lydia says, "We are really pleased with this. It might change, but they come here because they want to."

Kevin says having the kids with them on the day-to-day operation of the farm adds another level to their enjoyment of it and helps soften the not-so-good times. He says, "Things like the satisfaction of planting a seed, watching it grow, and harvesting it; watching a baby calf — not only do we get to enjoy it, but they do, too."

"They see that cows do die. Some calves come alive and beautiful, and some come dead. They understand that a dead one is one less to sell. And they understand what happens when it doesn't rain. Sometimes they have a better perspective than we do."

"Even if they don't go into agriculture, they can take the lessons they learned on the farm and apply them anywhere," Lydia says. "Whether all three of them want to be rocket

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scientists or computer engineers, or choose to do this, we're convinced there isn't a better place to raise children."

A place to come home

If they do want to farm, Kevin and Lydia handpicked Ridge Spring so they'd have that option. When the owners of Congaree decided to disperse their cattle operation, the young couple scoured South Carolina, as well as other states, to find a place where cattle farming had a future.

Kevin says, "We asked ourselves if our children could farm in this area."

The answer was yes, or at least from all appearances. When Kevin first brought Lydia to look at the community, she said: "I didn't know there was anyplace in South Carolina like this." Farmland was available; but, even more important, they were overwhelmed by their reception. People bought bulls, leased them land and provided moral support.

"Our neighbors and the folks in this community couldn't have been better to us," Kevin says.

There wouldn't be a Yon Family Farms without Kevin and Lydia's team approach. "It is a great opportunity to work together," Lydia says.

Although she grew up on a 100-cow commercial operation, she says it is highly unlikely a woman would have been able to get a job as a herdsman when she graduated from Clemson in 1989. As it was, Kevin graduated first, in December 1988, and immediately stepped into the job as manager for Congaree. When Lydia finished in May, they got married, and she stepped in beside him.

"The Lord opened the right doors for us," she says. "Everything just fell into place. We don't think it happened by chance."

By accepting cows as part of their salary, the Yons had acquired 20 females by the time the owners decided to disperse in 1996. Then they purchased 80 more.

Ignoring the vocal majority, who told them there was no way anybody could start a farm without inheriting one, Kevin and Lydia bought 100 acres near Ridge Spring and went to work. Now they are up to 250 breeding-age Angus females and 175 commercial cows. In addition to the 100 acres they own, they lease several more farms in the community.

"Lydia and I are probably two of the hardest-headed people you'll meet," Kevin says. "I've heard all my life you just can't start farming. I've never, ever wanted to do anything but farm. Never, ever."

"The Yons are proving you can start from scratch," Daniel says. "They'll be a factor for a long time."

Still, Kevin and Lydia both say farming with one's life partner can be a bit challenging. "I've been fired or quit at least 100 times this past year," Lydia says. "Usually, though, in a couple of hours either my partner has wised up or I've seen the error of my ways."

Both say it isn't the big issues, but merely the inherent stress of farming, that makes them lose their cool. Lydia adds, however, "There is enough separation in our duties. If there [weren't], we wouldn't be a cohesive family unit."

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Above: Kevin and Lydia Yon handpicked Ridge Spring, S.C., as the place to locate Yon Family Farms so their children would have the option of coming back to the farm to ranch. Shown from left are Corbin, Drake, Sally, Lydia and Kevin.



Left: Corbin is in charge of the children's laying operation.



Below: Growing up in a situation where they have to entertain themselves, Corbin, Drake and Sally Yon are self-sufficient and easy to be with. Creative and imaginative, they find pleasure in the simple things.

Family first continued

Responsibilities

Kevin tends to the forages, the equipment and the physical plant. Lydia does the advertising and most of the computer work. They share cattle chores like herd health, breeding and checking heat, as well as tending to their feed and livestock-equipment business.

"They complement each other," Perry says. "They are such a great team. They pull together."

Sally is on her mother's heels with the computer work and typed in all the breeding records this year. She and Drake also help check heat, get the cattle up, write down numbers when they work cattle, and keep the cows herded.

Corbin is in charge of the children's laying operation. A dozen eggs are a dollar. All three children also look after their own livestock projects.

Kevin's parents, Phillip and Barbara, moved to Ridge Spring in 1996 specifically to help with the family and farm. They baby-sit, help get ready for meetings and sales, and feed when Kevin and Lydia both are gone. Phillip also helps with the hay operation.

Perry, while not officially kin, might as well be. He funnels information to the farm, particularly on forages, helps the kids with their 4-H projects, pitches in with meetings and sales, and serves as head cheerleader.

"I was there when they dug the first posthole, and I helped move the cattle to Ridge Spring," Perry says.

"Phil Perry has a genuine interest in us being successful," Kevin says.

With their family-first team approach, Kevin and Lydia are well on their way to meeting their long-term goal. Kevin says, "I want to leave a legacy to the children, not of a lot of land or nice things, but we want people to say we had a good program, good cattle, took care of the land, were honest, and contributed to the community and industry."

Those who know them aren't surprised they're already thinking about what they'll leave their children. "You can't be around the Yons very long without realizing family is first," Daniel says. "Look at the name of their farm."

