

Graham Angus Means BUSINESS

At Graham Angus Farm in Georgia good business sense and cattle sense add up to more cents for beef producers.

by JANET MAYER



Key players in Graham Angus Farm's success are Jimmy Bowles, cattle manager; Joan Rowley and Joyce Wagner, office managers, and Bill Graham, owner.

Does the mention of the word "entrepreneur" grab your attention? Entrepreneur has become a buzzword of the 1990s. And although the word is French, the concept of the highly successful, self-made individual is as American as Apple Pie.

Both admired and envied, entrepreneurs who are successful in all types of businesses, from the corporate world to the world of agriculture, are emerging every day.

If your ambition leans toward agriculture in general and cattle raising in particular, or if you're looking for a role model, you might do well to take a few notes from Bill Graham of Miami, Fla. He's an entrepreneur who has had an amazingly magic touch, no matter what type of business tried. And let it be known, there have been quite a few.

Depending on what hat this youthful appearing 71-year-old is wearing at the time, he is an Angus breeder, a pecan grower, a dairyman and a community developer. To add icing to the cake, all of the Graham Company businesses are doing well.

Graham Angus Farm is one of the businesses that has done especially well. The 7,200-acre farm just outside the city of Albany is located in southwest Georgia. The registered Angus herd, established in 1946 and closed to outside blood lines since 1981, has achieved widespread recognition in the Angus industry for seedstock with outcross genetics.

Graham says the total acreage at Albany is confusing because only about 2,000 acres of the farm is open pastureland and much of the remainder is swamp and woods. However, in addition to the pasture, the farm cultivates crops of hay, pine

trees and pecans. Many of the pine trees were already growing on the farm when Graham bought it, but he planted additional pines that are harvested for pulp wood and lumber. A 1,000 acre pecan grove is located about 10 miles from the main farm, where Graham continues to add trees and irrigate the grove. Last year the pecan crop totaled 1.28 million pounds

Although Graham's farm is in Georgia, he is a true Floridian. He was born in 1924 on a houseboat in the Florida Everglades, on a canal 20 miles northwest of the city of Miami. His father managed a sugar plantation.

"I grew up in the Everglades, but I essentially feel I've been in the cattle business all of my life," Graham says. "I'd attribute this to the fact that my father into penning up some wild range cows when I was only 14 years old. That was my start in the cattle business."

The range cattle that young Graham talked his father into penning had previously been kept to provide fertilizer for the plantation's sugar crop. A hurricane in 1926 wiped out the sugar crop and after that, the cows ran wild.

"After we penned up that group of range cows, my father hired an old rodeo rider, who had suffered an injury, to take care of the cattle. We had a rodeo of our own for about three years — castrating, dehorning and building a herd, Graham says.

"As a graduate of Michigan State University, it was natural for my father to go back to Michigan to buy two Angus bulls to use on our cows. That was my introduction to the Angus breed. From then on I was interested in only Angus."



Bill Graham and Jimmy Bowles take a pasture tour. Bowles has been with Graham since 1970. He was raised 14 miles away and this is only his second job since graduation.

Another Graham business which involves cattle is a dairy farm in Florida. The operation, which uses three herringbone milking parlors to milk 2,500 Holstein cows, is located near the southwest corner of Lake Okeechobee. Graham started the dairy operation because of the tremendous market demand for milk by the large population in the state's southern region.

One of Graham's largest business projects was the development of Miami Lakes, a self-contained community at the northwest corner of Miami. It's currently home to 25,000 people and provides employment for about 10,000.

The development evolved when an expressway cut through five sections of land Graham owned. He took the opportunity to build houses, apartment complexes, shopping centers, office and industrial buildings.

A large part of the Graham Family, including a son, three daughters and two sons-in-law, are involved in the management of the community and other family-owned businesses. This

includes Shula's Steak House, a restaurant located in Don Shula's Hotel & Golf Club, which is well known for serving *Certified Angus Beef*™ steaks. Don Shula, coach for the Miami Dolphins professional football team, owns the steak house in partnership with the Graham Company.

Graham's daughter and son-in-law manage the hotel and restaurant business. "While we were still in the initial stages of this project, I

told them if we were going to have this restaurant, then we were going to do it right and serve nothing but *Certified Angus Beef* product," Graham recalls.

"The restaurant is going like gangbusters, and it keeps getting better and better. I maintain that serving *Certified Angus Beef* product is one of the reasons for this."

Graham recently had a customer tell him that he had eaten there numerous times, and that each time the beef



A performance-bred cow-calf pair at Graham Angus Farm.

BUSINESS

was excellent.

The cattle that provide the *Certified Angus Beef* product served at Shula's Steak House and the wild range cattle that Bill Graham first convinced his father to corral in the late 1930s are a world apart, but it was the beginning of Graham's career as a cattle breeder.

In 1946, at the end of World War II, the Grahams started a registered Angus herd in Florida. Five years later, Floyd Wagner, a friend of Graham's father from Michigan, pioneered the move of the Graham Angus herd to Albany to start an operation on a farm near the present main farm, which wasn't purchased until 1970.

"When we moved that particular part of the operation to Albany, we were really trying to raise bulls to use on our commercial herd of about 2,500 head in southern Florida," Graham explains. "Back in the 1950s, we were buying Angus bulls in the south and getting a really poor selection. We were looking for growth and scale, but the bulls available were awfully small. We weren't really satisfied so, we decided to raise our own."

Graham sold the commercial cattle operation a few years ago to a citrus grower who owned a neighboring ranch.

In 1960 the first additions of seedstock used to improve the herd were bought from Wye Plantation in Maryland. A year later, Graham made a trip to Oklahoma to buy more seedstock, and bought a bull named Big Elban Moore.

"He was the biggest bull I'd ever seen in my life up until then," Graham recalls with a laugh. "I later found out that the scuttlebutt around Georgia at that time was the bull was a mule and nobody was going to use him. But I'd have to credit that bull with



really turning this herd around and greatly influencing what it is today."

Although Graham still resides in Florida, he makes at least one trip to the Albany farm each month. At the end of each visit, he meets with farm manager O.T. Watson and cattle manager Jimmy Bowles to discuss objectives and resolve any problems. From these meetings, a monthly memo is prepared, which Graham feels keeps clear in everyone's minds what has to be done.

Graham credits the farm's success to practical management and valued, long-time employees such as Watson and Bowles. "You can't have an operation like ours without reliable people. For example, if Jimmy didn't accurately tag our calves and weigh them when they are born, where would our records be? We don't keep records to promote our cattle; we need

them to help breed better cattle. It all goes back to integrity and honesty all down the line. When I'm not here, I feel fortunate and comfortable in knowing that everything is being taken care of in a correct way."

In addition to Watson and Bowles, two full-time employees, Jessie Johnson and Aleck Johnson, help care for the Graham herd. Working in the office is office manager, Joyce Wagner, and her daughter, Joan Rowley. Joyce is the wife of Floyd Wagner who was instrumental in starting the Albany farm, and was the manager until his death in 1972.

The Graham Angus Farm herd is made up of 15 herd bulls and more than 500 cows which perform, reproduce and are maintained on a realistic forage environment. The program is managed much like any other commercial operation with the exception of keeping individual records

on all cattle. Natural bull service is used because Graham considers artificial insemination (AI) to be labor intensive and would require the hiring of additional employees. He also feels by using bulls from his own program, he maintains a uniformity in the herd which might not be achieved if bulls from other bloodlines are used.

In addition to keeping costs down by using natural breeding, Graham says some years ago he woke up to the fact that there was a more systematic way of keeping the herd and using the farm's full capacity. In the past, pastures were not fully stocked with cows. Graham figured a new system could be achieved by increasing cow numbers to fill eight separate pastures with 33 mature cows in each.

Cows are bred for two calving seasons, one in the fall and the other in the winter. With two calving seasons, everything is done twice a year, from weaning and weighing to pregnancy checks. The checks are done when the calves are weaned, and if a cow is open, she is dropped back to the next breeding season; but this is done only once. Cows don't get a second chance.

In an effort to keep the groups up to capacity, a few extra cows are kept to replace those which have calving problems or have been culled for other reasons.

"We have been using this system for several years now, and I feel with our pastures filled to capacity we are getting top production," Graham says. "Maybe some of our calves are mediocre, but I would rather have a mediocre calf than no calf at all. Getting a live calf is the number one economic factor in raising beef. This is why we put a lot of emphasis on fertility and reproduction. There is no choice between a cow that produces a mediocre calf every year or one that produces an outstanding calf every other year. The one with the mediocre calf can help pay the

taxes and the bills; the other one doesn't even pay her own way."

Graham bulls feature basically three bloodlines – the Gorthy of Graham line, going back to PS Franco; the Big Elban of Graham line, going back to Big Elban Moore; and the Menteith of Graham line, which goes back to Wye Plantation. Graham says the Menteith line has fast growth, and the animals are easy keepers. Several years ago the number one and number three ribeye Angus bulls in the country came from this line of cattle.

The Graham program is an indepth study in production and performance. Efficient computerized recordkeeping is essential with the herd enrolled in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program. Graham Farm culls strictly on records alone. The visual appearance of an animal does not enter into final decisions. However, emphasis is placed on sound feet and legs, good udders, efficient gain, large testicles, fertility and mothering ability.

The unique marketing program developed to sell Graham cattle is one of their most outstanding attributes. At the onset, all bulls were sent to Graham's Florida commercial operation for breeding purposes. As the number of registered animals increased, and other commercial breeders saw the results of breeding with these bulls, a demand for Graham bulls began to evolve.

Two-year-old bulls are sold at the Florida Bull Sale each November in Okeechobee, located in what Graham describes as the middle of commercial cattle country. Bulls to be sold in the farm's production sales are not creep fed prior to weaning. After they are weaned they are placed on feed test for 140 days in large groups. coming off feed, they are weighed given an adjustment, and exposed to limited feed until offered for sale in open house sales each

March and November.

The sales, conducted since the late 1960s, have proven to be successful. Approximately 30 cows, 35 bulls and 10 heifers are offered at each sale. Not every animal listed in the sale catalog is sold. Those that are not are put back into the cow herd.

Another positive marketing asset of their sales is the offer of free delivery to buyers within the continental United States. This past March, buyers from eight

states attended the Spring Open House Sale of 56 lots, which grossed \$120,500 and averaged \$2,153.

"We don't sell any cattle by private treaty. Everything but the older bulls and the culls are offered at our Open House Sales. The cattle are pre-priced, and customers have the opportunity to sign a buyer's list, claiming any particular animal offered," Graham explains. "Should two or more buyers claim the same animal, a low-key

auction is held among those individuals. We feel this is the most open and honest way to handle our sales."

The objective of Graham Angus Farm has remained unchanged since the mid-1950s. It has been and will always be to produce registered Angus bulls which will improve the economic efficiency of commercial beef herds.

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