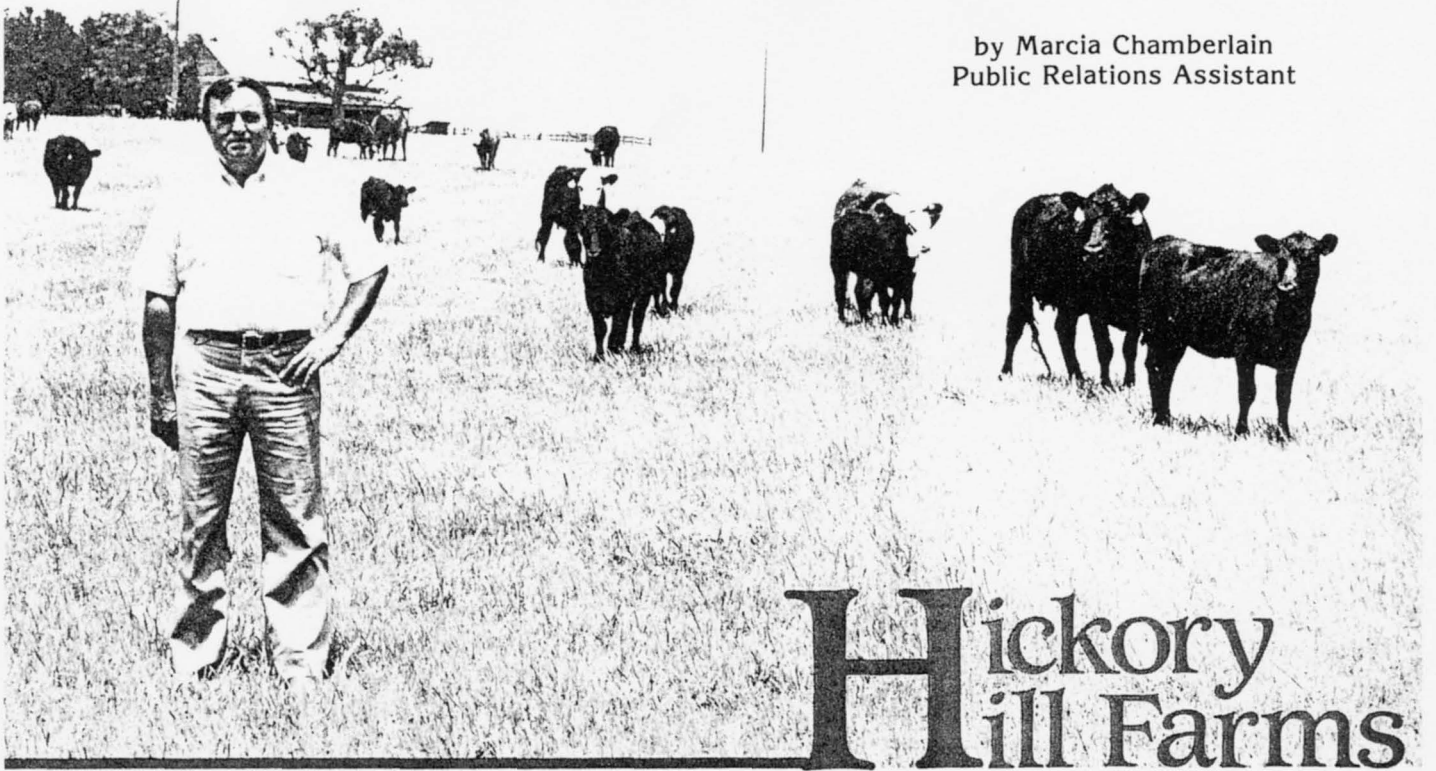


by Marcia Chamberlain
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Hickory Hill Farms

Billy Moss Makes Angus the Core of This Top Georgia Commercial Herd

Up until five years ago, Hickory Hill Farms at Thomson, Ga., had what you would call "caretaker type management," where there were about 50 cows running on 420 acres of grass on the 2,000-acre farm.

The wheel turned when Billy Moss became manager of Hickory Hill. Since then he has developed one of the top performance-tested commercial cow herds in Georgia. And the operation's carrying capacity has quadrupled.

"The only way I was interested in coming to work at Hickory Hill Farms was to have a first class cattle operation and have enough cows to justify me being here," tells Moss.

"When I came here five years ago, I set out to develop a cow herd that would be half Angus and at the time, the other half didn't matter," he adds. "Now, I've decided I want the cows to be half Angus-half Hereford or half Angus-half Santa Gertrudis. These have been the most profitable for me.

"The ideal cow for this operation has to be Angus based. I want maternal traits in the herd and this is what the Angus cow is known for," says Moss.

Nearly all the cows—nearly 200 now—are Angus based. Besides the crosses mentioned, there are a few Angus-Charolais and Angus-Simmental cross cows along with some straight-bred Angus and Herefords.

"I take advantage of hybrid vigor for crossbreeding," he tells. "I always come back on the Angus-Hereford and Angus-Gert. cross cows with a bull of a third breed.

"In other words, on these cows we may use a Simmental bull, a Limousin bull or a Hereford bull," explains Moss. "And sometimes we breed them straight to get some Angus and Hereford replacements."

The cows weigh from 1,000 to 1,200 lb. and Moss feels a cow that weighs around 1,050 lb. is big enough, especially if she'll wean 60 percent of her body weight in calf.

Hickory Hill Farms has a young herd. The cow herd is probably close to or under 5 years of age, according to Moss.

"We have kept nearly all our replacement heifers that will work and that are big enough. Plus we've been trying to

use better bulls each year, so genetics in our herd have improved each year."

For the mature cow herd, the bulls are turned out March 22. Calving season begins around Christmas and goes through the first part of March, lasting about 75 days.

Moss feels it is important to have as many calves as possible born early.

The cows are put in large herds during the calving season to save time in checking them. They are put in less wooded pastures and are checked at least three times a day.

When a calf is born, it is tattooed and ear-tagged. The calf's ear-tag number matches its mother's, making it easier and quicker to identify pairs in the pasture and when sorting cattle.

Moss goes on to say the ear-tag, tattoo, birth date and sex are all recorded in a handbook, along with other information such as calving troubles.

Must pay their way

A cow isn't given a second chance at Hickory Hill. If she loses a calf for any reason, tells Moss, she is allowed to regain her lost weight, then she is sent to the sale barn.

He says, "I don't believe in boarding cows that will not produce some income during that year."

Our replacement heifers calve at 2 years of age. The bulls are put in with the first-calf heifers February 22, around 30 days before the cows, and they are bred for 60 days. Our calving season for them begins about December 1.

"I found having these heifers calve earlier than our cows gives them extra time to get over calving and start putting on some weight before the next breeding season begins."

Moss feels it's important for the heifers to calve sooner, as it takes them longer to come back into heat. The additional recovery time for 3-year-olds helps them remain on schedule the rest of their lives.

During calving season, replacement heifers are placed in a three-acre pasture near the farm headquarters where they are checked in the morning, at noon, late afternoon and at 9 p.m. If none are in labor at 9, then they are not checked again until the next morning at 7 a.m. A lighted corral is close by so heifers can be given assistance quickly, if needed.

This year, 46 heifers calved. No calves were pulled and one was lost. All were sired by Angus bulls.

Proven sires help

Moss uses only performance-tested bulls and buys them from test stations and/or from purebred breeders who have done their own testing at home.

"One of the traits I have been really interested in when I buy bulls is birth weight," says Moss. "And that's because we've kept so many heifers and calve out so many of them each year.

"I've been using some sons of QAS Traveler 23-4 as I knew he was high in the sire summary (American Angus Assn. Sire Evaluation Report) for calving ease along with his other performance traits."

"And since we've used Traveler sons on our first-calf heifers, we've had virtually no calving problems," tells Moss. "Plus, we've done a good job, I think, with our heifers because they have been big enough to calve."

Bulls are put in with the cows as yearlings. "That's one thing I like about Angus bulls," remarks Moss.

"And the reason I wanted Angus to be the basic breed in this cow herd is because of all the traits that have made the breed," he goes on to say. "Of course that's fertility, milking ability, mothering ability and carcass quality, all this.

"We started using Angus bulls as an outcross. We have used Traveler sons, PS Power Play sons and Hundred Oaks Rito sons," he adds.

Moss is oriented basically toward maternal traits. That is the strength he wanted to develop in the cow herd at Hickory Hill.

Moss tries to make sure every bull purchased is out of an exceptionally

good cow, since he knows he is going to have daughters out of each bull.

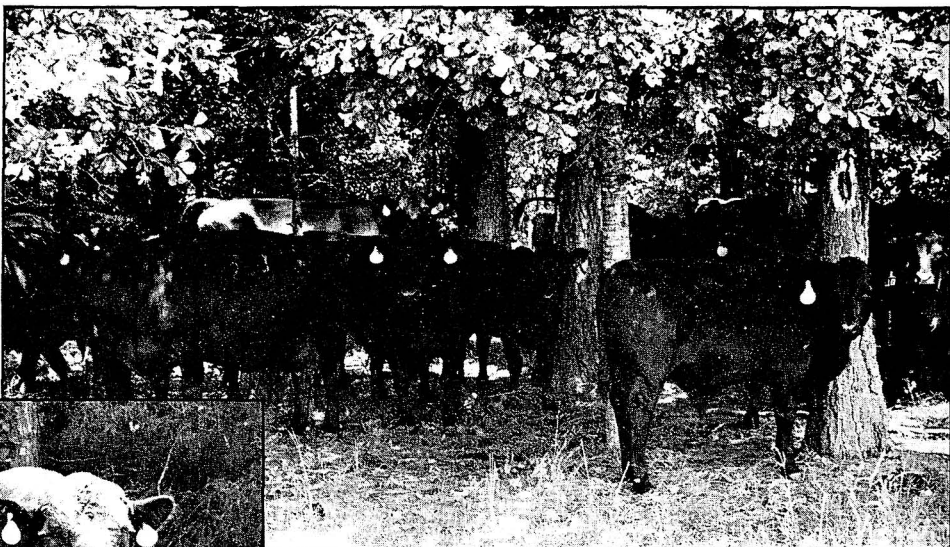
Another factor Moss considers when buying bulls is their pedigrees. He is, however, more concerned with performance. He looks at birth weight, weaning weight and yearling weight. He has not been too concerned about hip height, although he does want his bulls to have sufficient frame.

A bull is normally used for three years at Hickory Hill and then sold. Moss explains an advantage of performance-tested bulls: "They have a high salvage value. We sold all our bulls we bought four years ago this past winter within about \$200 of what we gave for them as coming 2-year-olds.

"They were only 5 years old then—we have three calf crops from these bulls and sold them for nearly what we paid for them."

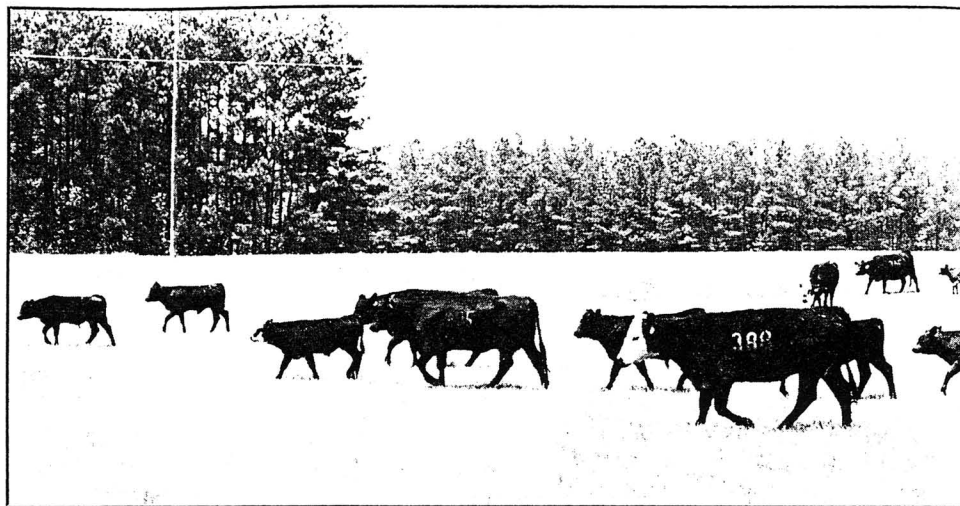
Building strong genetics

"I strongly believe that the fastest way to genetically improve a cow herd is to 'turn generations,'" says Moss. "In other words, I don't believe in relying on only one bull—use him, sell him and replace him with a better bull. This way you are continually adding better genetics to your herd."



Members of the Hickory Hill herd must pay their way—there are no second chances here. Manager Billy Moss has stressed maternal traits and insists that each cow wean a heavy calf annually.

Performance-tested sires are turned over every few years at Hickory Hill. Growth is important, but strong maternal traits and calving ease are of primary importance since a high percentage of heifers are retained each year.



Angus-Hereford and Angus-Santa Gertrudis crosses seem to be working best for Billy Moss in Thomson, Ga. He runs 200 cows in one of the state's strongest commercial operations.

All heifers are backgrounded and each one is given a chance to become part of the cow herd. None are culled at weaning. In the latter part of February, heifers that weigh less than 700 lb. at 13 months of age and the smaller framed ones are culled. The remaining heifers are exposed to bulls for 60 days, then pregnancy checked and the ones that are open are sold.

Even after the heifers wean a calf, some are culled because of poor performance. Heifers that have bull calves must wean calves with a weight per day of age (WDA) of 2.25 lb. to stay in the herd; heifer calves must have a WDA of 2.0 lb. or their dam is culled.

"We put a lot of pressure on our heifers. We must keep a large percentage of them because when this type of selection pressure is put on them, a large percentage aren't going to make it," says Moss.

"However," he continues, "look at the positive side with this type of management—those heifers that do make it should be excellent mother cows."

Looks to purebred breeders

"We're on a computer program like the old BCIA (Beef Cattle Improvement Assn.) program through our county agent. Through him we can record data and get all we need on our herd."

Moss likes the average birth weight for the calves to be 70 to 80 lb. The weaning weights for the steer calves have averaged 590 lb. over the last three years; heifer calves have averaged 530 lb.

All the calves are preconditioned. Weaned in late August at 7 months of

age, calves are weighed, vaccinated and then put through a four to six week preconditioning program. After that, steers and heifers are separated.

"We sell our steer calves the end of September through a tele-auction sponsored by the Georgia Farm Bureau," tells Moss, "Our pay weight last year was 651 lb. and we preconditioned them for only four weeks. We sell what is known as Georgia Certified Preconditioned Calves."

For the last three years, Moss has sold the highest price lot of steer calves for their weight through any tele-auction in Georgia. "For that weight of calf all year," he adds.

Moss is an active member of his county and state cattlemen's associations. He is president of the McDuffie County Cattlemen's Assn. and on the executive committee of the Georgia Cattlemen's Assn.

In 1983, he received the Georgia Cattleman of the Year award and was the Georgia nominee to receive the 1984 Beef Improvement Federation Commercial Producer of the Year award. He has also been recognized by the Soil Conservation Service for management practices involving no-till grass farming.

Moss relies on the purebred breeder for producing the best bull possible. He believes in order for him to keep producing good calves, he needs to have that Angus base in the cow herd.

"The only way I can do this," he says, "is if the purebred Angus breeder keeps in mind what the Angus breed was developed for and does not lose sight of those traits that have made the breed great." AJ