

Conversion at the Abbey

BY BRAD PARKER

The Benedictine monks of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas have found a new way to hold onto their agricultural traditions. And it has them singing the praises of Angus cattle.

In the western Arkansas community of Subiaco, each day begins at 5:40 a.m. with the sound of bells. The ringing chorus will drift over the Ouachita Mountains four more times before nightfall, calling the monks of Subiaco Abbey from their chores to join in group prayer, part of the custom the Benedictine order has observed since its founding 1,500 years ago.

The routine has changed little since 1878 when monks arrived from Indiana to minister to the German Catholics who had settled in the Arkansas River valley. But every day has been different, with different challenges, and the Benedictines have learned a few things about adaptation.

Among the latest adjustments are those in their farming operation. The Arkansas

brothers have continued the tradition of working the land surrounding the monastery to help provide for their own physical needs and to remind them of their reliance on God's providence. While the farm always has included cattle, the newest revision involves registered Angus.

Past to present

When the abbey was founded, the farm helped feed and clothe the monks and provided some of the sustenance for the young men enrolled in their Subiaco Academy. By the 1910s, they had developed a top dairy herd. Unfortunately, the milk cows' schedules didn't always coincide with the monks', and several of the "farm brothers" often were unable to answer when the bells summoned.

Above: Dairy cows, then commercial beef cattle, once roamed the abbey's pastures. Now they're home to a growing Angus herd.

Add the increased regulations of the 1960s, which hampered the dairy's sustainability, and it becomes clear why the abbot's council in 1963 recommended that "within a reasonable time, the abbey dispose completely of the entire dairy herd and that it expand and improve the beef herd to the maximum." In July 1964, 75 registered Holstein cows sold at public auction.

With a renewed emphasis, the abbey's crossbred commercial beef herd eventually grew to more than 200 mother cows. For most of the latter half of the 20th century, Brother John Schad was the herdsman, assisted by Brothers Louis and Henry Fuhrmann. Another of the Fuhrmann cousins, Brother Michael, sometimes took leave of his assignment at the abbey's sawmill to help with farm chores.

In the early 1990s, with the farm brothers nearing retirement, the monks sold half of the herd. As the new millennium approached, it was time to make another decision.

"We had to decide whether or not to just phase out of it or do something else," says Abbot Jerome Kodell, adding that few of the younger monks had any farm experience. Only two really fit the bill. Brother Tobias DeSalvo was at the community's mission in Belize, and the Rev. David Bellinghausen was the abbey's prior — the No. 2 spot after the abbot, who happens to be one of the resident welders himself.

To help determine a plan of action, a farm advisory board was formed in 1998. The dozen or so local alumni of the academy and other area farmers offered diverse points of view, physical assistance and a wide range of equipment. Their first official action was to sell the remaining commercial cows.

"We were kind of in an 'in-between' situation," the Rev. Kodell explains. "For several months, we didn't have any animals here."

For years David McMahan of Belle Point Ranch at nearby Lavaca, Ark., had been encouraging the monks to develop a purebred herd. The advisory board decided it was time to take that step.

"We've looked to him for a lot of advice and references," the abbot says of McMahan, who started the endeavor by donating three bred, registered Angus cows in October 1998. They calved the following March.

With cattle once again grazing the abbey's pastures, the issue of labor had to be addressed.

In June 1999, Lawrence "Butch" Geels, a 1956 graduate of the academy, was hired to oversee the farm. He brought a working knowledge of the registered cattle business and forage systems from his former career as



PHOTO BY BRAD PARKER

Butch Geels, the first layman to serve as farm manager at the abbey, sits and softly whistles until the 52 curious recipient cows on loan from Belle Point Ranch gather around him. They'll go home after the calves are weaned.

a dairyman. Bellinghausen became the communication link between the new manager and the monks.

Shortly thereafter, Stan Schluterman joined the farm staff as Geels' assistant. Brother Tobias returned from Belize this past June and was assigned to the farm.

Brother Louis, 70, still assists with the farm at times, but mostly he helps care for Brother Henry, 80, who is confined to a wheelchair. Brother Michael, 80, still runs the sawmill, but he doesn't do any more farming. Brother John died about the time the commercial herd was liquidated. At his funeral, Kodell prayed the abbey would find a way to maintain the agricultural way of life so important to the monks who had gone before them.

Friends and neighbors

"Ask, and you shall receive," the Bible says. The abbot asked, and they received.

Just less than a year after Belle Point donated the first three cows, it and Ankony Angus Corp. Inc. of Clarkesville, Ga., gave the abbey half interest in a bull, Ankonian Subiaco, who later was taken to North American Breeders in Virginia for semen collection.

Then, a month later, Circle A Ranch, Iberia, Mo., donated 38 open, registered cows.

Late in the year, Belle Point paid to have the three full sisters that started it all flushed and bred to a common sire. McMahan then loaned the abbey 52 recipient cows to carry the resulting pregnancies.

Meanwhile, the first calves of those heifers were among the featured lots at Belle Point's spring production sale. While the abbey would have liked to keep the heifer calves for



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SUBIACO ABBEY

Geels, the Rev. David Bellinghausen, Shane Gadberry and John Jennings inspect an abbey pasture. Gadberry and Jennings are part of the Arkansas Beef Improvement Program team that is advising Subiaco's model farm.

breeding stock, McMahan convinced them the resulting cash flow and publicity would be better for business in the long run.

In June, Ankony donated 10 bred cows, which calved in August and September.

The generosity of the monks' friends and neighbors also went beyond gifts of livestock. Many donated labor or provided materials at cost to improve the farm's physical plant. About 30 volunteers helped build the abbey's new working pens and farm office.

"The monks have been their pastors and grandparents' pastors," Geels says, trying to explain the respect people in the 10 surrounding parishes have for the brothers of Subiaco. It's that respect that drives support for the abbey.

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Benefactors, such as Belle Point Ranch, Ankony Angus Corp. Inc., Circle A Ranch and several local alumni of Subiaco Academy, have donated registered animals, labor or materials to the new seedstock venture.

The abbot also recognizes the community's commitment and is thankful for it.

"The wonderful thing about this farming operation and, to some extent, the school is that, since we've declined in numbers, it's given them more of an opportunity to help us," he says. "This whole renewal has been encouraging. . . . We're very grateful for everyone's help."

A model farm

The ties that have drawn support from the public also will allow the abbey to give back to the agricultural community.

When he first heard about Subiaco's conversion to a seedstock operation, Larry Campbell, Logan County Extension agent, wondered about inviting the abbey to join the Arkansas Beef Improvement Program (ABIP).

Shane Gadberry, an Extension assistant specialist in beef cattle for the University of Arkansas, thought Campbell had a good idea. He asked the abbey to allow the ABIP team to help set goals for the new herd and to establish management practices that would get them there.

"We saw some potential here where we could come in and assist them with their genetics program, in developing pastures and pasture layouts, and rotational grazing," Gadberry says.

Over the next five years, periodic visits by ABIP specialists will assist Geels and the monks with inventories, hay samples, soil tests and fertilizer recommendations. They'll also help plan such things as supplemental feed rations, pasture layouts that allow for rotational grazing and weed control, and breeding strategies.

While the abbey will benefit from its advice, the ABIP essentially will gain a new laboratory. Being involved with a purebred herd from day one may help determine what prices actually will cover all the costs of production — a unique proposition considering most of the program's 10 herds are long-time commercial operations.

"This is going to give us an opportunity to look at the cost of starting a registered ranch from, basically, ground zero," Gadberry says.

Stan McPeak, the ABIP team's genetics specialist, says their involvement with the abbey will provide some important baseline

data that will be useful in developing new model budgets and determining the actual breakeven costs for raising registered breeding stock.

The lessons learned will be shared. "It's an opportunity we saw to reach others in this community," Gadberry says. "Cattlemen around here pay a lot of attention to what's going on at this farm. They're watching the progress, so they're going to begin to ask questions."

Those questions likely will address topics like sire development, pasture management and feeding strategies, the Extension specialist predicts. Bellinghausen sees expected progeny differences (EPDs) as one area in which they can help educate the area's commercial cattle producers.

Geels looks forward to the educational role. "They'll have to learn to depend on us to furnish good information for them and to be honest with our facts and figures," he says of Arkansas cattlemen.

Bellinghausen admits their costs won't be truly representative due to the donations they've received, but they're keeping track and realize what they would have needed to spend to get where they are.

“We can get all this information, but the real test is how we’re going to use it,” the prior says, adding that information needs to be translated into profitability to be useful.

McMahon says having the abbey’s model herd comprised of Angus is good publicity for the breed and should increase demand for Angus bulls in the area.

He adds the abbey will be a good “citizen” of the American Angus Association because those associated with it are excited about doing things the right way, as evidenced by their enrolling in the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program and purchasing the Angus Information Management Software (AIMS).

Home advantage

While the conversions to a model farm and a seedstock operation will have benefits for many beyond the monastic community, Kodell says the monks themselves, their students and their guests will be the main benefactors.

“We’re one of the few abbeys that still has a farm,” he says, adding that the agricultural atmosphere is highly conducive to the monks’ callings to be gracious hosts, educators, laborers and men of prayer.

“We feel very positive about the move,” he says. “We’re very happy that we can continue to have a cattle herd here.”

Of course, there always are the business considerations.

“We also feel that it will be profitable for us; but, for most of us, that’s an extra,” the abbot continues. “But we probably wouldn’t do it if it couldn’t be profitable.”

Another rarity is that few boarding schools are located in such agriculturally oriented environments. Kodell hopes some of the academy’s students — who come from all over the world — can become involved with the cattle operation.

“Maybe we can help some students become involved in and learn about agriculture,” he says. “There are not very many students that come from a farm background — there’s fewer all the time.”

Campbell says the farm easily could be tied to the academy’s science curricula. He’s working to start a 4-H club for the students, who could help halter-break and exhibit the abbey’s show animals.

The students also could benefit from the farm by working off part of their tuition, as some already do by helping with the groundskeeping during their activity periods. And profits from the farm would supplement the academy’s scholarship funds.

Most of all, the monks are happy to keep the farm going because it provides a link to the everyday lives of many of their neighbors.

Work to do

Like their neighbors, the farm crew at Subiaco works hard to get the most from

forages. Pastures of Guymon Bermuda grass are limed, fertilized with turkey or chicken litter, and sprayed for weeds. Rye pastures are reseeded in the winter. Rotational grazing is employed to prevent overgrazing.

Geels points out that Angus cattle are easy to maintain as long as enough fertilized pasture is available. “That’s what I like about Angus,” he says.

There also have been breeding chores. When the 38 cows from Circle A were ready to artificially inseminate (AI) in May, the plan was to use semen from Ankonian Subiaco, but he wasn’t mature enough to collect. Instead, they decided to use semen from his full brother, Ankonian Elixir 100, and some lower-birth-weight bulls.

Bellinghausen says using those other bulls on some of the cows having birth-weight EPDs greater than 4.0 probably will be advantageous.

With *moderation* being one of his watchwords, Geels agrees: “In the cow herd out here, there’s big ones and small ones, and we’re trying to breed the big ones down and the small ones up.”

He prefers to use bulls that don’t produce surprises — either good or bad. It may seem boring, he says, but that’s why he’s committed to using proven AI sires with high-accuracy EPDs for all traits. That’s the best way to achieve the moderate-sized, moderate-milking specimens the area’s commercial producers desire.

Bellinghausen says he believes the 52 embryo-transplant (ET) calves — half siblings from flushmate mothers — that began arriving last month will start them on their way to the kind of herd they want.

“I think predictability is pretty important,” he explains.

The goal

As it stands now, the new “farm brothers” eventually would like to select a core group of 20 heifers that will be the foundation for the new and improved Subiaco herd.

“When people donate to the herd, they’re a heterogeneous mixture,” Bellinghausen explains. “We’ll take what we can get, then start eliminating the extremes to get to the ideal that we want.”

Before long, Abbot Kodell envisions, Subiaco will again boast of a herd of 200 mother cows; but this time, they all will be AI daughters of high-accuracy Angus sires.

Some would say that’s the answer to a prayer.



Around 30 volunteers, most alumni of the academy, helped build the abbey’s new working pens and farm office. Among them are (from left) Abe Willems, Keith Willems and Jackie Komp. “We grew up in the shadow of the abbey,” Abe says. “It’s time to give back to the brothers here.”

