

To say Shirley Brown and Doris Blackmon raise Angus cattle is a little like saying the mushers in the Iditarod race dogs. Both statements are accurate, but don't begin to tell the whole story.

The Tigerville, S.C., sisters started their marathon in 1955. "Mother and Dad took us to the fair and we saw the cattle," Shirley says. "It looked like something we wanted to do."

Apparently no one told them girls didn't show steers. When she was 15 years old, Shirley started showing Angus, Hereford and Shorthorns. Three years later, when Doris turned 15, she joined in.

Turning to Angus

While Doris and Shirley enjoyed their steers, they got tired of selling them after they had become attached to them.

They also had narrowed their breed choices down to one. "After dealing with all three breeds, by then we knew we wanted Angus," Doris says.

"They usually won," Shirley adds. "And the Angus people were so nice."

"We had a lot of good people in all the breeds help us," Doris comments.

The sisters were also impressed with the Angus junior program, so their father bought each of them a registered Angus cow in 1958.

Their herd and their show string grew. Their father also bought them their first truck, and they hit the road.

"It was so unusual for girls to show that whenever a fair or show wanted advance publicity, they'd send the reporters out to do stories on us for the local papers," Shirley says.

They now have bulging scrapbooks filled with yellowed clippings from their younger days.

These girls were no divas, though. Former show buddy John Crouch, now executive vice president of the American Angus Association, recalls, "They came and went like everybody else."

He adds, "It was always fun to swap work with them. You could surely depend on them to get it done and get it done right. ... They did such a great job with their cattle. They were very, very competitive."

But it wasn't all work. Crouch says, "We had a great time. When the work was done at night, we'd sit on the show boxes and my brother, Smoke, would pick and sing."

Misadventures

Singing aside, the Brown ladies did have their misadventures.

"One night, around 1 a.m., we were way down in Georgia, on our way to a show in

Sister Act

After almost 45 years in the Angus business, these South Carolina sisters are still producing top-flight cattle.

Story and photos by *Becky Mills*



► Shirley Brown (left) and Doris Brown Blackmon started their Angus herd in 1958 with two bred cows.

Florida," Doris recalls. "We had a flat tire and when we got out to look, we heard bullets flying by our heads."

They were in chicken country, and the farmer who lived on the side of that particular road was convinced they had come to steal his chickens.

Thankfully, another group of Georgians was able to show them true hospitality. Once again on a country road headed to a Florida show, their truck motor blew up. These Georgia folks took the ladies into their home and put the girls' cattle in their barn.

"They were so fascinated by us they had a town picnic so everybody could meet us," Doris recalls. "The fried chicken was wonderful!"

Despite their father's rescuing them by sending another truck from his meatpacking business, the girls were becoming self-sufficient. Other breeders saw

how successful they were, and their custom-fitting and showing business grew.

Building a future

In 1962, they borrowed the money to create their present operation, which now totals 300 acres. "We borrowed the money as a family," Doris says. The name of the outfit: Famoda – for father, mother and daughters.

"Daddy taught us business sense," Doris says. "When we started with our steers, he would take us to the bank, and we'd borrow the money for them."

Financial sense is not the only skill they acquired. By the time they moved to the farm in 1963, their father was in a wheelchair.

"We've done everything," Doris says. "We built most of the fences and dug the fence posts by hand. Now, thank goodness, almost

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all of the fence is high-tensile and doesn't take as many posts."

Three years ago, the sisters made the last mortgage payment. "There were times when we wondered if we were going to make it," Shirley says, "but the Lord provided."

"A couple of years we had a champion steer that brought good money and that would make the mortgage," she adds.

They've had show winners all over the East and had the top-selling bull eight times at the Clemson and Edisto central bull tests. They've had the top-selling female at the Carolina Futurity five times and the senior champion sale bull at the National Western Angus Bull Sale in Denver in 1997.

"Cows have been good to us," Doris adds. "We've made a living, and they put Heather through college with scholarships and the sales of her cattle." Heather, 25, is Doris and husband Paul's daughter.

The sisters have been the South Carolina Cattlemen's Association seedstock producers of the year, have won several conservation awards, and are now in Clemson University's Block and Bridle Hall of Fame.

Doris comments, "When we looked at the portraits of the other people in the Hall of Fame, I said, 'Shirley, do you realize most of these other people are dead?'"

The next generation

Show and sale toppers aside, Doris says, "Our greatest achievement is Heather."

Growing up, Doris says Heather did all



► Shirley Brown does the artificial insemination breeding and the tractor work at Famoda Farms.

the Angus things — she started showing cattle when she was five, was a director in the state junior association, won the Gold Award, and won second place in the Angus Auxiliary's scholarship competition.

Heather, though, says she learned far more than cattle skills from her mother and aunt. "They taught me the value of hard work and to be happy with what you have."

"I always showed in the bred-and-owned class, but wanted a fancy, high-dollar heifer. Mama and Shirley always said I'd do better with what I had. They were right."

Heather credits Shirley with teaching her people skills. For a time, Doris owned her own tour company and Shirley would come along to care for Heather, then a toddler. She'd pay Heather a quarter to visit with the senior citizens on the tour.

"To this day I can carry on a conversation with a fence post," Heather says, laughing.

Heather has also seen the value of cooperation. "They (Doris and Shirley) are two peas in a pod. They work side by side, day in and day out."

Working hard, together

"We love each other and complement each other," Shirley says.

Doris says, "Shirley has a wonderful eye and salesman abilities. She is also really strong on EPDs (expected progeny differences)."

Shirley does their artificial insemination (AI) work, often getting first-service conception rates of 75%-80% on the cows.

Shirley is also blessed with mechanical abilities and enjoys driving the tractor.

"I don't," Doris says.

However, Shirley says, "Doris is the public speaker, the PR (public relations) expert, and the gracious hostess."

Don't count her out on the dirty work, though. "Last week I mixed and bagged eight tons of feed by myself," Doris says.

"When it comes to the hard work, we do it together," she adds. "Everybody tells us they don't know anybody else that works together as well as we do."

Even though Paul works off the farm, he is a good project man and helps with repairs. Although he isn't a cattle person, he knew better than to suggest Doris quit the cattle business when they married in 1965. "It was part of the package," she states.

Challenges to overcome

In the last few years, Heather says she has also begun to realize what her mother and aunt were up against. "There are some older



► Doris Blackmon is the public relations coordinator for Famoda Farms.

men who don't think women should work with cattle," she says. "But Mama and Shirley have really broken into a man's world and done it just as well as, if not better than, many men."

"Even the feed and equipment salesmen didn't want to talk to us," Doris says. "They kept looking for our husbands."

Thankfully, times have changed. "Women are more accepted now in any kind of business," Shirley says. "You go out now and look at a tractor and the salesman comes right up."

They also have the respect of their customers. Retired surgeon Stanley Baker has bought Famoda bulls for the past seven years.

"Number one, I trust them," says the South Carolina cattleman. "Two, they have as good a bulls as I can buy anywhere."

"Shirley visits with me a couple of times a year to see what my calves look like and to recommend what type of bulls I need," Baker says, adding, "They are great people and I value their input. They've become close friends."

The bulls are apparently working out, too. After a 45-day preconditioning period, Baker sells the calf crop from his 250-head commercial cow herd to a farmer-feeder in Ohio. This past year, 50% of the finished cattle met *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand specifications.

Despite the struggles of making it in a man's world, Doris says, "We're facing our biggest challenge now."

Their mother, Minnie, is 100 years old and broke her hip and arm two years ago.

She also has dementia and requires 24-hour-a-day care.

The change in lifestyle meant the sisters had to cut back from 55 cows to 30. They can also no longer attend sales, shows and meetings. "We don't have the contacts we used to," Doris says.

"People have been asking us if we still had cattle," Shirley says.

They are not giving up, though. They keep all their heifers and say they can increase their numbers again quickly. For now, they scurry out in the early morning and get chores done before their mother wakes up. And with help from friend Louise Surret, who sits with their mother for three to four hours at a time, they not only manage but are also still working toward their goals.

"I want to have a bull go 0/100," Shirley says, referring to a combination of birth weight and yearling weight EPDs. She's close. One of the bulls they sold to Baker had a birth weight EPD of 2 pounds (lb.) and a yearling weight EPD of 98 lb. "I want to send a bull to the Midland Bull Test, too," Shirley says.

She adds, "We want to make 50 years so we can be a historic herd."

They are also in the process of passing along the terrific bovine genes they've put together over the last 44 years. Twenty-year-old college student John Nixon caught the cattle bug from the sisters and has purchased 10 head. He and friend Stephanie Moore recently took their Famoda-bred cattle to the Eastern Regional Preview Show in Maryland, a favorite show of Doris and Shirley's.

Then, of course, there is Heather. Currently working as an embryologist at the Cleveland Clinic in Ohio, she says, "I miss my cows. I'd keep them in the bathtub if I could."

She adds, "I have a vision for the farm. I want my kids to show, and I want to push Mama and Shirley through the barn in wheelchairs."

If the current activity level of Shirley, now 62, and Doris, 59, is any indication, Heather is going to have to wait awhile for the wheelchair bit. But as for being in the show barns, they'll be back. Because yes, most assuredly, they do still have cows.



► The Brown sisters are down to 30 cows, but they still strive for excellence.

