



# piggly wiggly had a cow

*The humble beginning of Black Crest Farms starts with three black Angus heifers, two grocery stores and 50 acres in the year 1957.*

*by Lindsay King, assistant editor*

William Richard “Billy” McLeod jokes that he was born in a pickup truck on main street in Sumter, S.C. The good-natured 87-year-old jokes about almost anything, actually.

Backtrack to 1954 when Billy graduated from the University of South Carolina. Though when he says USC, it’s implied that it was the university on the other coast. Only living in one other state in his life, Billy grew up and expanded his businesses right in Sumter.

“Long story short, when I was in the Air Force in Texas I found a place to rent on a ranch,” Billy explains with a far-away look in his eye as he ponders yesteryear. “The guy had commercial Herefords. I helped work them when I wasn’t on the base. I came home a year later and just had to have black cows.”



*He’s still the 25-year-old man who came home to carry on the family legacy. But he’s also the 87-year-old man who built his very own at the same time.*



## Angus since day one

Claiming he had no business buying cattle, Billy started with just three heifers 60 years ago and grew his herd to the more than 300 brood cows roaming his South Carolina pastures today.

“We have somewhere around 700 head running around here, most of them are brood cows,” Billy says. “We have over 300 calves off them currently and then maybe 100 bred heifers. That is standard for us here.”

Those original heifers started out at Billy’s grandfather’s place who raised Herefords at the time. One of the Angus bulls escaped, dropping black baldies for his grandfather.

“I got chewed out pretty good for that one but the next year he wanted to borrow my bull because his calves never looked better,” Billy says fondly with a chuckle.

Giving various breeds a try over the years only taught Billy to stick with “good ol’ black Angus.”

“We always come back to Angus because they are still the best,” says the cattleman who boasts a career in black Angus lasting more than 60 years. “There are no problems with them if you watch what you are doing.”

Keeping a careful eye takes the uncanny business sense Billy possesses, in addition to utilizing your resources — something Billy mastered.

“We have been all over the U.S. buying cattle,” says the longtime Sitz Angus bull buyer. He also cites Gardner Angus Ranch and Knoll Crest Farm as sources for the black cattle cresting the ridge at Black Crest.

## No business like Black Crest

“We just try to raise the best cattle we can and we back everything up,” Billy says.

Hosting an annual sale the second Saturday in February sends 70 bulls and 100 females to new homes. The secret to Billy’s success is not in the silage. In fact, he has never fed the easy-to-come-by feed to his cattle.

“Our cattle are raised on coastal Bermuda grass and Bahia grass so when those bulls go out in the field, they don’t fall apart,” Billy adds.

If someone ever has a problem with an animal purchased from Billy, he does everything in his power



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to fix it. Though one would be hard-pressed to find a dissatisfied customer coming from Black Crest.

Of the nearly 5,000 acres, which grew from the original 50, only 1,000 are used for cattle pastures. The rest are in row crops, managed by Billy's son Mark.

"We are in a difficult situation for raising cattle," Billy says. "Once you drop below Columbia, everything is in row crops. We are one of the few places in this area with fences."

This situation forces Billy to sell his cattle outside of the Sumter area. He annually sends bulls down to Florida. But the black cattle stand stark against the corn, soybeans, cotton and tobacco surrounding them in Sumter.

Billy's entrepreneurial heart kept him questioning his own sanity when he purchased

a second ranch 150 miles north of Las Vegas. Housing 2,000 cows in the valleys of the surrounding mountains, the ranch is now owned by Billy's cousin.

"I bought it from BYU and dropped a pile of money into it to clean everything up," Billy says. "We moved the White River over a bit and eventually drilled some wells that everyone thought we couldn't."

Now a well-oiled machine complete with pivots and irrigation galore, Billy's cousin and his family raise alfalfa and cattle.

The constant travel to the ranch prompted Billy to sell out to his cousin who managed the ranch for him. His attention was pulled elsewhere anyway.



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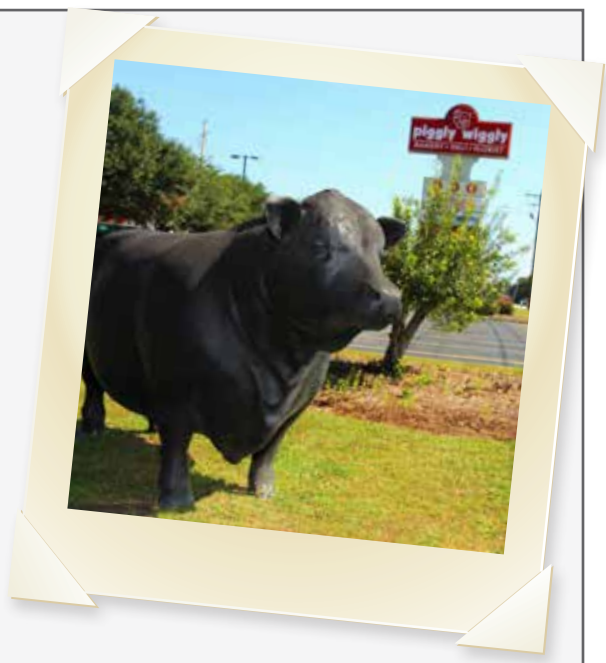
## Angus greeter

Driving through Sumter in the 1960s, one might have seen something locals had witnessed several times — a massive black Angus statue getting hauled to the local football stadium by the graduating class.

"That bull has been around for probably 40 years," Billy says. "He is the 1950 model of Angus: real short with hardly any legs."

One year the graduating class took the bull sitting on the roof of Billy's store as a challenge. The next morning the bull was gone, but Billy knew where he was.

"He has been through a lot and lasted for some reason," Billy says of the 200-pound Angus bull who is now welded to the ground in front of the Piggly Wiggly in Sumter, S.C. — a symbol of everything that is important to Billy and his family.



## The grocer knows best

The death of his 45-year-old father in 1955 is what originally brought Billy home from Texas. His help was needed with the family business: two grocery stores.

“My dad worked for other people for a long time before starting his own little grocery store, which turned into two,” Billy says. “He was sick his whole life, but when he died I came home to run the grocery stores with mom.”

At one point, they owned 16 stores in South Carolina. Joining the franchise market of Piggly Wiggly in 1953, there are now nine stores under Billy’s care.

“My oldest son, Ricky, helps run the grocery stores and I am still up here trying to keep them moving also,” Billy adds. His daughter Melissa helps with the Angus operation and wherever else she is needed.

Their biggest market across all nine stores is the traditional meat counter rarely found in a modern-day grocery store. It is even more of a surprise to see the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) logo packed in the cases.

“I think we are the only Piggly Wiggly in the bunch selling CAB,” Billy says about the meat product. “I just came home one day and decided it was something we needed to advertise. We burnt the newspapers up with it.”

The real struggle of selling CAB products is the advertising campaigns of Billy’s competitors. Simply throwing Angus on the label is confusing for the typical grocery-getter who might not know the difference.

“CAB brought us one of those flashy TVs to tell customers all about the product,” Billy explains.

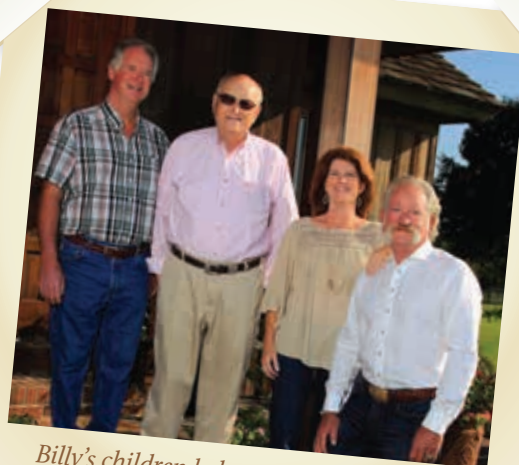
Without a viable source for primal meat cuts in the area, Billy gets most of his meat from a distributor near Atlanta, Ga. Everything comes in for processing at each Piggly Wiggly —nothing is ever pre-packaged.

“We try to push our meat department. That is what keeps us in business,” Billy says with an exasperated breath calling for the simpler times of days past.

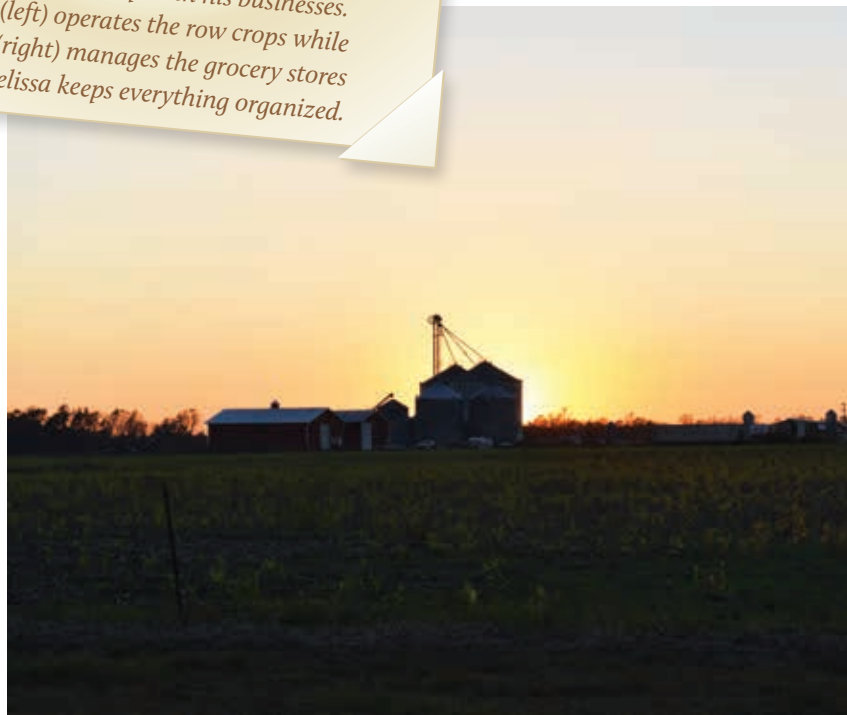
The two businesses never merge, something Billy has made sure of for the most part. The local community knows he raises cattle while operating grocery stores, but it is never something he advertises.

“We know all about the beef industry and the meat counter — that is our big deal,” Billy says.

He’s still the 25-year-old man who came home to carry on the family legacy. But he’s also the 87-year-old man who built his very own at the same time. **[A]**



*Billy’s children help with his businesses. Mark (left) operates the row crops while Ricky (right) manages the grocery stores and Melissa keeps everything organized.*



*Sumter, S.C. isn’t exactly known for raising cattle. This leaves Billy no choice but to sell cattle outside of his area, including down in Florida.*