

Steadman Farms manager Stan Watts

STEADMAN FARMS

by Ann Gooding

When he was a youngster, Stan Watts saw cattle while visiting his grandfather, a tenant farmer in Virginia. And until 10 years ago that was the extent of his exposure to and experience with cattle.

Today Watts manages a 265-head performance-oriented herd that would do a veteran cattleman proud.

It's been an eventful 10 years.

In 1970 Watts, with a masters in American history and only orals and a dissertation between him and his doctorate, was teaching. Less than satisfied with academic life, he decided to take a break, so he and his wife Carolyn packed for a 6-month stay in the Kingsport, Tenn., area where Carolyn's father, Harry Steadman, owned a construction business. Steadman also kept some Angus cattle on his farm at nearby Blountville.

What began as involvement in record keeping for Watts became a full-fledged interest in the cattle operation. And instead of returning to academia, he decided to try his hand at raising Angus cattle.

The Past 10 Years

In the 10 years since, he's put in a lot of hours, learned a great deal, made his share of mistakes. But he's come out of it a respectable cowman managing a respectable cow herd.

The original herd had no particular base, minimal records, no regular calving season. Watts more than tripled its size—selectively—while developing a practical program. And he did it without spending a lot of money.

"It's been a real learning experience," Watts admits. "And in some ways, starting with no experience helped. I came into the business with no preconceived notions."

How does someone with no background, no experience, no training build a successful purebred cattle operation? He reads, according to Watts. He learns by doing. He listens.

Watts maintains he learned most by listening to other people, to breeders he respected. And he assured himself access to those people by becoming involved in Tennessee Angus Assn. activities (he is now president), by attending American Angus

Assn. national meetings and by visiting herds throughout the southeast.

Breed Publications

As for reading, Watts recommends breed publications, publications put out by the extension service (free for the asking through county or state extension offices) and books on animal science and nutrition.

And he did have a short apprenticeship, working the first two years under a manager. In that time he saw some things he would do differently, some he would do the same. And he concluded there is no one way to go about breeding cattle—rather a breeder has to learn as much as possible from as many different sources as possible, set his goals, then start working toward them.

Not that those goals can't change. His did. "First," Watts says, "I wanted the champion at the North American. Now that's not even on the agenda."

From a show-oriented beginning, Watts evolved (slowly at first) to performance. The transformation began, he says, in 1975 when regional managers John Crouch, Raymond Barton and Chuck Grove classified the Steadman herd. Classification itself (a service then made available by the American Angus Assn.) amounted to visual appraisal of each cow, but after that appraisal each classified herd entered the AHIR program. That was his introduction to performance.

Either . . . Or

"Then about four years ago," Watts says, "we came to the point where we either had to make more money or go out of business. It finally dawned on me, if this was to have some permanence, there would have to be more profit." And by then, Watts was convinced performance was the key to that extra profit.

So the show ring became less important. Records became more so. And two years ago economics led to Watts' decision to abandon the show road altogether. Even so, Watts maintains there's nothing wrong with wanting a show champion. In fact, he thinks shows are one of the best promotional tools going—but he doesn't think a successful breeding program can be aimed

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at that one area.

So his goals have changed. He no longer cares about owning the champion at the North American. Instead, he's aiming for a herd capable of producing 100 bulls a year good enough to benefit southeastern commercial breeders. Today he figures he's half, maybe three-fourths of the way there.

Started With 70 Cows

And that's no small accomplishment. Watts started with 70 cows, of which two may have been half sisters. They were calving year round and there were no performance records.

Realizing a need for a good maternal base, Watts purchased and used Bandlermere GV 13S heavily, breeding as many cows as possible to him, keeping as many of his calves as was practical. The maternal traits carried by the Canadian-bred bull (who came to Steadman Farms by way of Ankony Angus Corp.) headed the herd in the right direction.

The next bull used under Watts' management was Jorgensen-bred Marshall Lad of Ideal 602 70, "268," a bull who still sees some use at Steadman Farms thanks to the ease with which his calves are born.

Today, in addition to 268, there are three Graham-bred bulls and one Wye bull working in the herd, all used naturally. (A year ago PS Franco, Schearbrook Shoshone, Band 105 and Shoshone Shannon HC3 were used A.I. Incidentally, tests are now underway on the Shannon bull, a Shoshone Titan FD60 son, to determine if he carries marble bone disease. If not, Watts will keep his calves; if so, they are slated for slaughter.)

Genetic Potential

The performance pedigrees on all Watts' herd bulls show several generations of

strong maternal traits. When Watts selects a bull, these traits are uppermost in his mind. And he goes shopping armed with facts and figures. He buys with emphasis on performance; he's looking for genetic potential standing on sound feet and legs.

Although he's not locked into it, Watts is high on the performance-based program developed by Graham Angus Farm, Albany, Ga. It is practical, he says, and it offers that genetic potential he wants for the Steadman herd.

Watts buys yearling bulls—they don't require that much investment, he reasons—and uses them on first-calf heifers. They graduate to the cow herd the following year, where they stay no more than two seasons. By then they've done their share; 100-150 calves carry their genetics. Consequently, with the exception of 268, the oldest bull on the place is three.

Watts has used some of his own bulls, by the way, and intends to use more because he feels his herd has reached the point where it's strong enough to produce the caliber bull he needs.

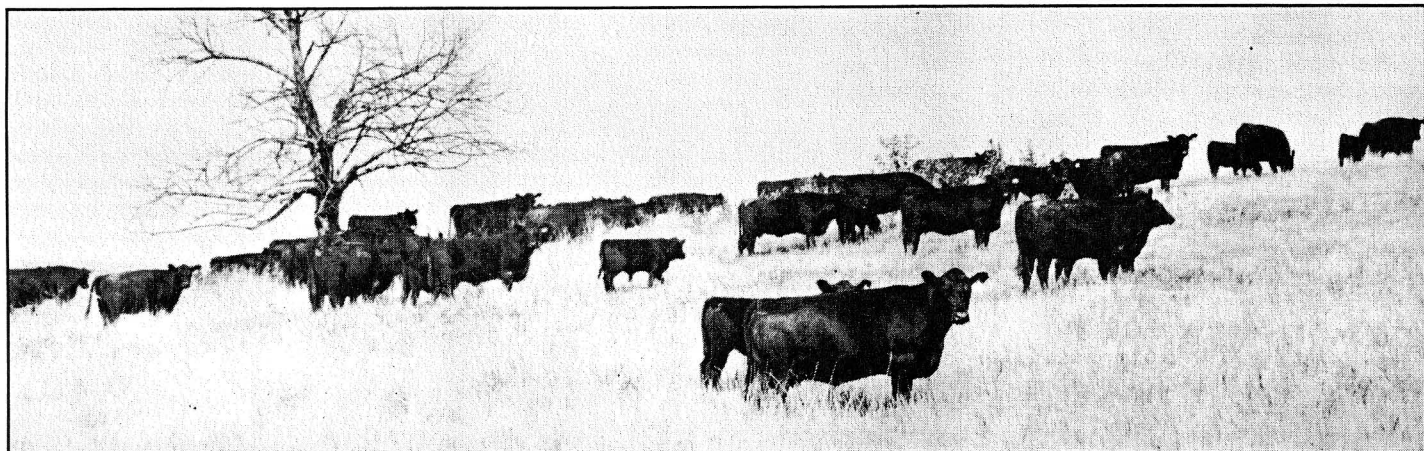
Price and Quality

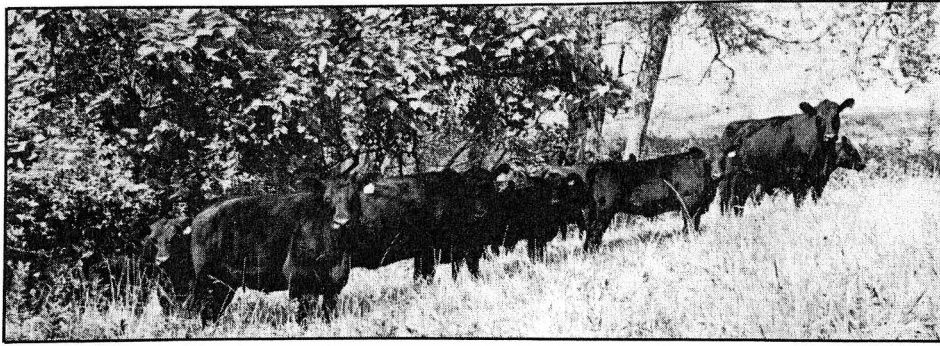
Bull-buying experience taught Watts that price and quality aren't necessarily correlated. During his first trip to Graham Angus Farm, he bought a bull out of one of their cheaper pens and, according to Watts, the bull did a tremendous job. And the highest performing bull (as measured by his progeny) he's used to date cost \$2,500. But then Watts hasn't spent a lot of money. The most he's paid for a bull was \$6,300 and, as a rule, he raises his own replacement females.

Once again experience was the teacher, with Watts learning that considerable progress can be made within a cow herd in a short time. During the last five years, he says, a number of Steadman cows have received their walking papers, with younger, superior, home-raised cows taking their place. In fact, last year every cow more than six was sold at private treaty, leaving today's herd averaging 3½ years.

And Watts plans to continue selling older cows, hoping to reach the point where he can sell all cows when they're seven. By

Maternal traits are important selection criteria at Steadman Farms.





Seeking shade!

then each cow will have produced five calves, he reasons, and among those there should be at least one female better than the dam.

Culling Females

Originally, in increasing the 70-cow herd, Watts retained most of the heifers and let them cull themselves. They were exposed 60 days, then pregnancy checked, and any found open took a 1-way trip to town. The rest went or stayed on the basis of their first calves' ratios. All heifers did—and still do—calve at two.

Using these criteria, the herd reached 350 head at one point; now it numbers 265. But with numbers up, emphasis is still on fertility. "Although geneticists say fertility is not all that heritable," Watts says, "records indicate differently." So a member of the Steadman cow herd is allowed only one mistake. She can turn up open once, not wean a calf once. The second time, she's out.

So additional culling depends on weaning weight ratios, with heifers given two calves to prove themselves. "And now," Watts says, "after a cow has three calves, if their weaning weight ratio doesn't have a high enough average to suit me, she goes."

In a seed stock operation, it's easy to pick the top and the bottom, Watts maintains. It's that grey area in the middle that's tricky, and it's difficult to move that area to the top. That's where performance comes in.

Progeny Records

Watts believes that in 10 years it will be virtually impossible to sell females without progeny records. There's going to be an even smaller margin between profit and loss, he feels, and performance will make the difference.

"Performance," Watts points out, "is not complicated. Every cow must work; if not, she's replaced. It's about like falling off a log. But it's not enough to collect records. A breeder must use them."

And even then records aren't everything. Visual appraisal is important at Steadman Farms. Legs and feet must be sound as must udders, although as Watts points out, weaning weight usually indicates the condition of a cow's udder. Regardless of her performance, though, a bad-uddered cow goes.

Since Watts' customers are predominantly commercial breeders, he's more con-

cerned with weight than with frame. However, he does look at prospective herd bulls' lean to fat ratio. And as Steadman calves' weights have increased, so have their frame sizes. Not only that, but emphasis on weaning weight ratios and yearling ratios have also increased average frame size in the cow herd.

Weights Up

Since 1974 Watts' selection methods have put an average 109 lb. on each bull calf. The last group tallied an average weaning weight of 562 lb. (without creep); in 1974 the average was 453 lb.

In a normal year, 2 acres of the Tennessee hill country near Blountville will support a cow and her calf. The red clay soil is covered primarily with fescue, orchard grass and timothy. In addition, most of the Steadman pastures have a 40% clover cover, which is top-seeded every four to five years.

The cows do get mineral supplements. Watts stresses nutrition, and he also emphasizes a good health program. He demands a lot from his cows, he says, and although they are not pampered, he wants to give them every opportunity to produce and perform. That, in Watts' book, means adequate nutrition and health protection.

As would be expected in a performance program, Steadman bulls are gain-tested. Twice a year about 60 head undergo testing on the farm; this year bulls also will be tested in Virginia and at Tennessee's new test station.

Calves are weaned 40-50 at a time—that way ratios can be compared in a relatively large contemporary group. Then two weeks after weaning, calves go on test, getting a balanced 12% protein, ground ear corn ration. All feed, with the exception of supplement, is grown on the place.

Strong Feet and Legs

The test lots are large, with feed at one end, water at the other. The bulls are forced to travel, and they have strong sound feet and legs to show for it.

Once off test, the top-end bulls go to a 40-acre lot, where they get silage and 10 lb. of ration. The bottom 20% find their way to local freezers via a locker in nearby Johnson City.

Watts sells some bulls through state consignment sales and last spring teamed up with Jonesboro breeders Wayland Crouch

& Sons and George Williams for the Volunteer Bull Sale. This year he plans to have the same sale, but because of the recent Crouch dispersion, only Steadman and Williams cattle will be involved.

Until 1979 Watts sold 2-year-old bulls, but he says last spring's bull sale made it clear buyers in his area won't pay a premium for extra age, so he plans to move bulls at 14-16 months.

As a rule, Steadman bulls stay within 200 miles of the farm. And it's generally one bull per customer, and that customer is usually a commercial breeder. During last spring's sale, a Kentucky breeder did take five bulls, and last summer a Florida man bought 12 bulls at private treaty. If this continues, Watts says he will consider it a major merchandising breakthrough.

Tough Merchandising

That's because in this part of the country merchandising is one of the most difficult aspects of the cattle business. The typical breeder has about 15 cows, Watts says. He is a part-time cattleman with limited income who wants to pay only \$600 for a bull. Cattle aren't his main concern and he doesn't realize the value of performance. Figuring that education has to help, Watts is doing his share on that front—he sits a breeder down, then pencils out what an extra 25-35 lb. per calf means in dollars and cents in a 15-cow herd.

Watts has accomplished a great deal in the last 10 years. He's paid his dues, or at least a good share of them, and he's built a program with purpose and direction. He's built a herd. He likes going to work in the morning. His family is involved—indications are his and Carolyn's children will be active in junior Angus doings. Although son Brandon, five, has a few years to wait, Katie, eight, will have her first 4-H calf next year.

He has been fortunate, Watts says, because Harry Steadman left selection decisions up to him. And Watts has good help. Bob Beaver, in his fifth year as assistant manager, has justified his reputation as a good cowman.

Some Mistakes

Watts hasn't done everything right, of course. He's made his share of mistakes. One was using a bull too long—Bandlermere GV 13S was 10 when purchased and was used for seven years simply, Watts says, because he didn't know any better.

And Watts feels his obsession with shows was a mistake, especially when he put emphasis there without also keeping records.

But he's learned from his mistakes. And he's convinced a breeder needs records—no one can tell how good cattle will be just by looking. He's also learned that nothing, absolutely nothing, can guarantee that every bull bought will work.

Watts has done well. He has a young herd on a sound program. He's learned a lot and he's still learning.

And this year's average weaning weights are 39 lb. higher than last year's.