

# ROBERTS ANGUS FARM

## The kind of calves, the weaning weights & what it costs to get them there...

by Nancy Ann Sayre

**W**hat in the world are you running those cows up there for? There's nothing for them to eat."

Those were the first comments of one cattleman as he studied a mountainside pasture on James Roberts' farm. And that reaction, fairly typical of anyone who sees the terrain of this northwest Arkansas operation, hints of the nature of Roberts Angus Farm.

Roberts runs a herd of 85 registered Angus cows and also milks about 30 dairy cows. The two cattle operations, managed entirely by Roberts and his wife Billye Sue, have provided the family's sole source of income. It's a way of life that demands hard work and a sincere commitment—but it's a way of life they love. For that reason they use what they have and make their management fit.

And what they have is land . . . land and grass. To make a small herd of straightbred Angus convert that into a solid income is not easy—especially on this land.

Scenic, yes. Rule, Ark., is located in the heart of the Ozark Mountains; hundreds of people spend their annual vacations touring over the same roads one must take to arrive at Roberts Angus Farm. The views from the highest pastures are impressive—but first glance also lets you know the cattle must be workers.

Hilly and rough, but strong country is how Roberts describes his 640 acres. "Brush is always a problem," he'll comment (every few years they spray chemicals to clear the hillsides, then seed fescue from the air), "but when you get up on those bluffs there's grass where you wouldn't believe."

His cattle, obviously, are bred to get out and work. Roberts wants fertile, easy-keeping cows that will "rustle" for what grass and feed is available. His market is based on local commercial cattlemen, so he keeps his

management parallel to theirs—he is serious when he says his operation could survive with or without registration papers.

### Bred to Work

The cow herd is divided into fall and spring calving groups; each calving season is limited to 60 days. All breeding is by natural ser-

this herd is for her to wean a growthy calf each year. Roberts has been enrolled in AHIR for 10 years, and works closely with his extension agent to gather weaning weights. He also keeps careful tabs on any cow that does not breed regularly.

Although he does not pregnancy check the herd, Roberts observes his cows carefully

at weaning time to spot any open females (they will normally show signs of heat when the calf is pulled off). An open cow is allowed to slide six months into the next calving group—but just once. In fact, Roberts accepts that single mistake now only because he is in the process of increasing his herd numbers to 100 head.

An increase in available land made this expansion possible, but Roberts plans to tighten his selection pressure when the herd stabilizes at 100 head. And selection pressure within the environment, he knows, is the key to making progress. His records are evidence that he is making progress; weaning weights have continued to increase, even with the recent expansion.

Like the commercial breeders for whom he produces bulls, Roberts aims to wean maximum pounds. But this cattleman keeps the entire production picture in perspective, and that means more than just pounds.

"The way I see it", Roberts explains, "the kind of calves, the weaning weights and what it costs to get them there—it's all got to come along together."

### Efficiency is the Key

He refers to efficiency, and his reasons for stressing that point revolve around economics. Roberts knows he can

not afford to buy feed for his beef cattle, so he must select those that will get the job done on available forage.

Other than grass, that includes very little supplement. The fall-calving cows are fed hay during the winter months; spring-calvers



*James and Billye Sue Roberts are the backbone of this northwestern Arkansas farm. They run 85 registered Angus and milk 30 cows as well—it's a way of life they love.*

vice and this, in fact, is the main reason for the split calving season. Since small pastures require small management groups, Roberts can best utilize his herd sires by using them twice a year.

The principle criteria for a cow to stay in

receive just enough range cubes to keep them healthy and bring them out of the brush for occasional checks.

"Fat is one thing we never have a problem with," says Roberts with a smile. "It's far better to thin them down than let them get fat while they're not working—we feed them enough to keep them in good health."

And selecting for the individuals that will produce under those conditions pays off. Roberts illustrates: "A cow that's a good, easy-flesher, easy-keeper is going to naturally do better. She's going to breed back and milk better. And her calf will take after her enough that it will wean heavier."

Creep feeding? Never. And that answer is rather emphatic. "If they can't rustle around and do it themselves, I don't need them. Grass is the only thing we have to sell off this land and they must do it on that.

bulls sold each year. The remaining steer calves are sold as yearlings—except for the five which Roberts feeds out and slaughters himself (on the farm) to fill his freezer and those of his children's families.

The top bull calves, 12 to 15 from each calving group, are selected at weaning. A few go on test at the University of Arkansas

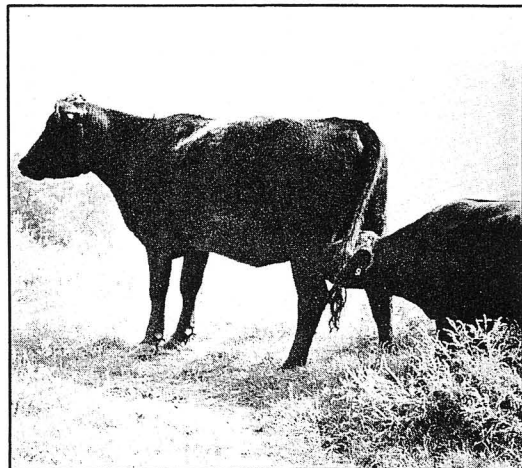
*"Brush is always a problem, but there's grass where you wouldn't believe it . . . the land is hilly and rough, but it's strong." Roberts breeds and selects his cows for their ability to work on that land, not for their looks. Converting available forage to pounds of beef is the only job they know.*

*Corner and gate posts along the fence lines hint at the nature of these mountainside pastures.*

pleased with the proof of their feed efficiency. Those calves return to the farm at the completion of the test and are sold with the others.

Roberts will sell bulls anytime after they are weaned, moving all of them within the year. He produces just to meet his market, keeping only those bulls he knows will sell easily. The reasons all hinge on the fact that he makes his living, year after year, on these cattle.

Producing bulls as economically as possible, yet providing his customers with the best he can breed is the key to Roberts' steady bull demand. And steady it is. A customer this past spring came looking for five bulls; Roberts only had three left to sell. Not many cattlemen had that problem this spring.



## ***...it's all got to come along together.***

"You can stand those things up there and full feed them and get them big as an oven. Well, that's fine for some people, but out here on grass, we've got to take the top—the ones that do the best on the same thing the commercial man next door has—those have to be the most efficient cattle."

Cow size is often a factor in keeping cattle efficient, but Roberts lets the environment control that. "I don't worry a minute about cow size—the way I figure it, if she produces, size will take care of itself."

A constant environment with steady selection pressure on fertility and production has resulted in uniform calf crops and higher average weights; but it is obvious that the cows have been selected for their work and not their looks. The average cow in this herd fits within a 1,100 to 1,200-lb. range, but the AHIR records show one 790-lb. mother that weaned a 500-lb. steer calf. Her size has not kept her from a breeding value ratio of 111.

The cows are there to work for Roberts and, as he says, "if they don't pay, we don't have anything."

### **Their Brand Says They'll Work**

The cows pay through their calves, and Roberts' purebred market centers around 25



bull test station; others are weighed for an on farm test. The bulls are fed six pounds of grain daily on a per head basis, then clean up alfalfa hay behind the lactating dairy cows. Last year the group gained an average of 2.50 lb. a day, with the top ADG better than 3.00 lb.

Bulls on test at the university perform well, according to Roberts. He is particularly

His market depends on local, commercial buyers from neighboring counties and Roberts has learned that they will not pay premiums for a bull, regardless of the individual animal.

"These commercial men are not going to pay much over \$1,000 for a bull—no matter what his pedigree reads, how fat he is, or anything. Price is their first consideration, in fact it's the whole thing.

"I really believe we could have five or six percent difference in ratios between bulls and if there's \$20 difference between them, they'd take the cheaper one. We just price them all the same and let the ones that come early have the best pick."

Customers will look at the weights, but most turn to Roberts for advice on selection. They trust his breeding program and his interpretation of the records. Roberts will use test gain and AHIR records to help breeders find the best bulls, but those figures are much more important to him than his customers—he is using records to make sure his cattle are bred to go out and work.

"These breeders will turn those bulls out under the same conditions we have. I have to know the bulls will be fertile and will get out and rustle and work."

Roberts is liberal with the pocket knife for just that reason. Any bull that carries the Roberts Angus Farm brand is expected to do a good job. If he will not, Roberts would just as soon have him in the steer lot. With only \$200-\$300 difference in selling price, the reputation of his product is most important.

And if a bull does not live up to that brand, if he does not do what he is bred to do, Roberts will replace the animal. Honesty and a firm stand behind anything he breeds has encouraged repeat buyers.

"I don't know enough not to tell the truth," Roberts says. "If you stand behind them real well and advertise a little, they pretty well take care of themselves."

Brief classifieds in the local trade paper have been Roberts' main form of advertis-

ing; they allow him to zero in on his strongest customers. Recently, he has also run a small ad in the AHIR Breeders section of the ANGUS JOURNAL—this has drawn more response from other purebred breeders.



ucing ability, change little in his herd after a cow weans her first calf. Roberts has also found that he can sell females easier once they have dropped a calf. The same fact holds true for his dairy crossbreds (all his dairy cattle are bred to Angus bulls). Roberts raises and breeds the half-Angus females, selling them with their first calf at side.

Those "half-dairies" are what got the Roberts family into the Angus business 25 years ago. To combine a commercial beef herd with his original dairy operation, Roberts used Angus bulls and kept the crossbred females.

Even then he was using the best bulls he could afford, and in 1957 he bought a bull that produced "good, big, stout calves." (They were the working type too—many of

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Steers remain an important consideration of Roberts, especially since there is so little difference in his two markets. His comments reflect the fact that he manages his herd basically as a commercial unit.

"If we raise these cattle just like a good commercial man, there's no reason we can't be making a living off these steers too. And if the bulls come out of those same conditions, they ought to help make a living for the fellow that's buying them."

#### Young Females Must Prove Themselves

The heifer calves must prove themselves under the given conditions as well. Roberts likes to keep the entire group (except for those very inferior in weight or structure) for at least one calving. He sorts them after they wean their first calf and feels that will accurately identify the working females. He has found that breeding values, which reflect pro-

the daughters remained in the herd until they were 14 years old or better.) At that point Roberts decided he could be running registered Angus cows as easily as he could run the dairy crossbreds. He purchased just one registered cow originally, and built the present herd from her and her first three calves—all heifers.

With the hindsight afforded now, he is glad he made that decision. First hand experience has taught him just how much more efficient his Angus cows are at producing pounds of beef.

"I thought the registered cows ate all the feed when we ran the half-dairies with them—they'd stay in fair condition while the others would be awfully hound-poor. So I changed them around and had 12 crossbreds and 20 purebreds on different sides of the

*Roberts buys the best herd sires he can and the new generation speaks well for his selection. Heifer calves are all calved out once; top bull calves are tested and then put to work in neighboring herds.*

fence. We were feeding them round bales and the 20 registered cows didn't eat as much, yet stayed in good shape and raised good calves. Those other poor things were starving, they never took their heads out of the feeder . . . that really makes a difference after a while."

Efficiency is the key then, and Roberts is concentrating bloodlines that will produce pounds at a low cost. Emulous breeding has worked well for him and most of his bulls have come from Oklahoma. In 1967 he bought his first Spur Ranch-bred bull; more recent herd sire pedigrees carry the "Tail N" prefix. The only other registered females purchased by Roberts also came from Bill Corbin's Tail N Ranch—he bought two cows that were average in Corbin's herd to use as a water mark in his own herd.

Performance figures guide Roberts' sire selection and young herd bulls purchased in the last year provide an outcross with the heavy Emulous breeding; they include PS Power Play and Schearbrook Shoshone sons.

The cattle at Roberts Angus Farm are selected to convert the feed available in rough, mountain pastures to pounds of beef—and to do it efficiently. The fact that Roberts keeps up registration papers on his cows has not changed the course of his management. The selection program and environment insist that the cows work hard for a living and that bulls carrying Roberts' brand off the place do the same.

"A customer called the other day and wanted me to hold a bull for him. I had sold him a bull back in 1976 and he worked him as hard as he could—he said he'd never pulled a calf, they weren't the biggest calves, but they hit the ground growing and were just as heavy as everybody's in the fall."

That is the kind of performance for which these buyers return. They do not pay top dollar, so Roberts is forced to use what he has—grass and land—and make his management fit.

It's a way of life he and his wife love; a way of life by which they have raised four children.

"You don't know how blessed you are if you can make a living doing something you know you like to do . . ."

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