



Armstrong family (l to r) grandson Matthew, son Jimmy Emma and Maurice, enjoy life at Split Oaks Angus Farm in Tennessee.

Always a Place in

Pappy's Heart

Tennessee Angus breeder Maurice Armstrong keeps on giving and wearing a smile.

by Julie Grimes Albertson

Successful businessman. Respected cowman. Devoted husband and father. All of these adjectives describe Maurice Armstrong of Eagleville, Tenn. The part about devoted husband and father — that's what really matters to this gentle Tennessean.

After suffering the tragedy of a lifetime, losing his only daughter, Maurice spends a lot of time demonstrating the love he has for his family and friends.

This is the place that love built.

Emma didn't even want to get out of the car when her young husband pulled up to the tired-looking log house fashioned in 1849. But she got out of the car that day, for Emma would have lived anywhere with this man. A state-

ly, soft-spoken woman, she spent the first five years of their marriage in Detroit while Maurice learned his trade.

"Don't ever take a country boy and drop him in Detroit. You might as well knock him in the head," Maurice exclaims with a deep chuckle.

It took Emma and Maurice several years to construct and remodel what is now a beautiful home and Angus operation called Split Oaks Farm. A long, vine-covered drive leads to an impressive set of barns and board fence that surround the grounds. What I found most impressive wasn't a barn or a bull. At the end of the lane, next to the 19th century home sat Maurice and Emma, complete with outstretched arms and smiling faces.

"If you don't make a friend today it's your own fault!" were his first words to me.

Every Sunday afternoon is like Grand Central Station around here!

Every time the Armstrongs sell someone a calf, they make a friend. Maurice encourages the kids to bring their Split Oaks heifers or steers back on Sunday afternoons.

"We let them weigh their calves and help with feeding or grooming," Maurice says. "They ask me 'What do you think of this one Mr. Armstrong?' I say man, no one pays for my opinion."

Before the current generation of young Angus breeders at Split Oaks, came Maurice and Emma's three children, Kenneth, now 37, Jimmy, 36, and Marcia, who would have been 35. The Armstrong, children decided they had to get into the Angus business in 1970. They wanted to participate in the third National Junior Heifer Show held in Nashville that summer.

"We bought a neighbor's Angus heifers for the kids to show. We didn't know how to select for heifers then, but we never stood last," says a prideful Maurice.

The Armstrongs attended the next two junior heifer shows, and then became involved again as their grandchildren picked up the lead straps.

Their second son, Jimmy, came to Maurice last summer and said his son, Matthew, needed to order some show supplies. He also wanted to find out how much a new show box was going to cost.

"I told him I wanted to buy that show box," Maurice says. "Matthew comes and helps me do everything in the world I ask. I chew him out and he keeps coming back for more."

The easiest bull for us to sell is always the longest tallest bull on the place.

Surprised? Well Maurice says that on this farm, big is

still beautiful, because that's what his customers want.

"The commercial cow herd in Tennessee is probably still 4 to 4.5 frame average. They haven't gotten too big. No more than five percent of Angus cow herds in the United States are too big," says Maurice.

However, this Angus breeder acknowledges a need for smaller-framed Angus bulls. "I think there are certain areas of the country where people are using exotic breeds, and they would like to see us breed some smaller black bulls to cross them out with. It gets their size down, some quality in the meat and gives them a valuable black hide."

While the Angus bull market for the past few years has been strong, Maurice worries about the outcome of the latest downsizing trend. "If we go back to 4 and 5 frame cattle, we're going to have cattle we can't give away," he says. "I was raised on a commercial farm. The commercial cattleman sells by the pound. We've got to give him something that will produce pounds or else he's not going to buy it."

The best producing cow he owns, a Wrangler daughter, has a milk EPD of -4.

That Wrangler daughter weaned off a calf this year weighing 735 pounds at 205 days. The next day, Maurice says she was standing by the fence with milk pouring out of her udder.

"If there's a +20 cow on my place it's got to be that cow," he says.

While Maurice believes that expected progeny differences (EPDs) will be more reliable the longer we use them, he says many people emphasize them too much, disregarding an animal's pedigree and conformation.

This farm has been my stress reliever. After work I walk out among the cows and feel a whole lot better.

Maurice never pushed his sons to be involved in the family's business — Southeastern Machine Repair. "I can think of nothing more pathetic than working at a job you don't like," says the elder Armstrong.

Both Kenneth and Jimmy maintain Angus herds while working for the family business. Maurice employs eight men who cover the southeastern states and Puerto Rico. They repair, rebuild and re-manufacture heavy, metal-working factory machines.

While Maurice has realized great professional success, nothing could prepare him for his daughter's tragic illness.

Now Daddy, Don't come down here wearing a long, sad face. I want you to be wearing a smile. I'm going to be wearing a smile.

"My daughter, Marcia, called me at work on a Wednesday two years ago and said 'Daddy, they found a tumor on my back. They don't think it's anything serious, but I'm going in for surgery on Monday.' I told her I'd be there on Monday," recalls Maurice. Marcia called back the next day with devastating news. The doctors found three tumors and they were malignant.

For the next nine months Maurice and Emma spent every spare moment with Marcia, who was living in Texas with her husband and two daughters.

Near the end of her struggle, Marcia wanted to return to Tennessee. She spent the last month of her life near the family farm she loved so dearly. Marcia had inherited Mau-

rice's love of land and of Angus cattle.

The diagnosis, terminal cancer, seemed so unreal and profoundly unfair. "From the day she became ill, no one ever gave her one word of encouragement," says her embittered daddy. They blasted her with radiation and chemotherapy, the treatments causing his beloved more pain than did the disease.

But in her suffering, she only wanted to spare her family. "I'm not really scared of dying," she said. "It's just all the sorrow that it leaves behind."

She did leave behind much sorrow. It's always there, deep in her daddy's eyes. But she also left behind two daughters — an incredible blessing and also a heartbreaking reminder of that beautiful and courageous daddy's girl.

While she knew cancer robbed her of a future with her family, Marcia wanted her daughters to be close to the farm.

Emma recalls Marcia's words, "I'm real proud of the opportunities you and Daddy gave me. I hope my children can experience that even though I won't be here."

"We told her that as long as there was life in us we would see they were taken care of," remembers Emma.

They have honored their daughter's wishes as both girls spend many weekends on the farm. The girls, Dana, 15, and Mandy, 3, serve as a constant reminder of their daughter, sometimes hauntingly so. "The older Dana gets, the more she becomes like her mom," says Emma.

Much to her grandfather's delight, Dana also has become involved in showing Angus heifers, something her mother wanted for her.

One heifer Dana will be showing was hand-picked by the Armstrongs' dear friend and fellow Angus breeder, George Morris, Champaign, Ill.

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"We were walking through George's herd when he asked me how I liked that heifer. He said she was for Dana," says Maurice.

Morris says their friendship grew out of the highly-advocated practice of keeping in touch with your customers. "After he bought a heifer from us out of the Illinois Spotlight Sale we kept in contact," says Morris. "He's become as good a friend as I have in the Angus business."

I probably don't deserve it, but I am sure not going to give it back.

"When they announced Maurice's name he was so surprised I thought the kids were going to have to pick him up off the ground," says Emma. Maurice was inducted into the Honorary Angus Foundation

at the 1993 National Junior Angus Show in Wichita, Kan. No inductee had ever received as many letters of support from junior members as this man the kids call "Pappy."

The following are excerpts taken from youth Maurice Armstrong has helped:

... Me and my three other brothers and sisters all wanted an Angus heifer to show and breed later, but my parents did not have the money to buy four registered Angus heifers. So Mr. Armstrong let us have four heifers at market price in order to get us started...

I think Mr. Armstrong deserves this award more than anyone in the world.
Michael Swift

My Grandfather is Maurice Armstrong. He is a very good man. He started me in the Angus breed in 1990. Since then we have been to many shows and sales... Through his knowledge he has taught me a lot about judging cattle and showing, but most of all he has taught me how to be a good person... He would be deserving of any recognition that would be presented to him even though he would never ask for it.

Brad Armstrong

One of the reasons I am building my herd with Angus is a man named Mr. Maurice Armstrong ... He is the type of person who is willing to go that extra mile to help kids like myself. He is always there to discuss cattle and will do anything he can to help you.

Justin "Rooster" White

It's easy to understand why people like George Morris and all those junior members keep in touch with the Armstrongs. These are people who do everything they can to help others, even in the face of their own personal tragedy.

I left Split Oaks that summer day having made two friends, just like Maurice promised.

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