

**M**otorists traveling through north-central Kansas often pause in a certain shady roadside park. There, just off U.S. Highway 36, they can take in the look and feel of mid-America.

This is it. Proof is found engraved on the stone marker proclaiming the geographical center of the 48 contiguous states.

It's not as flat here as outsiders think Kansas ought to be. There are hills, gently rolling mostly, and creek beds carve jagged creases across the landscape. The topography lends itself to diversified agriculture.

Farmers here grow wheat, not a lot of corn, but plenty of milo. The roughest hills and wooded creeks are best suited for grazing. So, while row-crop farming is a priority enterprise, many operations include a 50- to 200-head cow herd.

Here, in the center of the nation, most folks tend to

# The Middle of the Road

*Emphasizing the cow herd and use of their own herd bulls, Benoit Angus strives for practical cattle which appeal to commercial and purebred breeders alike.*

BY TROY SMITH

*(Above) Kansas Angus breeder Everett Benoit has raised cattle for more than 30 years, never straying from his original goal of raising quality seedstock.*

avoid extremes. That might be why Benoit Angus has enjoyed quiet success. Everett Benoit's middle-of-the-road approach to breeding cattle has proven popular among beef producers within a 100-mile radius of his Esbon, Kan., headquarters. He says customers want cattle with growth, but since most raise their own replacements, they need maternal strength. That's a balance he's worked to maintain from the very beginning.

Everett and Bonnie Benoit have been raising Angus cattle for more than 30 years. Everett's introduction to the business came as an employee of breeder Stanley Marr. Everett bought six Marr heifers in 1961 and 15 registered cows when Marr dispersed his herd in 1969.

"That was our start," says

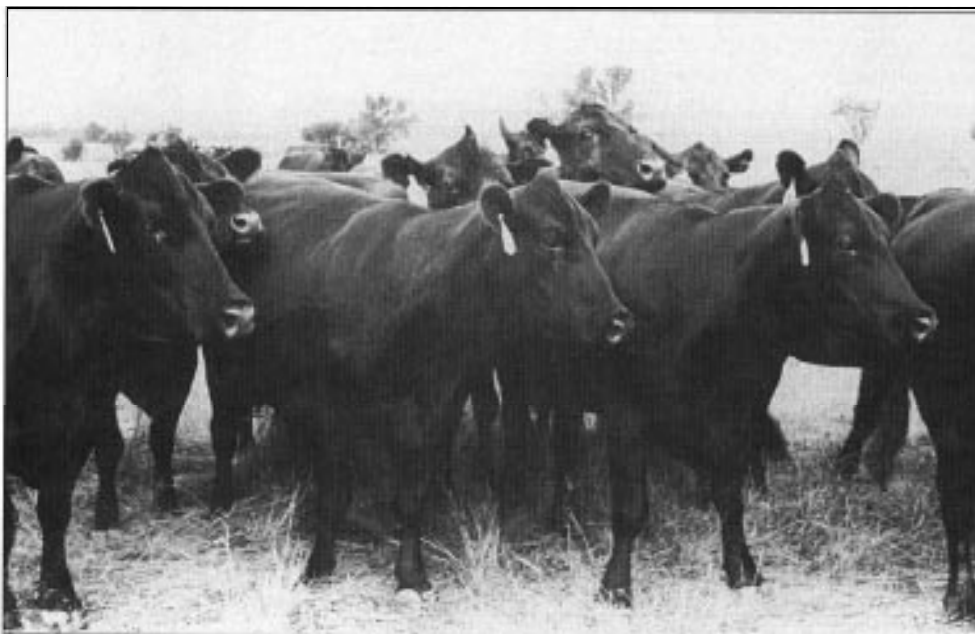
## Middle of the Road cont.

Everett. "And we've always run our cattle pretty much like a commercial herd, so we had to have easy-keeping cows. We've always stressed the maternal side, but tried to balance that with growth and performance."

To test performance as well

Everett thinks buyers appreciate the way Benoit cattle thrive under the same conditions as neighboring commercial herds. Pairs summer in the creek bottoms and hill pastures where cows are expected to raise a calf without assistance from a

bulls. Actually, the bulls Everett sought out and purchased have influenced the Benoit program more significantly than any of the popular AI sires. A good example was CH Stacker 7040, purchased as a calf from Cedar Hills in Montana. Herd



*The Benoit Angus cow herd is bred for uniformity growth, performance and strong maternal traits.*

as introduce their cattle to a broad range of potential customers, Everett made use of several Kansas bull test programs. He was among the first breeders to participate in the Benoit Bull Test during the early '70s. Exposure gained through the test/sale programs brought bull buyers knocking at the door and spurred private treaty transactions.

"We started holding our own production sales in 1990," says Everett. "It's been a more efficient way to market the larger numbers (80 bulls per year) we have to sell. I miss the one-on-one contact with private treaty buyers, but our bulls have brought a little more money through the auction."

creep feeder. Once her calf is weaned, she gleans her way through stalk fields until the first of the year. Home-raised alfalfa and prairie hay or baled cane will see her through the January-February calving season and up to grass time in the spring.

"We'll supplement heifers a little prior to breeding," adds Everett, "but we're not in the habit of pampering the mature cows."

Artificial insemination (AI) has been important to the Benoit program, but its use has been limited. In keeping with his "no fads" philosophy, Everett avoided experimentation by using proven AI sires. However, he felt it was just as important to have a strong battery of herd

bulls like Stacker were used for AI, but also for extensive natural service.

"We use the hell out of bulls," says Everett. "We AI a lot of cows to our own herd bulls, but we turn 'em out with cows too. If the pasture isn't too big, an aggressive bull can breed 50 cows. We've proven it. It gives customers confidence when they can buy sons of aggressive breeders. They want to buy something that will get their cows covered."

Benoit-raised bulls have measured up for performance, even rivaling the exotic bulls that some area cattlemen tried. Many are coming to Benoit Angus wanting bulls with that kind of growth, but maternal traits too.

"Some of our customers raise and sell commercial replacement heifers," says Everett. "They really want to breed in some uniformity and that's something we've tried to do all along. We want cows that are big enough but not too big. Sometimes those cows will fool you and weigh more than you think, but I think we're pretty close to optimum with six-frame cows weighing about 1,250. We do like a lot of volume and hip. And good udders."

Everett believes his method of selection involves simple common sense. It's just a matter of minimizing problems.

"Select for too much muscle and you squeeze the milk out of your females," he explains. "Get too much milk and they have trouble breeding back. When you get milk expected progeny difference (EPD) values of 20 to 30, you might be headed for trouble. Ten to 15 seems about right, but I don't panic over a six or eight. Those might be the heifers that are a little short of milk for their first calf. But if they give more the next time, they'll do. Those kind often have the most longevity. Some of our best producers have been cows which started a little low but have been doing an excellent job for a lot of years."

Everett has never considered calving ease to be a cornerstone of a breeding program. While he doesn't believe in asking for trouble, he thinks too much emphasis on light birth weights is ill advised.

"A lot of breeders have sold bulls on the calving ease trait alone, but that will change," says Everett. "There are some calving ease bulls which still offer growth, but not many. I don't think commercial producers will want to wean light-boned calves for very long. Here lately an 800-

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pound calf brings about the same price per pound as a 500-pounder. With the price of feeder cattle down, producers will want to wean as many pounds as possible and they'll want the calves to keep growing sale day."

The show arena never beckoned Benoit Angus until 1992, when Everett decided to take a pen of bulls to the National Western Stock Show in Denver.

"We didn't win anything but friends on our first trip to Denver. We caught some attention," he says. "We went with two pens of three in '95. All were sons of our own herd bulls and we won a reserve championship. The pen that beat us was a Whitestone Krebs pen sired by our own Stacker bull, so we didn't feel too bad."

As hoped, the exposure in

Denver sparked interest among new potential customers. And among the interested parties were other Angus seedstock breeders Everett says a surprising number of breeders have stopped by wanting to see the cows. The last two Benoit bull sales have attracted interest from other breeders too.

"A lot of other breeders are interested in the Rito-bred cattle. We like to think they are practical and uniform. Maybe our kind of cow is what some people need to come

back to," Everett adds. "Anyway, several breeders asked about buying females. We just hadn't sold any before, but our numbers were getting plenty high. And we were looking at an embryo transplant (ET) program, so we decided that a mature cow sale might be a good idea."

By the time the October '95 cow sale was scheduled, the Benoit ET program was underway. The goal is even more uniformity in a younger herd. The decision to go with ET came only after long and

careful thought. But spurring things along was Doug Benoit who has joined his father and the family operation.

"After college, Doug worked two years for Continental Grain," says Everett. "He and his wife, Michelle, wanted to get out in the country and raise their family here. Doug farms ground he rents on his own and he's really interested in these Angus cattle. He's good at business, good with a computer and wants to add some more technology to this operation. He's been wanting to go with the embryo transplant for a while. I drug my feet at the start, but now I'm convinced. We'll be breeding the same kind of cattle but with some new tools."

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