
WAYNE McGINNIS

A Farmer With a Commitment

A fourth-generation farmer, McGinnis of White Hall, Md., promotes environmentally and economically sustainable farming practices.

by Janet Mayer

Since the beginning of the year, interviews with the media have almost become a routine part of life for Maryland cattleman and grain farmer Wayne McGinnis. This siege of fame began when he and his family were awarded the first national Steward of the Land Award from the American Farmland Trust.

The national nonprofit farmland conservation organization selected the McGinnis Family from more than 60 nominees nationwide in recognition of outstanding efforts in land stewardship, farmland conservation policies, and the use of environmentally and economically sustainable farming practices.

For McGinnis, dealing with various publications and television stations has proven interesting. He recalls three reporters from CNN, the news station out of Atlanta, who spent a whole day interviewing him and filming his farm for just two minutes on the air. Another reporter briefly talked to him on the phone and fabricated a story about his operation, which he found upsetting.

At a height of 6-foot-7-inches, McGinnis, a former University of Maryland basketball player, towers over most people, prompting one reporter to describe him as a giant of a man; another described him as lanky, and still another as tall and strapping. "One reporter said I had a definitely prickly

attitude toward certain environmental issues," he recalls with a laugh. "I guess that is a result of speaking my mind even when it's not always politically correct."

He says one of those prickly subjects is the constant harangue by the media against red meat and the resulting drop in meat consumption. Another one of his pet peeves is that two-thirds of the farmers also have to work elsewhere in order to maintain their farms.

"Other countries subsidize their farmers, but here, the farmer subsidizes the consumer," he adds.

He has also argued streambank fencing with local conservationists and convinced them that his preference for using concrete stream crossings at critical points instead of using stream fencing works to prevent erosion just as well. In combination with the crossings, he plants thick stands of fescue to the water's edge. Each pasture has a spring-fed watering tank for his herd of Angus and crossbred cattle.

One fact that has come through clearly in all of the media coverage is that McGinnis is a true advocate of state and national farmland protection programs, and he exercises the usage of environmentally sound farming practices on an everyday basis.

"I am the fourth generation of my family



to farm this land and each successive generation has tried its best to leave it better than it found it," he comments. "I am just continuing like those before me."

As early as the 1970s he began to actively support efforts to adopt agricultural zoning to protect farmland from urban sprawl in the fast-growing area of Baltimore County. He served on three different county committees, resulting in the establishment of agricultural zoning for a third of Baltimore County. He later aggressively



promoted and placed his own farm in the Maryland Agricultural Land Preservation Program. Nationally, Baltimore County ranks in the top 10 in agricultural preservation with more than 19,000 acres of protected farmland.

The farm, located near White Hall, has been home to McGinnis almost his entire 60 years. Both he and his father were born in the 1811 farmhouse where Wayne and his family still live. The original farm was bought by McGinnis' great-grandfather at an auction in 1881 and was used as a site for a sawmill and for sheep and cattle until McGinnis' father changed to a dairy operation. It changed again in 1960, this time to beef cattle.

"When I graduated from college in 1959, I became a high school physical education teacher and coach," McGinnis recalls. "I continued to help my father on the farm, but we came to a point where the dairy needed to be changed to a bulk system, which would have demanded a big outlay of money. If we weren't going to spend the money for a milking parlor, then we needed to do something different. That is when my father decided to sell the dairy herd and to go into the beef business. I often jokingly say, we went into the beef business when neither one of us knew what we were doing; so we started out even."

The choice of a breed was simple, McGinnis says with a grin. Angus was chosen because it would be easier to keep them separated from the herd of Herefords owned by an uncle on the next-door farm. That decision was never regretted, since the breed has done well on the farm. Ironically, the cousin who now operates the farm next door has chosen to breed Angus cattle.

After dispersing the dairy herd, the operation bought a herd of Angus cattle from a nearby breeder. About the same time that McGinnis was getting into the beef business, he married Harriet, a former college classmate. A few years later, the couple bought a neighboring farm of 260 acres, 50 registered Angus cows and a tractor, using Harriet's salary as a teacher for the down payment.

For the next several years, his days began at 5 a.m. and ended long after sunset while he continued working long hours as a teacher and a coach and working on the farm. In 1967, a tractor accident involving his father made a full-time commitment to the farm a necessity for McGinnis. The following year, he and his wife bought the home farm and

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

“The strength of Angus cattle lies in the fact they are a recognizable, saleable item.”

WAYNE McGINNIS cont.



Installing ~~spring~~ watering tanks in each pasture provides clean fresh water for the McGinnis herd.



Pastures are fertilized each fall and are seeded with clover every three years.

moved into the original farmhouse.

While McGinnis had always taken care of managing the operation, it became Harriet's job to take care of the accounting and payroll for the operation. She also helped out as needed and eventually provided management for the labor force of one full-time and several part-time employees needed due to the expansion of the cattle herd and cash grain business.

By 1989, expansion was achieved by leasing 12 other farms, increasing the acreage to about 1,500 acres, with about 1,060 acres of cropland — soybeans and corn — and some hayland. In an effort to reduce soil erosion, contour strip plowing was implemented by McGinnis' father in the 1930s. To further reduce the erosion and also help improve the organic matter, the operation converted to "no till" planting in 1969.

He manages his 142 head of cattle— registered and commercial Angus as well as Angus-Hereford crosses— on an intensive

“If you are in the hay business and you have some rough ground, beef is the natural choice for utilizing that ground.”

— Wayne McGinnis

grazing system that utilizes acreage that is too rough for crops. The cattle are moved every five to seven days on pastures of native grasses that are surrounded by 10 miles of high-tensile fencing. Each fall the pastures are fertilized, and every three years they are seeded with clover. McGinnis continues to experiment on ways to reduce the use of fertilizers and pesticides.

“If you are in the hay business and you have some rough ground, beef is the natural choice for utilizing that ground,” he explains. “We are kind of locked in to having beef cattle, but it’s a matter of what part of the operation you want to be in. We have always been a cow-calf operation and, for the past 15 years, we have wintered the calves on hay and corn silage because there is always a strong market for them in the spring.”

Calves are vaccinated and backgrounded over the winter and sold as yearlings by private treaty to local cattle breeders.

McGinnis does some crossbreeding and all of these calves, both steers and heifers, are either advertised and sold locally as feeders or sent to a livestock market in Lancaster, Pa.

McGinnis keeps accurate computerized records on all of the cattle from both the crossbred and registered herds. In 1963, the operation signed on with the Beef Herd Improvement Association at the University of Maryland and has participated since that time.

Calves are weighed each fall and spring, giving good records of weaning weights as well as yearling weights, which are used as guidelines for culling the herd. By backgrounding the calves until spring, he says the 365-day weight gives him an accurate measure of both the cow and the bull and the ability to judge better what replacement heifers to keep.

McGinnis has chosen not to use artificial insemination (AI) in his breeding program because his time is split between the cow herd and the grain business. He has been successfully using bulls that he purchases at performance-tested bull sales since 1963.

“When it’s calving time, I don’t have time to sit out watching the herd for calving

problems; so, I shy away from the heavy-birth-weight bulls,” he explains. “I look for birth weights no higher than 85 to 90 pounds, and I look at the bull’s 365-day weight and rate of gain, the backfat measurements and a frame score of about the 6 to 6.5 range. I also take into consideration where I think I need to make improvement in the herd as far as appearance goes.”

Early in his breeding program, McGinnis recalls he had a discouraging 65-percent rate of live calves from heifers. To remedy the situation, he bought Texas Longhorn bulls to breed the group. For about 12 years he used the breed. During that time he only had to pull one calf, shooting the live rate up to 90 percent.

However, the calves didn’t tolerate the cold too well, and the calving season had to be moved into later spring, which McGinnis says meant more mud and more cases of scours.

When the calves were sold, he found that another drawback to the breed was the sale price he received for them— about 10 percent under market price. Eventually the operation bought a light-birth-weight Angus bull of Wye Plantation breeding that McGinnis says has done a really good job bred to heifers.

For many years, calving season for older cows in the herd was January. The severe winter two years ago changed McGinnis’ mind, and he has since moved the season to the end of February.

In an effort to get good condition on all of the cattle, dry cows are fed fescue hay until they have calved. Then they are moved to another field where they are fed better quality hay and corn silage. All calves are tagged at birth and in a week or two are tattooed and permanently tagged. Because McGinnis does not have the facilities to raise bulls, all bull calves are banded at birth and sold as feeders.

The younger cows, including first- and second-calf heifers and three-year-old cows, start to calve about a month later at the main farm where they can be watched and fed according to their needs for increased nutrition.

At breeding time, the registered cows are separated from those that are commercial, and four different bulls are used on the various groups of females. Heifers are taken to another farm where they are pastured with a light-birth-weight bull.

Because there is a good market for crossbred feeder calves, McGinnis has tried using several different breeds of bulls on Angus cows. He has tried a Simmental and Charolais and is currently using a Hereford bull. He is considering trying a Limousin bull or maybe a three-way cross.

“The strength of Angus cattle lies in the fact they are a recognizable, saleable item,” he says. “The smaller buyers want to buy only Angus; however, the feedlot buyer knows that the crossbred feeders will gain faster, but they still have to have black in them and it needs to be Angus. At some point, a breeder has to come back to Angus to keep getting that quality.”

McGinnis says a major drought this past summer has forced him to look at where he is going and to speculate as to where the operation might be 10 years down the road. Although he has survived four major droughts during his years as a farmer, he says the latest one has put a strain on his business and has caused him to consider what the future holds for the operation and for the next McGinnis generation, daughter Anee McGinnis-Jones, and sons, Bret and Jay.

“It has been a good life for all of our family,” McGinnis reflects. “Our children were raised on the farm and showed both heifers and steers in 4-H and FFA. All of them have gotten their college education and right now are experiencing the outside world. Bret is living at home and the other two are in Baltimore.

“At this time, neither of my sons are really interested in the beef business, but I hope at some point they may return to the farm to be the fifth generation to live and work here.

“I imagine we will always have beef cattle, and there will always be Angus. I’m not getting any younger, and I am looking forward to working with my children, just like my father worked with me for so many years.”