

Oh, the Places He's Gone!

Finding the perfect balance between life on and off the farm is no easy task. Keith Burgett – a well-traveled veterinarian from Carrollton, Ohio, and longtime Angus producer – seems to have it all worked out. Now retired, Keith dedicated his life to animals large and small, near and far.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor



Burgett Angus Farm LLC was officially started in 2005, but Keith Burgett and his sons — Phillip and Bryan — were farming long before that.

“We bought the farm in 1983,” Keith says. “There were 13 buildings on the property and we tore most of them down.” A house was built the following year.

In 1984, Keith bought a purebred Angus heifer from Summitcrest Farms for his kids to show at the fair. His sons, Phillip and Bryan, caught the cattle bug from the start, but their older sister, Marti, didn’t have the same sentiment.

“We had a few commercial cows (10-15) at the start, but after that first heifer we just kept growing the herd,” Keith says. “We planned to have 100 acres and be part-time farmers.”

When Keith and Judy moved to Carrollton in 1971, they purchased what is now Carrollton Animal Hospital. This kicked off Keith’s life-long career as a veterinarian.

“There used to be a large number of dairy farms in the area, which made it necessary to be a mixed animal practice,” Keith says. In the last 20 years of his career, Keith shifted his focus to small animals as livestock moved out of the area.

In the 28 years Keith operated a mixed animal practice, he saw various breeds of beef cattle. He says this is why he exclusively runs Angus today.

Balance

As a full-time veterinarian, Keith left most of the daily cattle care to his sons. When the family moved to the farm, Bryan, then 8, and Phillip, 10, jumped into the farm life with both feet.

As Bryan and Phillip got older, keeping an eye

on 30 head got easier. Once they were both off at college, Keith hired a part-time herdsman to keep the cattle operation running smoothly while he was at work.

“Both Bryan and Phillip got degrees in animal science and then came back to the farm,” Keith says. “Everyone in our family goes to Ohio State, it’s tradition.” The waving Ohio State University (Ohio State) flags strategically placed around the property demonstrate the family’s loyalty to Buckeye nation.

What was only 30 head has now grown to more than 200 cows. This is enough to keep the growing Burgett family busy all year.

“Our grandkids often feed our bulls, and they like to pet every single one of them,” Keith says. This just illustrates the high-level of docility required to remain in the Burgett herd.

The peculiar balance between docility, growth and maternal traits keeps the Burgetts culling hard and fast for anything they don’t like. Keith’s profession allowed the family to place an even stronger emphasis on health standards than most herds can adhere to.

Healthiest herd for miles

“People don’t generally use good biosecurity measures, and when they buy animals they don’t test them,” Bryan says. He is the front man when it comes to managing the herd. “We are a closed herd on the female side and buy a few bulls only after they are tested.”

That testing is for Johne’s Disease and bovine leukosis. The latter is transferred through infected blood and eventually leads to

Continued on page 22

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Burgett Angus Farm has grown enough in the last 20 years that both boys and Keith are needed to keep the operation running smoothly.

What is leukosis?

Bovine leukosis is basically the cattle version of lymphosarcoma resulting from an infection of the leukemia virus (BLV). Cancer in cattle is rare, but this virus is one of the most common cancer-causing agents in bovine, according to Matt Miesner from the Kansas State University (K-State) Veterinary Health Center.

Causes: a virus that adapts to cattle. Once an animal is infected, it remains that way for life. The virus survives by incorporating itself directly into the DNA and replicating. This is why the condition remains permanently.

Transmission: blood, and not very much of it at that. It can also be transmitted through saliva, milk or the air. Blood is the main avenue for transmission.

Clinical signs: signs may not appear until an animal is at least four years old, if they ever surface. Tumors can develop around the lymph nodes in the body and show up as lumps under the skin. If the tumors are inside the body, they can cause serious problems for the digestive, reproductive or respiratory systems. Clinical signs are not common, but the virus itself is. Sometimes herds will be 75 to 100% infected and only 2 to 5% of the herd will actually exhibit clinical signs.

Treatment: none, antivirals are not available for cattle in the first place and would be ineffective for this condition.

Testing: a blood test can show elevated blood lymphocytes as an indication, but this is uncommon. A serum test is available, but cannot indicate if clinical signs will surface. Some of the clinical signs mimic other problems, making it necessary to perform a necropsy to confirm the animal has leukosis upon death.

Source: Matt D. Miesner, Kansas State University Veterinary Health Center.

tumors as it is a cancer-causing virus.

“It [leukosis] is a lot more prevalent than people are willing to admit,” Bryan says. Flies can easily spread leukosis just like using one needle for multiple animals can. “We have a strong fly control program to cut down on the vectors.”

The Burgetts’ herd ranks in the highest percentile of a voluntary national program striving to eradicate Johne’s disease. Keith says few herds are certifiably free of the disease.

“I have seen herds devastated by both of these,” Keith says with a shake of his head. It’s not something he worries about for his herd since every adult animal is tested for both annually. “If you can prevent a disease, it sure beats treating one. We don’t make excuses for our cattle. If we get rid of one problem animal that eliminates work for the others.”

That is a strong selling point for his animals in a place where marketing cattle can be challenging.

Meet the need

“We have had a successful bull sale for about the last 20 years,” Keith says. “A producer from West Virginia helps market the bulls in his area. We generally sell our animals within a 100-mile radius.”

The Burgetts cater to the commercial cattleman. This end goal makes it imperative to produce cattle genetically bred to grade on the rail as well

as be retained as replacements. Everything is about moderation for the success of this operation.

“We use true calving-ease genetics. We try to keep the same perspective and end goal of a moderate cow size that will raise a calf and breed back in a 60-70-day breeding period,” Keith adds. “You need a live calf before you can get a carcass. That is why we don’t trade on high-dollar females.”

Breeding “problem-free cattle” is what the Burgetts strive for as their customers continue to age. They also emphasize disposition. Most buyers simply call and let the family know what they want when the bull sale comes up the first Saturday in April.

“We don’t advertise our sale, everything just sells right off the farm,” Keith says. “Each pen is pre-priced. If more than one buyer wants a certain bull, there is a mini bid-off between them.”

It’s not exactly an auction, but it works well for the Burgetts. Protecting the herd health is the beacon for this operation’s success. It’s a balancing act of the utmost importance.

Balance from afar

With Bryan and Phillip taking over the day-to-day responsibilities of the farm for the last 20 years, Keith has been able to travel to other parts of the world.

At the turn of the century, Keith found himself spending time in remote Russian villages. Each trip lasted about three weeks, allowing Keith to put both his agriculture and veterinary degree to use for producers in faraway places. The trips were funded through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and Land O’Lakes grants.

“I mostly taught AI (artificial insemination), but we did about everything to train farmers and veterinarians,” Keith says. “I made a uterus out of a plastic sleeve to teach them how to AI cattle. Some of these countries were so remote I thought for sure Jesus would come walking around a corner at any moment.”

While in Russia, Keith mostly visited dairy farms – most had a capacity of 1,500 head. He essentially used every aspect of his bachelor’s degree. Nutrient deficiencies in their feedstuff sticks

What is Johne’s disease?

Loosely related to Crohn’s Disease in people, Johne’s Disease is termed a chronic wasting disease of ruminants at the hand of bacterium in the intestine.

“Basically, the animal slowly wastes away until they die,” says Keith Burgett, a retired veterinarian and Angus producer from Carrollton, Ohio. “The incubation period is a long time, maybe 2-3 years. Sometimes the clinical signs don’t show up until the animal is maybe four years old.”

The intestinal walls absorb the bacteria once it enters the body. This spurs the immune system to recruit more white blood cells to kill it. As a result, the intestinal wall thickens thus reducing the animal’s ability to properly absorb nutrients from their food, eventually leading to death.

Causes: caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium avium subspecies paratuberculosis (MAP)*. Historically, Johne’s was a problem for dairy cattle but any ruminant is at risk.

Transmission: the organism is transferred through a contaminated surface such as an udder or from manure on hay being consumed. Animals infected with the bacterium will shed the organism in their manure, milk and semen. The quantity shed increases over time.

Clinical signs: affected animals usually exhibit signs between 2 and 5 years of age. Most animals will be thin and weak regardless of an adequate food supply and appetite. Diarrhea is a hallmark of the disease. Most cases will appear suddenly after a major change such as birth or transportation.

Treatment: none, no medication or dietary change is effective.

Prevention: maintain clean birthing areas, keep udders clean, spread manure on non-pasture land, limit access to low-lying wet areas, feed colostrum from Johne’s-negative sources, protect water sources from fecal contamination, do not feed directly on the ground, test to identify and cull Johne’s-positive animals, and do not contaminate feed for young stock with manure.

Testing: culturing feces for the bacteria is the most effective avenue for diagnosis. However, a blood test using the enzyme linked immuno-sorbent assay (ELISA) can also diagnose it.

“We do fecal tests one year and then ELISA tests the next,” Keith says. “You have to be careful though, because the bacterium grows slowly. You can have both a false positive and a false negative, it’s a tricky process.”

Source: eXtension.org

Continued on page 24



When Keith was a boy his family milked dairy cows. He quickly decided that wasn't the life for him and went to school to become a veterinarian and eventually an Angus producer.

out most prominently in Keith's mind from his many trips across the ocean.

"Their production is very low compared to ours, they don't have the resources to feed their animals like we do," he explains. "I had to convince them the protein is basically zero in the hay they fed, so they needed to add some grains."

Corn isn't king in Europe like it is in North America; barley is the semi-comparable substitute. Their silage is made from wheat, oats and canola, Keith adds to illustrate the plane of nutrition he was working around.

A lasting impression

"On the first trip, I delivered a calf. There were five women and one rope when I got to the back of the cow to help them," Keith says. "Many of the villages I visited had one needle and used it for all of the animals."

Keith says the people were always really kind and graciously accepted any assistance and advice the Americans provided.

"The people love Americans," Keith says. "The farm I remember most I always enjoyed visiting; they would always ask me to bring things like sleeves and needles for them."

What the humble 75-year-old won't openly admit is how much of his own medical supplies was donated over the years for each trip. Despite all the needles and sleeves Keith brought, perhaps his lasting impact on the people is still felt today in the expertise he shared.

"I have loved being a vet for the last 46 years," Keith says. "My wife Judy thought I should take an early retirement, so I did just that in January (2018)."

Keith chuckles at the recent memory. With no intentions of slowing down, Keith will continue to raise cattle with his sons while teaching his grandchildren the tricks of the trade. **AJ**

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