

Knowing it takes pounds of beef to pay bills,
this Florida Historic Herd didn't get caught up in fads.

STARDUST RANCH

BY JANET MAYER

At Stardust Ranch everyday life revolves around a herd of registered Angus cattle that has been in the making for some 54 years. Owned and managed by the Henry Chitty family (Jeannette and her children, Jeanne and Henry III), the operation is located near Micanopy, Fla.

The Stardust herd is possibly the oldest registered Angus herd in the state and was designated a historic herd by the American Angus Association. Inducted into the Angus Heritage Foundation in 1996, Jeannette was recognized as a breeder who has worked in an untiring manner to improve the Angus business and the Association.

She and her late husband, Henry, who died eight years ago, worked for many years toward a common goal of producing functional cattle with quality carcass traits that would make money for both themselves and their customers.

As a result, the operation has collected a large number of satisfied customers who return year after year to purchase by private treaty the progeny of the herd's 100 registered Angus cows and 60 commercial Angus cows.

"So far we have been able to sell all we want right off the ranch," 72-year-old Jeannette says. "Our customers are mostly commercial breeders, but we also sell some seedstock to purebred breeders.

"We only offer the really good bulls for



JANET MAYER PHOTOS

JEANNETTE CHITTY
Stardust Ranch ■ Micanopy, Fla.

sale, and they have been semen-tested by a veterinarian from the University of Florida. We cull our bulls very strictly, and the remainder are steered and sold to a feedlot that has bought from us almost every year since 1970. Heifers we don't use as replacements are also sold."

Many Stardust bull customers are

commercial breeders located in southern Florida. Jeannette describes these breeders as more-progressive types who want to make progress through breeding their own replacement heifers using good Angus bulls.

"Even in my grandfather's day, he knew the value of using a good Angus bull on his commercial cows," Jeannette says. "I always considered them to be cattle that were good milkers and could hustle around to get something to eat. And, most important, they had good carcasses that produced a lot of red meat.

"I can remember seeing a summary of how many carcass shows the breed had won at the International Livestock Show when it was held in Chicago. They had won practically all of the contests, which proved to me this was the breed to have."

■ Angus start

The base of the Stardust herd dates back to 1945 when Jeannette and her father bought a group of Bellboy KM granddaughters. At that time she had decided she no longer wanted to show 4-H steers that had to go to slaughter. Instead, she

wanted to show cattle that could be taken back home and used for breeding.

Since the 11 registered Angus heifers were open, her father borrowed an Angus bull to breed them. The following year she talked her father into buying a bull from the University of Illinois.

"There I was, a little cracker girl from Florida, showing my cattle at the big International Livestock Show in Chicago,"

SOLID FOUNDATIONS — Angus herds/Angus people



Henry Chitty III (left) leaves no doubt that his 72-year-old mother, Jeannette (right), still runs the ranch.



Daughter Jeanne Campbell (right) is following in her mother's footsteps, pursuing a life in the Angus business.



The Chittys have started using ultrasound on their yearling bulls, hoping their customers will use the extra data.

she recalls with a laugh. "It is a good thing I knew some other folks there, or I would have gotten lost. Anyhow, while I was there, I went to see this bull, Postelmeer V. He was really something. He weighed over a ton, which was a lot, since cattle in 1946 tended to be much smaller. I made arrangements to buy him and had him shipped down to Florida in a boxcar that was boarded in half."

Jeannette and her father continued to build their herd while she earned a degree in animal science at the University of Florida in nearby Gainesville. After college she took a job as an ag teacher and continued her education, earning a master's degree in agriculture. She met Henry Chitty, a Clemson University graduate with a degree in animal science, when he stopped by one day to see her cattle. Later they were married.

■ **Stardust**

Jeannette and her father split the herd. She and Henry continued to breed cattle on a small parcel of land they bought near her father's and her grandfather's ranches. The name *Stardust* was chosen for the ranch because it had been the couple's dream for so long, and the song by the same name was popular at the time.

The Chitty family grew to include Henry III and Jeanne, and the ranch expanded into a 1,300-acre operation with two separate herds of cattle, 100 registered brood cows and 60 commercial cows.

Since Henry's death, Jeannette has continued to live at the ranch in the house they had built soon after they bought the land. She still works in the operation, keeping meticulous cattle records in longhand, driving the farm truck and working with the cattle when needed. She possesses an extremely accurate memory for lines of cattle and names of people associated with the cattle business, both those from the past as well as from the present, and she tries to keep abreast of the cattle industry as a whole.

The herd has been closed to outside females since 1955, but new genetics were continually introduced through the use of artificial insemination (AI). Natural service is presently used to breed almost all of the cattle.

"To do AI properly, it takes time," Jeannette explains. "And time is something that is extremely limited around here. We feel as long as we can develop some bulls of our own that we like and are capable of

The next generation at STARDUST

For Henry Chitty III and his sister, Jeanne Campbell, who have lived and worked almost their entire lives at Stardust Ranch, the experience not only has provided an education in the cattle business but also has given them the opportunity to continue to work in a full-time capacity with their mother, Jeannette Chitty.

Both Jeanne and Henry own cattle of their own, which are mixed in with parts of the main herd. Henry and his wife, Gaye Lynne, live about three miles from the main part of the ranch. Jeanne, her husband, Chad Campbell, and daughter, Tracy Crawford, live nearby on a section of ground that was part of her grandfather's land.

"I have been here the whole time, in other words, my whole life," says Henry, who started ranching full-time immediately after high school. "The ranch keeps me busy since our land is split up; but I love working with the cattle and my family, and I wouldn't change it for anything else."

Henry leaves no doubt that his 72-year-old mother still runs the ranch. "This is her life," he says.

"All she ever talks about is cows, cows, cows; and she can look out there and tell you which black cow is who, and that is something I could never do. I chide her that she

is always doing some kind of paperwork, either for our own records or the FBCIA or AHIR and that we need to be computerized, but I think she likes doing it that way."

Jeanne is following in her mother's footsteps. "I guess you could say my career kind of started the same as my mother's," she says. "I loved growing up at the ranch and loved everything about the business, except selling my steers.

"One year I had a grand champion steer at Gainesville, but I knew he was going to go for slaughter, and I just cried and cried. From that time on, I showed only heifers. Now my daughter, who is 10, owns cattle of her own, and she wants to keep everything — bulls, heifers and all."

At one time Jeanne did strike out to pursue a different path. "The ranch has always pulled me back; I started law school, and then I quit because I wanted to come back here to work at the ranch," she explains, feeling some regret for not finishing school.

"I hope that one day I know a quarter as much as Mom does," says Jeanne, "and I pray that I will still be able to be in the business when I am my mom's age and that the operation continues for many, many generations."

siring good calves, we are going in the right direction."

Jeannette recalls Stardust Expansion 690 as being one of the most outstanding bulls from their program. Known as a calving-ease bull, he was out of a Stardust dam bred AI to Bon View Winton 1342. The Chittys sold two-thirds interest to a group of breeders, who were mostly from Tennessee, while retaining a one-third interest. Later the bull was leased by what was then called American Breeders Service (ABS, now ABS Global).

■ Herd emphasis

When breeding decisions for the Stardust herd are made, close attention is paid to both performance and carcass expected progeny differences (EPDs). Since birth weight EPDs are especially important, they have been using both a son of Sleep Easy and a bull from their own breeding that goes back to Band 105. Jeannette says both have done well.

Calving for the forage-based operation takes place January to March, with the heifers kept close to the house for observation. There they receive a small amount of feed. As they continue to calve, the feed is increased. If possible, they are

kept separate from the main herd through rebreeding time. Jeannette credits this type of proper nutrition for eliminating any problems in getting the first-calf heifers to rebreed.

Carcass EPDs, especially those for marbling, are a concern for the Chittys, and Jeannette says more of their customers are interested in carcass traits than in the past.

"I think our records have helped us tremendously," she says. "I think one of the smartest things we ever did was to start keeping performance records. We participate in the Florida Beef Cattle Improvement Association (FBCIA) and also the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program. When we started keeping records back in 1958, people didn't pay a lot of attention; but those records caught on pretty quick. We use the records ourselves to decide what heifers to use as replacements and when we use bulls from our own breeding.

"We have also just started doing ultrasound on our bulls, and we are hoping our customers will find this information useful. Here in the Gainesville area the ultrasound procedure is done by the University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service."

The Chittys also would like to get some performance data from the feedlot or carcass information from the packers, but so far they have been unsuccessful. Jeannette says she feels the cattle must do well. Otherwise, the feedlot, located near Columbus, Ohio, wouldn't keep buying them.

During her 54 years as a cattle breeder, Jeannette has witnessed a lot of changes in the cattle industry and in her own herd. "When my husband, Henry, and I first started this herd, we decided we weren't going to follow fads," she says. "Back then, the real short cattle were popular, and later the breed went the other direction to larger, taller cattle. We had a small commercial herd, and we realized it took pounds to pay bills, so we always kept away from the extremes.

"Today, I think the breeders need to watch the scales. At least that is what we are trying to do. And, for us, they need to have the carcass characteristics," says Jeannette. "I don't think you ever accomplish every goal you set down for your herd; but last year the feedlot people told us all of the Stardust cattle graded Choice, so I guess we must be doing something right."

