



Best of Both Worlds

BIF President Holliman is both cattleman and researcher.

Story & photos by Becky Mills

Ask almost anyone at a Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) meeting why they are there, and they'll tell you it is because the meetings are a thought-provoking mix of research and production.

With current BIF president Jimmy Holliman, Marion Junction, Ala., the federation gets that blend in one man. The Mississippi native came to the Auburn University Black Belt Research and Extension Center in Marion Junction in 1975, straight out of graduate school, for his first and only job.

But Holliman states, "When I'm at BIF, I don't say I'm superintendent of an experiment station. I say I'm a cattle producer." Since 1982, he and wife Kathleen and son Bret have owned and operated Circle H Cattle Farm, a purebred black Simmental operation.

Holliman says his career in the cattle industry started in 1951, when he was born. "I grew up in a commercial cattle operation; plus, we had a small purebred Angus herd, too. When I was 9, I started showing cattle, was involved in 4-H, was on the judging team and was a junior member of the American Angus Association."

He adds, "My dad was one of the best cattlemen I know. Even before the push toward performance, he identified his cows and calves."

When Holliman entered Mississippi Delta

Community College on a football scholarship, he had to put showing and judging aside. But, since the college was only 10 miles from home, he continued to work for his family's operation.

At Mississippi State University, he didn't play football, but did make the livestock judging team. "They brought Dr. Howard Miller down from Southern Illinois to coach the team," Holliman says. "I was on his first judging team down here. We won the American Royal judging contest in Kansas City, and I was one of the top 10 individuals in the contest."

He also stayed at Mississippi State for his master's degree in animal nutrition. "I had the opportunity to go back to the farm, but I was into the research end of it, too. I worked for Dr. Werner Essig as an undergraduate, helping him with digestibility studies," Holliman notes. "After I got my master's, Dr. Essig pushed me to get my Ph.D., but I decided it was time to go to work."

"I visited the Black Belt station in the spring, and the cattle looked good and everything was green," he continues. "This was cattle country. I felt like this was the place I needed to be."

Holliman came in as

► **Left:** BIF President Jimmy Holliman, Marion Junction, Ala., is a cattleman first and a researcher second.

assistant superintendent, just in time to get in on the landmark fescue study in 1976 and 1977 in which the toxic fescue endophyte was identified in a pasture at Black Belt. He has been there ever since, moving up to superintendent in 1989.

Improving the federation

His BIF involvement also started in 1989. "One of our Auburn project leaders, Dr. John Hough, talked me into going to the meeting in Nashville," Holliman says. "I thought it was the best meeting I've ever been to, and I haven't missed one since."

He continues, "You get to talk to the great scientists in the industry and the great producers — the ones you've read about all your life."

In 1996, the year he was president of the Alabama Beef Cattle Improvement Association (BCIA), his efforts helped bring the BIF meeting to Birmingham, Ala. Then, in 1998, he was elected to an at-large position on the BIF board and has since worked his way up to vice president and program committee chairman, then to president for 2004-2005.

The perfect fit

Auburn animal scientist Lisa Kriese-Anderson says Holliman is a perfect fit for the job. "Number one is his integrity. If I or any of my co-workers decide to do a project at the Black Belt station, all the i's are dotted and all the t's are crossed. If that is what he tells you, that is the way it is. That's the way it is for his work life, his home life and his own personal cattle operation.

"Number two is his passion, not only for beef cattle in general, but for BIF," she

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► **Holliman willingly shares the knowledge he gains from working with the research herd at the Black Belt Research and Extension Center.**



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continues. "He'll do anything for that organization or any cause he believes in. There is no medium. If he has a passion for it, he stays with it."

Case in point — coaching football. Holliman has been an assistant coach at John T. Morgan Academy, a small private school in Selma, Ala., since 1992. Even though his son graduated from Morgan Academy five years ago (and later from Auburn as a four-year letterman), Holliman still coaches at the academy.

"It is a volunteer thing," Holliman comments. "I would pay them to let me come."

Dave Maples, formerly director of the Alabama BCIA and now executive vice president of the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association, talked Holliman into running for his first term as BIF director. "He's in it for the right reasons," Maples says. "He loves the industry and is willing to share his knowledge and is willing to help people."

For the past few years, Holliman and the

other BIF leaders have been funneling that willingness to give and knowledge into an industry-changing cause. "We've developed standards and guidelines for emerging technologies," he notes, as well as "genetic marker tools for predicting the genetic merit of beef cattle."

Given his reputation for sticking to the causes in which he believes, this cattleman and researcher will continue to work on that evolving cause long after he passes the president's gavel. 