

An Angus Legacy

Art Bartenslager is perpetuating a family tradition in the cow-calf business.

Story & photos by *Janet Mayer*



► Art Bartenslager (right) is perpetuating a family tradition with a cow-calf operation near Lewisburg, W.Va. Also pictured are daughters Alison (left) and Abbie Jane.

Agriculture and animal husbandry have been a way of life for the Bartenslager family for a number of years. Following in the footsteps of his grandfather, A.V. Bartenslager, and his grandfather before him, Art Bartenslager is perpetuating the tradition with a cow-calf operation near Lewisburg, W.Va.

“I know our farming background goes back quite a number of years to the York County area of Pennsylvania, where our family made their living farming,” Bartenslager says. “My grandfather grew up on a farm in that area and became a veterinarian with a practice in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania. In addition to being a vet, he and my grandmother also

operated a farm where they raised Yorkshire hogs and a few commercial cows. In 1938 he added the Angus breed to the cow herd with the purchase of three purebred heifers.”

With a need for more acreage and a better bull market, Bartenslager’s grandparents decided to move the operation to Virginia in 1952. They purchased a dairy farm near Churchville, complete with machinery and a herd of registered Guernsey cows. Bartenslager’s father, John, lived and worked at the farm, giving Bartenslager and his two brothers and sister the advantage of learning the business from the ground up.

Known as Bellefonte, the operation maintained the dairy herd

until 1967 when they dispersed.

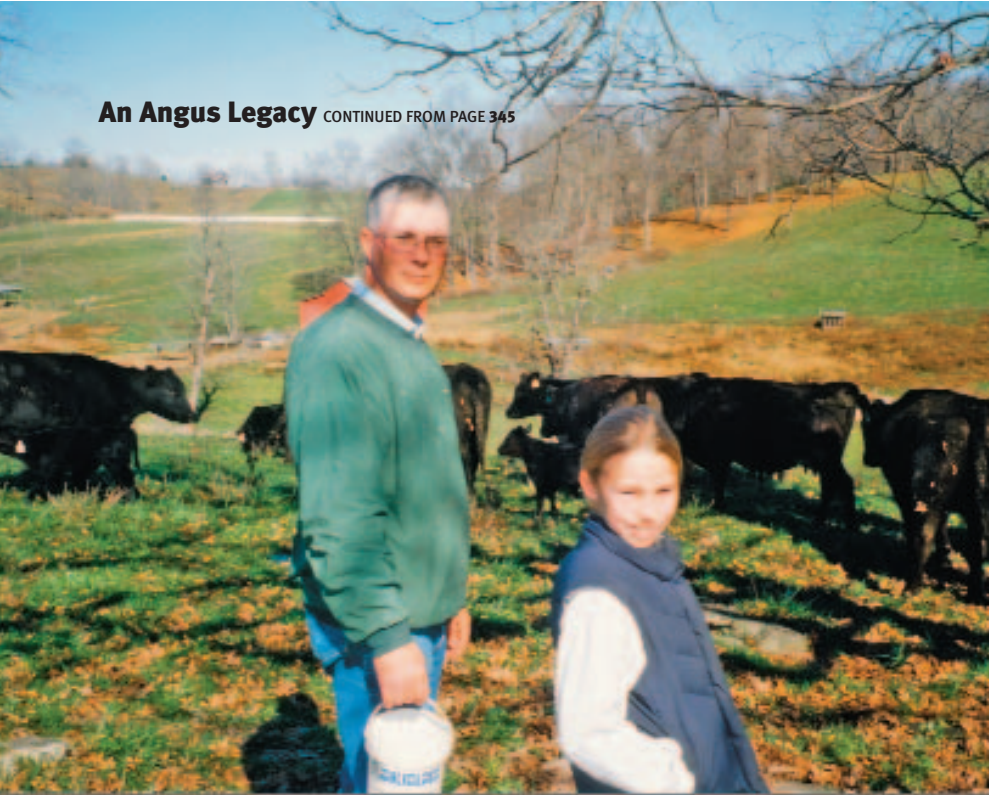
Bartenslager’s grandfather began building the herd of Angus cows until it numbered 350 head. That farm was sold, and all but 20 cows were dispersed in 1990, when A.V. moved to a 30-acre farm in the same area. He kept cattle until 1997 and died at the age of 89 in 2002.

Continuing the legacy

“I went away to college and worked various other jobs after I graduated, but ended up in the Lewisburg area in 1986 when I was 23,” Bartenslager recalls. “I worked as the manager of old Clark Farm for three years, and when I resigned from that

CONTINUED ON PAGE 346





► “I believe, as my granddad did, when you chase extremes you always end up giving up something else in the breed. As an Angus breeder, I don’t want to lose the heartiness, thriftiness, fertility and longevity of Angus cattle,” Bartenslager says.

job I decided this would be a good place to get started raising cattle. My brother John had also settled in the area, and my wife, Ruth, was from here, so after we got married we started the operation with 30 leased acres, a Ford® Bronco and 20 heifers. Some of that number was from the nucleus of my grandfather’s herd, and we still have a handful from those lines.”

Since that time, Bartenslager’s operation, named Bellemonte after his grandfather’s farm, has grown to include 12 owned acres, 850 leased acres, the necessary machinery and a herd of 200 cows — 80 registered

Angus cows and 120 commercial cows. His family has also grown to include children Zach, 12; Alison, 9; and Abbie Jane, 4.

“I would describe our operation as a grass program,” Bartenslager says. “This is mainly because we are located in a limestone-rich part of the state, where the terrain prevents the use of machinery in many fields. But, in the spring, we have more grass than we can utilize. We do a lot of the hay up in round bales, with about 50% of that put up as high-moisture, wrapped hay. Our grasses are mostly mixed with white clover, red clover, some alfalfa and fescue being the largest part.

We control the fescue by cutting early before it matures and then using it later for grazing. With this type of usage and some reseeding, we are seeing a slow return of some bluegrasses and orchard grass.”

After trying an intensive grazing system, which Bartenslager found to be too much work with a family and other obligations, the herd is on a rotational system with the use of high-tensile fencing.

Managing the herd

Up until this past year, the operation has kept all heifers to build herd numbers, but for the first time this past winter, some heifers were sold at several sales. What doesn’t make the replacement cut will be grazed the following spring and sold as yearlings in the fall or go to the feedlot. Depending on his feed situation and what pasture rental he has available in the spring, Bartenslager will often buy steers and heifers to feed.

Both cow herds are basically treated the same, with all first-calf heifers being heat-synchronized and bred by artificial insemination (AI), with the bull going in at 42 days. Calving starts in January and runs until the end of April, with heifers from both herds calving two weeks earlier than the rest of the cows, followed by the purebred cows and finishing up with the commercial cows.

To facilitate breeding the heifers back, after calving they are kept together as a group and fed second-cutting alfalfa or alfalfa haylage and a couple of pounds of grain a day. About March, when the grass season begins, they are separated and bred to calve in sequence with the mature cow herds the following year.

The past three years, some of the commercial heifers were held until later for use as recipients for 50-60 embryos from another purebred operation. The remainder is bred to bulls. Bartenslager says he also implanted 20 eggs from a flush of one of the cows from his grandfather’s original herd, a 1992 cow from the Mina family, a maternal line he says his grandfather used heavily in his herd because of their longevity.

Gaining the edge

“For many years we sent bulls through the bull tests, but found it to be an expensive proposition, especially if they didn’t index in the top percentile,” Bartenslager says. “The last year we participated in the central bull test, we had 12 bulls make the sale, but the sale was just a disaster, and I decided then and there not to send any more bulls to test.

“I got together with three other breeders, and we decided to try doing our own test and sale. This past March was the fifth year, and we have gotten along super well by

A.V. Bartenslager

A.V. Bartenslager was many things to those who knew him. He was a veterinarian, with a thriving large animal practice until 1947; a teacher of reproduction and surgery for 20 years at his alma mater, the veterinary school at the University of Pennsylvania; a consultant on large animal reproductive fertility problems from 1947 to 1977; and, last but not least, an Angus breeder from 1938 until his death in 2002. He did many services for other Angus breeders by working with Enos Perry of Rutgers University, helping to usher in the infancy of the artificial insemination (AI) procedure, and also served as president of the American Angus Association from 1985-1986.

A.V.’s grandson, Art Bartenslager of Lewisburg, W.Va., describes his grandfather as a purist in everything he did. “He was a purist of the Angus breed. He would never use a bull unless the accuracies were locked in and he had done an extensive pedigree search to make sure there were no skeletons in the closet. He was also a purist when it came to keeping records and kept unofficial records from the time he began breeding Angus cattle in 1938. He kept official records from 1960 on and said the records spoke volumes to him. He culled hard on them, and I learned a great deal from him.”

In an *Angus Journal* interview with A.V. in 1986, he made the following statement: “I have watched, rode and stood against the shifting tides sweeping across the Angus breed and the Association. It has been a real interesting experience, and I have no doubt it will be even more so from now on.”

A.V. died in August 2002 at the age of 89, leaving a legacy of knowledge for those who follow.

doing the advertising and everything else ourselves. Numbers vary from year to year, but this year we had 42 bulls on test; 20 of them were mine. We don't have any magical formula that the bulls go through — they are all kept at our place, all fed together; we do weights, measurements and ultrasound them. At the end of February they come off test, and we compile our data to make our selections."

The group, known as "The Cattlemen's Edge," hosts their sale at the local sale barn the fourth Saturday of March. This past March, they sold 35 bulls and 50 open replacement heifers. Some of the bulls have been sold to breeders in other states, but, for the most part, customers are local commercial breeders with herds of 50 or less who will buy a bull every three or four years. True to form, the group has started to see some repeat buyers throughout the last several years.

"We do make an effort to do follow-up with our customers, trying to serve them as best we can, and we have had very few problems," Bartenslager says, adding that a large number of their customers are looking for calving-ease bulls. While not something they paid particular attention to prior to conducting their own test, calving ease is something they prioritize now.

Beyond actual birth weights and birth weight expected progeny differences (BW EPDs), Bartenslager says 90% of their customer base is looking for only three things in a bull — color, phenotype and price. "They are mainly looking for a live calf on the ground, one that will wean heavy and is black," he explains. A small percentage will try to interpret the other data and carcass EPDs.

At the regular central bull tests, Bartenslager says he thinks more buyers really look at all of the data, just as he did when he bought a bull out of a bull test two years ago. He based his decision strictly on the data and made the buy through the phone.

While he says the bull is doing a good job for him, he probably wouldn't have purchased him if he had seen him. "I think most of the carcass bulls are ugly," he says. "It really confuses me when I look at ultrasound data that reports they have a big ribeye or some other merit, and then, when I see the cattle, they don't have tops or rumps, and it goes against everything I was ever taught as a cattleman."

Although Bartenslager views EPDs as a good tool, he says a breeder can get to the point of data overload. "When choosing a bull, I don't base my decision on a single

EPD value," he explains. "I look for birth weight under 3 pounds, moderate on milk — above 10 but below the 20 range." Higher-milking cows have no place in his operation, he adds, because he can't get them bred back.

He prefers an average weaning weight, and he avoids chasing extremes with yearling weight (YW) EPDs. He prefers bulls with 90- to 100-pound (lb.) YW EPDs, but will use a bull in the 70s if it's one he likes for other reasons.

"On carcass, I want a decent ribeye and marbling, but I also want to see some back fat, and a lot of people don't like to see that," Bartenslager notes. "Back fat means the cow will flesh on grass, and our cattle have to do it on grass." Cows that don't have fleshing ability don't stay.

"My granddad always told me not to disregard carcass, and he also taught me not to chase extremes — just stay in the middle of the road," Bartenslager says, adding that the breed needs to be careful not to chase extremes in calving ease and carcass EPDs. "I believe, as my granddad did, when you chase extremes you always end up giving up something else in the breed. As an Angus breeder, I don't want to lose the heartiness, thriftiness, fertility and longevity of Angus cattle."

