

# Find Out, Fix It and Find



## Southern couple takes up full-time ranching with quality focus.

Story by **Jen Gillespie**; photos by **Angelle Klar**

**S**ome say ignorance is bliss, but not Cooper and Katie Hurst, Woodville, Miss. These city-folk-turned-cattlemen learned the hard way that ignorance is frustration, missed opportunities and lost profit.

Their story could begin a few years after buying land in 1990 that was once owned by two Mississippi cotton plantations, Hunt and Hill. Since they lived about an hour away in Baton Rouge, La., the Hursts hired a local

stockman to help during the week. Richard Hollins, who Cooper says “used low-stress animal handling before it was cool,” is still an integral part of the operation.

When “the market was right” in 1995, they bought a load of F<sub>1</sub> Braford cattle. In 2003, they finally moved to the place they named Hunt Hill Cattle Co.

They knew they had a lot to learn, but not how much. Like many of their neighbors running a typical Southern-cross herd, the

Hursts sold load lots to order buyers. When the same buyer kept coming back for more, they assumed what most others would: Their cattle were pretty darn good.

“Or so we thought,” says Cooper. “At that time, all we really knew was weaning weight.”

After a few years of being promised data with no delivery, the Hursts made up their minds in 2002. They would retain ownership and feed out their own cattle. That was a surefire way to, in 2003, get the data they were looking for — data that Cooper later described as “a rude awakening.”

“The cattle gained and converted, but the quality grade just wasn’t there. We were bouncing around in the 35% Choice or above and knew we had to make a change.”

### Making strides

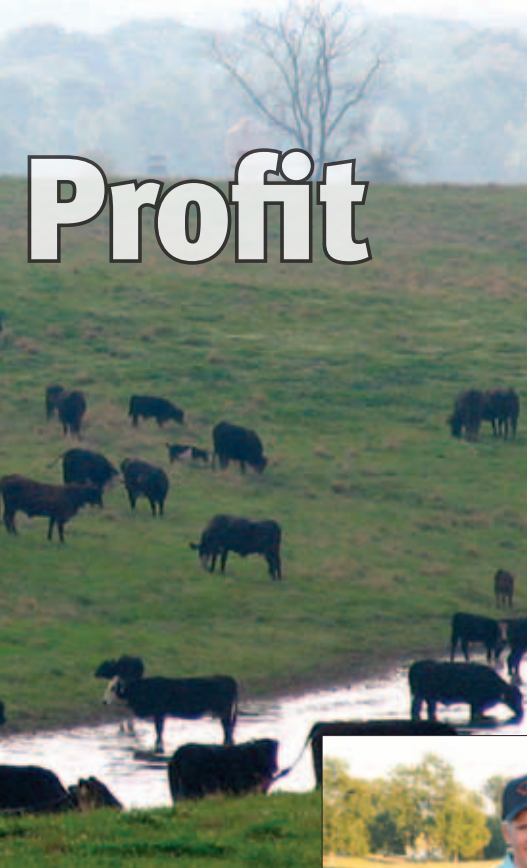
That’s when Gardiner Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan., began to play a larger role in the picture. “We first came up in 1999 with a friend that had known Henry and Nan a long time,” says Katie. “We visited with them, looked at the animals, and that kind of started the ball rolling.”

Slowly, at first. The commercial producers wanted to improve their carcass characteristics without giving up maternal or growth traits. At first, they only used those Angus bulls in a terminal program, not retaining heifers. The 2003 data demonstrated the limits of that strategy.



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# Profit



With advice from the Gardiners, they began keeping replacement heifers until the *Bos indicus* influence faded to  $\frac{1}{4}$  and  $\frac{1}{16}$ .

“In a nut shell, we’ve gone from 35% Choice and below plant average for dressing percentage to, in 2010, our Angus-sired calves were 95% Choice and 50% CAB® (Certified Angus Beef® brand),” says Cooper. They are now beginning to stack those high-

percentage Angus female genetics, which should push the quality numbers even higher.

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He adds, “The exciting thing is, with EPDs being enhanced by DNA testing now,

there’s going to be just that much more opportunity.”

One of the hardest parts for Cooper, who admits to some impatience, is waiting two years to see results. “If you make the wrong AI [artificial insemination] selection, you’ve really got yourself in a bind,” he says. But working with the Gardiners, the Hursts have implemented a synchronized AI program with balanced bulls that fit the goals of their commercial operation.

## Finding a feedyard

The “hardest thing in the world” was finding the right feedyard, says Cooper.

“You’re shipping all of your calves and your work to somebody, and for us that’s a long distance away, so we can’t just swing by and check on things every now and then,” says Katie. “You have to put a lot of trust and a lot of faith in your feedyard.”

And there are countless variables to consider. Where is the feedyard geographically, not only from the ranch but from the packing plant? How close is it to corn and ethanol byproducts? Do they offer help with risk management? And what do they share as far as carcass data?

“What’s important is different for different people,” says Katie, “so you just have to find what works for you.”

Sometimes, that takes a little trial and error.

“It’s hard, because there are

a thousand feedlots out there,” says Cooper. “Every time we have left a yard it has killed me because they were good people. But there was a valid reason every time.”

The Hursts finally found their home at Irsik & Doll near Garden City, Kan., where they’ve been working with Mark Sebranek and Jerry Jackson since 2008. “We’ve really enjoyed the partnership. They’re great with communication, which is important to us.”

In the end, it’s about loyalty and trust.

“When you establish relationships with people, through the good times and bad times, then they’ll work hard for you and know you’re there for the long haul. That’s

how we try to do business,” says Cooper. “Loyalty goes both ways. Nothing in business is a one-way street.”

## Looking back

The transition to retained ownership and data discovery hasn’t always been easy.

“Once you start feeding, you better be ready to accept what you get back, because it may not be what you want,” Cooper warns. “The bottom line is, you’ve got to be willing to accept — hey, if I’ve got flaws, I better be willing to change. And if you don’t, you’re kidding yourself.”

Katie remembers the nerves during that first year, sending cattle to a feedyard.

“It was scary,” she says, “a ‘what have we done’ kind of thing.”

That may be why some producers drag their feet when it comes to feeding. But to those who still insist on selling at weaning, Cooper offers a challenge: How are you going to negotiate with a buyer when he knows more about your calves than you do? In this day of information, he’s got all of the bargaining power.

Even with their progress, the Hursts aren’t done.

“We have a long way to go,” says Cooper, “and sometimes you just get disappointed with various aspects to the core. But failure isn’t an option, and quitting isn’t an option.”

“I remember back in the earlier days, I would get that closeout, and I’d almost be scared to open it,” he recalls.

Laughing, Katie adds, “Now it’s the complete opposite. We can’t wait to get to the mailbox when we think we’re getting information back. The first thing I do is make a copy so we both have one and we don’t have to share it!”

This Southern couple has come a long way since going for the ranching life in 1995 with no preconceived idea of how to run a cow herd. Now the business partners and U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) shareholders are entering a phase of herd expansion, drought permitting. Through the process, they’ve each found their niche in the business.

“She doesn’t let me near the computer,” Cooper says, glancing at his wife.

Katie smiles back, “And I’ll do anything just as long as he won’t make me learn about forage. I know it’s important, but I’m just not interested in forage.”

When Katie’s mom asks if 20 years ago she could imagine she’d be doing this, the answer is simple: Never.

“But it’s so fulfilling, and we enjoy it so much,” says Katie. “We kind of laugh because in our retirement we’re not playing golf or bridge; we’d much rather be doing this.”

And so they are.



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