

# 'Hobby Herd' Excels

Aiming to do his best, Missourian hits CAB target.

Story by Lyndee Patterson; photos by Steve Suther



As many people reach middle age, they dream of retirement. They wait in anticipation until their days are no longer measured by hours on the clock, but instead are filled with activities of their choice. The possibilities are endless — from traveling the world to relaxing at home, whatever brings enjoyment and happiness.

For veterinarian Wayne Miller, Savannah, Mo., traveling the world definitely has not been a priority. His relaxation maintains

a certain focus. He may have stopped practicing medicine in 2001, but animals remain a big part of his life.

Twenty years ago he joined his brother Leon in the cattle industry, pooling cattle then and increasing over time. Miller now manages more than 225 commercial and registered Angus cows. His nephew Derek Holt also joined the operation a few years ago after graduating from college.

In 2003, Miller entered into a couple of

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new ventures: seedstock production and management-intensive grazing (MiG). Setting up a rotational grazing system required a large amount of time and financing. To obtain funding through the USDA Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), he had to attend a three-day seminar offered by the University of Missouri.

## Grazing grids

"At first I had my doubts about the rotational grazing school, but it sure is good that I went," Miller says. He and Holt started with about 15 paddocks and gradually progressed to using quick, portable fencing to incorporate strip-grazing as well.

"Our system isn't as intense as some because we don't have the manpower to move every day," he says. "But we try to do things well by making modifications and adjusting from year to year."

Besides more efficient use of pasture, rotational grazing has another benefit.

"The cattle associate being handled and moved with good things," Miller says. It literally makes them more docile. . . . They'll follow you through 8-inch-tall new grass because they think you're taking them someplace even better."

To maintain pasture quality and minimize the amount he is spending on nitrogen fertilizer, Miller interseeds legumes and uses "grid" soil sampling.

"This was my first year not putting any nitrogen on in the spring," he says. "Of course we've had a lot of rain, but my grasses have held up quite well." Even without the added fertilizer, a cow-calf pair needs less than two acres.

## AI fine-tuning

The Angus herd now includes 60 registered Angus cows and 80 commercial cows, plus his brother's cows. All of the registered cattle and commercial heifers are bred using artificial insemination (AI).

Cattle production presents an enjoyable challenge for Miller.

"My goal for the registered herd is to see how good of a calf I can make by finding the weaknesses on the female side and then using AI sires to cover those," he says.

Since he retains ownership of progeny from the commercial herd, the challenge is to create cattle with high carcass merit, measurable using the American Angus Association's beef dollar value index (\$B).

“It’s a slow process, but we weed out the cows that are bottom producers,” Miller says. “Then we try to advance our carcass genetics by continually using better bulls.”

Quick genetic turnover is a key part of herd improvement. He keeps all registered heifers and any AI-sired from the commercial herd.

Lacking unlimited access to land, this infusion of so many replacements means selling younger cows. “Eventually we’ll be selling 5- and 6-year-old cows, but if I keep them much longer, they’ll be worth more to me than what I can sell them for,” he says.

Jim Humphrey, area Extension agent through the University of Missouri, has worked with Miller for several years. Together they’ve experimented with adapting new breeding, grazing and management techniques to improve genetics and efficiency.

“Wayne is great to bounce ideas off of,” Humphrey says. “He’s not satisfied with the status quo, always wanting to make things better.”

Two years ago Humphrey worked with Miller to be a part of the university’s timed-breeding program, using 150 of the commercial cows.

Now he uses an adapted system as a regular part of his breeding program for the registered cows. They are AI-bred twice: the first by synchronization and observed heat, and then using strictly timed breeding.

“It’s a labor-saving situation,” Miller says. “You don’t have to spend so much time looking for visual heat, and the conception rate is basically identical to the rates of any other method.”

### Proactive calving, weaning

Getting cows bred is only half the battle, of course. Calves must be born healthy with the ability to grow and reach a high-quality end product.



► “[Miller] invests a lot of time and effort to have good genetics, so he does everything he can to keep those animals alive with a good chance of being successful,” Jim Humphrey observes.

“We try to be very conscious about having appropriate shelter so we can minimize losses from exposure or inclement weather,” Miller says.

Three old buildings, including a hay barn and a former granary, have been converted into calving facilities. A series of gates and pens allows for a flow-through system so cows can easily come in out of the weather to calve on dry bedding. Once their calf is up and going, they can be moved to a different area to allow room for another cow.

To make the best use of the facilities, all the cows that are calving need to be near the barns. “Unfortunately, you can’t always pick all of the right ones,” Miller says. The land offers some natural protection for cows calving in the pasture, but he has built windbreaks and calf shelters as well.

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good chance of being successful,” Humphrey observes.

Even though these facilities work fairly well for the system Miller has now, he has goals of expanding and improving. “I’m gradually getting better equipped so I can do more artificial breeding in the commercial herd.”

Since their planting time and breeding seasons coincide, Miller says he needs facilities that are still more efficient and allow for quicker, easier movement of cattle. Likewise, the weaning at about 500 pounds (lb.) needs to work well and avoid conflicts with fall harvest.

Calves get the best hay and a custom blend of feed Miller has developed that calves like but saves money over commercial alternatives.

“It’s important to give the calves something they will eat,” Miller says. “The amount of energy they are consuming is a determinant of how well they will handle the stress of weaning.”

After the calves are weaned, Miller has a couple of options.

They have the facilities to start feeding the cattle or even finish them, but for the past five years Miller has sent them to David Trowbridge, manager of Gregory Feedlots, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) partner lot near Tabor, Iowa.

### Followup on feed

Two aspects of the feeding relationship stand out for Trowbridge.

“Of the customers we feed for, the health and vaccination program Wayne follows is probably one of the best,” he says. “It’s impossible to prevent all diseases, but he runs a program that focuses on prevention.”

Another trait is involvement.

“Some customers will put cattle in the

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► Wayne Miller’s nephew Derek Holt (right) joined the operation after graduating from college.

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feedlot and forget them, but Wayne stays involved so he can see what's happening with his cattle," Trowbridge says.

In the mutually valued relationship, the feeder goes beyond maximizing performance at the yard by giving Miller the feeding and carcass information to improve his herd.

"It gets to be a matter of trust and who you are comfortable with," Miller says. Clearly, that goes two ways, as well, and the feedlot sees standout cattle getting better.

"He's doing a bang-up job on genetics," Trowbridge says.

Those cattle typically grade at least 90% Choice with 30% accepted for the *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) brand, but Miller's not satisfied to maintain those numbers. "We need to get a lot more CAB and Primes," he says. The intensified AI program should ramp those up a few notches this year, he adds.

Trowbridge says the Miller cattle have been

in the top 10% for grade and performance, but he looks forward to the prospect of grades in the top 5%.

"We're proud of the progress we've made," Miller says. "My philosophy for anything I do is to do the best I can."

For Miller, the cattle business is really "a fun hobby," but if the success of retirement is measured by enjoyment and happiness, he's there.

