



# The Angus Route

Arkansas mailman delivers better Angus cattle each year.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

**R**ick Gurley knows about delivering the goods.

Up at 5 a.m. and off at 4 p.m., the now-retired Arkansas mailman is accustomed to delivering a consistent product along his 112-mile trek of Rural Route Two Huntsville. For 33 years the 6-foot-4 gentle giant saw to it that every package arrived safely to its rightful owner.

Six days a week, and with few notable exceptions, it was even on time.

"It's immaterial, but I pulled a lot of calves," Gurley says of the gig that included 80 miles of dirt road and knowing people by their first names. Per U.S. Postal Service rules, one is never supposed to get out of his or her mail truck for any reason, but hiring Gurley meant they had gained a cowman to boot.



There was one morning he spotted a heifer upside down in a feed trough, and then the afternoon when Mrs. Israel "bush-hogged" over the fire hydrant. Each story legitimizes Gurley's modesty, and validates his neighbors' affections.

"We would have a competition at Christmas to see who got the most stuff," he says when probed. "I wiped them out."

Two years out of the game, the mementos keep coming.

In fact, it was care for the country courier that started him

down the Angus route. Now it's the only one he'll take.

At 19, a severe neck and back injury left the high school athlete in constant pain. Decades and a couple of back surgeries later saw him confined to the couch to heal. Originally sentenced to six weeks rest, he determinedly broke out to work cows after only two and

wound up back in the hospital. The next time his bride wasn't so lenient.

"Suze (Susan), she's little but she's mighty," Gurley says of his wife of 30 years. Together they raised a daughter, Nicole, and son, Heath, both having an interest in the cattle today.

"It's just one of those storybook deals," he says of their love story. His proud grin shows off what he states as fact. "I married way up. My mother just out-prayed hers."

Back on the couch, with an abundance of well wishes and a set of 30 heifers in the pasture, Gurley's mind raced.

"I watched TV for about 15 minutes and then I was done. I was climbing the wall," he says.

## An unexpected start

That's when lifetime friend Jeff Williams dropped off a stack of magazines.

"He was an Angus guy, and he brings these *Angus Journals* over and says, 'Look at them and stay in this house.'"

► **Above:** The Gurley family, Nicole (left), Susan and Rick, aims to improve their Angus herd each year. In 2017 they plan to feed a set of calves and learn from that data.

I'm looking at the pictures, going through all of them, and they all seem to go back to Gardiner [Angus Ranch, Ashland, Kan.]."

At the same time, thinking he'd avoid pulling calves, he'd been hunting a Longhorn bull to no avail when another neighbor offered to sell him an Angus.

"He said, 'Rick, I've got a black bull that you'll love and guarantee you won't have to pull any calves.' He delivers that bull and I'm in the house looking out the window, going, 'He just hooked me.'"

Looks aren't everything, though.

"Lo and behold, that fall I sold those calves, and man did they grow. That's what truly convinced me that genetics matter," he says.

Before that, he'd had a hunch and called Mark Gardiner when he and Susan made their way to Kansas for their first bull sale.

"I've got my cowboy hat on and they run Grid Maker in there at half interest, no possession. We looked so out of place," Gurley recalls. "I said to Suze, don't make eye contact with anybody. Don't sneeze. Just look at the floor, and we'll soon be outta here."

A few bulls into the sale, Mark grabbed Rick's attention to look at one they had discussed on the phone.

"He comes in the ring — his ears are frozen off — and I buy him. Next is one with no tail and I buy him, too. I've already got the ugliest bull back home, and now I've

added some serious cosmetic flaws to my bull battery, but I've done bought me a Gardiner bull, and I'm proud."

The road was paved. With assistance from the Kansas breeder and hours spent reading those Angus magazines, "we just continued to go back year after year."

That was 2001, and things have changed a lot since then. The herd grew to 250, and the calf crop went from commodity to premium.

Today, the Gurleys artificially inseminate (AI) everything to one bull each year.

"At the time, I couldn't afford to go buy a new set of cows," he says, "but through bull selection, you can do an awful lot. We want to be able to guarantee what we're putting out there."

Genetic selection allows for just that.

A family affair, they'll put CIDR®s in late April to AI the first of May. Calving begins Feb. 10, and come November there will be the annual "Thanksgiving weaning."

A lot of that timeline is based on research, studying the top market trends.

### Don't be afraid to learn

"Don't let him fool you," Susan says of her husband's refusal to brag. He's more likely to point out where he's gone wrong in hopes that someone else can avoid the same mistake — like the first time he did little prep prior to AI.

"If you could have done it wrong, I did it," he says of moving cattle soon after breeding

and working them just before, "but I didn't know."

"I was 50, and everybody just assumes you know," he recalls. "You've got to ask questions and not give up on the calves, because it may not be their fault."

Now that Angus route looks far less bumpy, perhaps still a little daunting, but nothing Gurley won't face head on.

"Where I'm headed is, I want to own them from the time they're in the straw to the time they're hanging on the rail," he says. He knows of the carcass premiums available for hitting the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand target and keeping the consumer in mind. "I want paid for all of it; you're leaving money on the table if you don't do that."

That's the goal, and one Gurley plans to hit next year by sending cattle to a feedyard, retaining ownership the whole way.

"Right now we don't have a clue what our cattle grade. We know what they look like when they leave, but we want more."

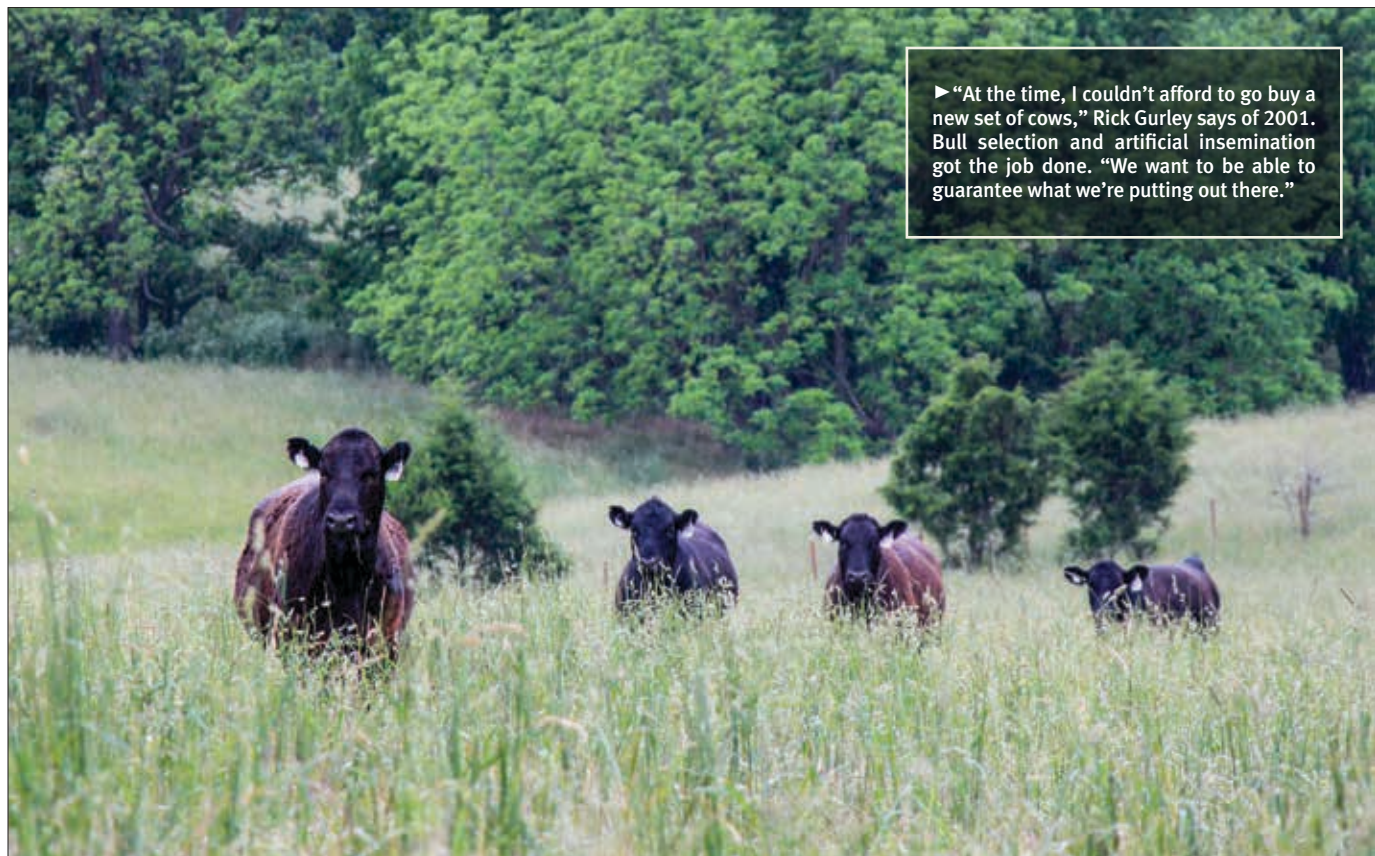
That "more" refers to quality. "I'd like to aim for 70% CAB," Gurley says.

"It's been a learning experience," he says. Susan and Nicole nod their heads to agree. All three smile with anticipation.

It's amazing what a little reading and a little help from your friends can do.



**Editor's Note:** Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist with *Certified Angus Beef* LLC.



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