



# The Road Less Traveled

Ed Oliver preserves a hidden treasure of historic Angus genetics near West Point, Ga.

*Story & photos by Jena McReil, digital editor*

**R**agged and torn, a dusty cowboy hat sits on the floor beside Ed Oliver's chair.

In a seemingly rhythmic routine, he reaches for the hat and places it carefully on his head. He presses the top of it gently for good measure, and then it's out the door to check cows. The hat has been Ed's faithful companion for nearly 50 years, and he wouldn't dare make a trip out to pasture without it.

Many cattlemen would have replaced it by now, but not Ed. The hat could tell tales of day-to-day life on the farm, fixing fence or baling hay, and the most memorable moments in Ed's life. It's been there through them all.

"This old Stetson is about worn out, but it says a lot about me," he says with a grin. "This hat has been a logo or a trademark for me wherever I've been, and I wouldn't swap it for the finest Stetson in Texas."

Ed's appreciation for tradition goes well beyond his cowboy hat. Since the late 1980s,

CONTINUED ON PAGE 338



► Ed and his wife, Martha Jo, raised four children on Cripple Pines Farm, just miles east into Georgia from the Alabama state line.



## The Road Less Traveled

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 337

he has operated a closed herd of registered-Angus cattle on Cripple Pines Farm near West Point, Ga. Using strict Wye Angus genetics as a base, Ed has established what is arguably one of the truest lines of pure Angus cattle in the country.

Walking among the herd, it's as if you have traveled to another place and time. It has a feeling that's almost nostalgic, considering the history behind each animal that stands silently grazing before a setting-sun backdrop.

Like Ed himself, the cattle are steady.

With unwavering discipline, he matches the herd's existing genetics to bring out the best in the entire population. Consistency is always top of mind, as he focuses not on one individual, but the collective group.

Where others seek change, Ed relishes in the predictable. He finds joy in the expected.

It's not a breeding strategy for everyone, he admits, but it has been a passion for him when developing his Angus herd, and given the cattle a unique connection to the breed's truest form.

### History in the making

Like many in agriculture, the 1980s were a decade Ed recalls with a heavy heart.

The young family was settled in the Jones Crossroads community, where his wife, Martha Jo, was a teacher in a nearby county school and Ed worked full-time on the farm. Times were good and the memories sweet as they enjoyed the daily rituals at Cripple Pines Farm.



► Ed Oliver's son Spencer and grandson Spen represent the second and third generations on the farm, and will continue to preserve the herd's genetics moving forward.

Then, all at once, swift market swings changed everything.

Interest rates soared to more than 20%, fuel costs increased and farmland values dropped. Many farmers, Ed included, were forced to sell everything they'd worked to establish. It was a heart-wrenching day when he loaded his herd and watched them drive away down the dirt road. More than a decade's worth of cattle selection and management — gone, almost in an instant.

"When those cattle left, it was one of the saddest days of my life," he says. "We worked

as hard as anyone possibly could work, but we couldn't make it. But as I was forced through those hard times, I had to take what I had and make the best use of it. That says more about me than anything I can ever tell you."

When the trailers left his farm, they included the entire herd, except for two.

A Wye-line Angus cow, fondly known as the "1900 cow," and her heifer calf were two with whom Ed could not stand to part. They stayed behind and became the foundation for his precisely linebred Angus genetics.

When he talks about the 1900 cow, it's almost as if she is family, and nearly every animal on the farm traces its roots back to her — Leonie of Wye, registration number 7903200. Her 1900 chain tag, rusty and aged over the years, still hangs in the living room within reach of Ed's favorite chair.

"If you can't put your head on your pillow at night and visualize your ideal cow, the odds of you making one are very slim," Ed says. "That vision has got to be in your mind. For me, she was the 1900 cow."

The Wye Angus story is one that goes back to the 1600s, when the plantation was established by the family of William Paca, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Angus cattle have been part of that history for nearly 80 years. In the late 1940s, farm manager Jim Lingle imported 19 Angus bulls directly from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales to refine the herd's genetics.

The Scotch Angus lines were bred for feed efficiency and gain, and helped make a name for Wye Angus, which is known today as one of the most historic Angus operations in the country. They closed the herd in 1959 and have been producing cattle from that lineage ever since.

Add on Ed's years to that equation, and

### Competition is fierce

While an unassuming and gracious man, Ed Oliver loves to win. He was a fierce competitor growing up and played college baseball at Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Ala. A pitcher, he learned how to face adversity and use it to his advantage.

After selling the cattle in the 1980s, Ed returned to his college training as a coach and educator. He says he was forced back into coaching, since he could not make a living raising cattle and farming.

Sometimes things have a way of working out for the best.

"After 30 years of coaching, I was part of six state championships, and we won the first state championship title Harris County ever held," Ed says. "The county went absolutely berserk. They didn't realize you could win because you're in Harris County, and we proved that we could do it."

He coached several championship high school baseball and softball teams, and his former athletes stop by the farm on occasion to visit and catch up with Coach Oliver.

"Everything that I've learned over the years, I've learned from someone else," Ed says. "Everything that we've accomplished is because of the support of the people who I trust and who believe in me. What I learned in coaching reflects back to the farm — heart precedes ability. And that's true for both athletes and cows."

In the fall of 2014, Ed Oliver was inducted into his college's hall of fame for his accomplishments as a high school coach.



► Ed Oliver wears his state championship ring proudly, a reminder of the talented athletes he has coached over the years.

you have more than a half-century of purebred Angus genetics.

Ed's cow herd is based on the principle that simple is best, even though those decisions can be the more difficult ones to make. He chose linebreeding as a way to ensure purity in the herd and build upon the strengths of the current population. Because of this system, Ed says he knows every detail and potential problem associated with each member of the herd.

Rather than bringing in new genetics to cover up these troublesome traits, Ed believes it is important to address them early on and move forward with genetic progress.

A cattle breeder in the truest sense, Ed is fascinated by genetics. He keeps meticulous notes on which matings work, and which ones need improvement. Although he has no formal education in the science, his eyes begin to sparkle when describing how genetics work within his herd.

"We are looking for a herd of cows that look alike, phenotypically and genotypically," Ed says. "Change is the easiest thing to do. Establishing consistency and predictability is the hard part. Only time, endurance, patience and hard work can establish that."

Ed has operated a closed herd for 30 years, using only Angus bulls raised within their own genetic lines. He relies on the natural strengths of the Angus breed, such as maternal and carcass traits, and remains focused on the fundamentals: fertility, reproduction and structural soundness.

This year, they calved 65 cows and ended the season with 66 calves, thanks to a set of twins.

"We absolutely did not assist a single cow in calving," Ed says. "The reason for that is for all these years, our direction and our selection has been toward those traits."

"If this were a commercial herd, I'd run it exactly like we run it today," he continues. "I think the pressure should be put on the genetics by seedstock producers and the commercial breeder should reap the benefits."

### Simple, not simplistic

Ed says the difference between his herd today and Wye Angus cattle is that they've taken the genetics and, through selection and direction, adapted them to the southern environment.

"We insist on those genes, straight Wye from imported cattle in the 1940s and 1950s, and we've kept them that way, but forced them to meet our criteria," Ed explains. "The



cows are going to have to adjust to what I can afford to feed them, and that's grass, and they've done it."

The climate in west-central Georgia provides ample opportunity for growing quality forages year-round. Ed's oldest son, Spencer, shares his dad's love for the cattle and making use of the land. By trade, Spencer Oliver is a golf course superintendent and has more than 20 years experience in turf management.

"At 22 years old, my dad sent me off to college to get a turf grass degree. At the time, I thought it was to find a good job in the golf course business, but in reality I think he just wanted me to learn how to grow better pastures around here," Spencer says with a laugh.

At the heart of every cattle breeder is actually a grass farmer, Ed agrees. You won't find a feed sack on his farm. The bulls and heifers are given a supplement when they are weaned, but once the breeding season is over, it's grass from then on out.

Common Bermuda covers most of the region, and the Olivers have brought fescue into their pastures to complement rotational grazing throughout the year. They rely on soil sampling to optimize the forages and will drill-in cool-season grasses, such as wheat, oats and rye grass, to carry cows through the winter.

It's a precise balance between what the herd needs to stay in top shape, and what's most affordable for the operation.

With Spencer's experience in improving forage quality and Ed's passion for beef cattle genetics, they are an ideal pair. Spencer and his family recently moved back to Jones Crossroads, where he can be closer to the farm while still working at the golf course.

"The dinner bell still rings here quite often," Spencer says. "This community means a lot to me; this has always been home. I want to raise my children in this same environment — being around the cattle and being part of something our family has created, and is blessed with the opportunity to care for."

► **Left:** Always one for a laugh, Ed entertains daughter Bess and son Sim during the *Angus Journal* photoshoot.

► Ed Oliver's hat was even featured on the May 1986 cover of the *Angus Journal*, in which he was pictured with his youngest son, Sim.



### Steady and sure

Ed doesn't believe in shortcuts. He believes in staying true to the course and fixed on the ultimate goal. While he treasures his friendships made throughout the Angus community, that doesn't mean they have to approach their breeding programs in the same way, Ed says with deep conviction.

"From coaching to the cattle business, everything he has done, he has attacked it," Spencer says. "I'd describe him as a rural Renaissance man. He is a philosopher, and an intense, intense guy at everything he does."

As Spencer becomes more involved with breeding decisions on the farm, Ed trusts that the quality of their genetics and forage program will continue to increase into the future. The second generation at Cripple Pines Farm is in good hands, and the third generation — Ed's grandchildren — are not far away.

"I tell Spencer all the time when we go to the pasture to look at cows, it's like school. Son, be taking notes, listen to what I'm telling you," Ed says. "Nothing will change here. Spencer understands our linebreeding program, and I have no doubt that he'll carry it forward."

Forward by continuing to fine-tune their genetics. Forward in their mission to multiply desired traits. Forward by preserving the nation's most historic bloodlines.

Forward, because Ed is a man who does not mind taking the road less traveled — he seeks it outright.

