

# Get a Lot with a Little

## Alabama cattleman does a budget-friendly makeover on his working facility.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**, field editor

In 2003, Regional Extension Agent Jonathan Gladney looked at Michael Anderson's cattle working facility and knew something had to change.

"It wasn't working for the animals or the animal handler," he recalls. "It wasn't safe."

Plus, as even more of an incentive, Anderson was gearing up to market his calves through the Alabama Feeder Cattle Marketing Association board sale. The requirements included a complete vaccination and deworming program, which resulted in more trips through the chute.

As a result, Gladney made a to-do list for changes. First was the ancient headcatch.

"It had design flaws," says the Tuscaloosa-based agent.

Then, there was the straight alleyway to the headcatch. "We now know that cows don't like to walk in a straight line," says Gladney. "They like to walk in a curved direction."

"When the cows got in the chute, they could see the headcatch at the end and knew what it was," says Anderson. "Then the calves learned. They would all balk."

"Michael was frustrated and so were the cows," says Gladney.

There was no palpation cage, either, or a safe way to approach the cattle from the rear.

Anderson added to the list. When he came to the Northport farm in 1998, he built the 72-foot (ft.) $\times$ 72-ft. facility with only one divider. Once an animal went through the chute, he had no way to cut an animal back if it needed more treatment or if he wanted to sort it off to sell it.

Last, the improvements had to be cost-effective. Anderson's Angus-based herd



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► **Above:** When Michael Anderson redid his working facilities, he angled the alley to his headgate in 45° and used 12-ft. panels to serve as dividers in the pen.



► **Left:** A newer and safer headgate is now in Michael Anderson's cattle working facilities.

► **Below:** The headgate is reinforced with extra cross ties and strips of metal.



### For more information on working facilities see:

- Temple Grandin — [www.grandin.com](http://www.grandin.com)
- University of Wisconsin Extension Service — [www.uwex.edu/ces/animalscience/facilities/cattle/](http://www.uwex.edu/ces/animalscience/facilities/cattle/)

averages 20 to 25 cows. “We had to try to make it fit for the size of the herd and the budget,” Gladney explains.

The duo, along with one of Anderson’s brothers, tackled the alleyway first. Rather than trying to build a curve, they simply created a new 20-ft. length of alleyway at a 45° angle back into the pen.

They cut out a section where the angle started and installed a 36-inch (in.) metal gate. That gave Anderson’s vet a way to get in behind a cow to pregnancy-check her or to castrate a calf.

Anderson also ditched the old headcatch and installed a new one. He attached it to two railroad cross ties, then reinforced it by nailing metal bands to another set of cross ties set 30 in. back. “I didn’t want a cow taking the headgate with her down the hill,” Anderson jokes.

To create another division in the pen, he purchased 12-ft. metal panels and chained

them to cross ties that are set in concrete. “The panels are cheaper and easier to put on than boards,” he says.

Anderson stayed with sturdy 2-in. × 6-in. white oak boards for his perimeter fence and alleyway. “White oak hardens up with time,” he notes. “As soon as you cut it, you better stick a nail in it or you’ll have to drill a hole to put a nail in.”

Ten years later the facilities are still working. Anderson says, “It has made it so much easier to work cows. If I had any idea how much easier it would be I would have done it sooner. Now the cows don’t balk, and we have a lot better headcatch.”

“We felt really good about it,” says Gladney.

Plus, they did it within their budget. The total for the materials used in the renovation was \$1,500. “The best part is, since he didn’t spend all his money redoing his working facility, he was able to buy the high-selling Angus bull at a seedstock sale that winter,” says Gladney.

As for the old headcatch? Anderson gave it to Gladney, who intends to hang it on his office wall. “It will be a conversation starter,” says the extension agent. “I can tell people it is what not to do.”



**Editor’s Note:** *Becky Mills is a freelancer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.*



► Alabama cattleman Michael Anderson revamped his working facilities 10 years ago.



► Michael Anderson’s old headgate is now retired.