

Strength in Numbers

At ErReR Hill Farms, producing Angus cattle means putting your best foot forward.

Story & photos by Jen Biser



► Sidney Riggs has been in the cattle business for 48 years and says he's just too bull-headed to quit.

It has been said of Sydney Riggs, owner of ErReR Hill Farms, Friedens, Pa., that if there was a good bull in the Angus industry, he would own at least a piece of him. Riggs' track record doesn't fall short of that belief. He owns at least a share of more than 20 leading sires in the Angus gene pool, plus an additional 250 brood cows producing 300-350 natural and embryo transfer (ET) calves per year.

"He's the kind of guy who sinks his teeth into something and doesn't give up," says Dick Beck, manager of Three Trees Ranch Inc. of Sharpsburg, Ga., and marketing advisor and sale manager to Riggs. Beck adds that Riggs has been intensively marketing his cattle for only about five years, but he has been raising Angus cattle for the last 48 years, and Riggs' investments have earned great success.

A plan in mind

ErReR Hill manager and Riggs' nephew, Bob Hay, attributes the purchase of Minert's Fortune 2000 in the early 1990s as the defining point, turning the hobby of raising cattle into a business. ErReR Hill bought the bull in partnership with Don Peterson of Rocking P Farm, Horner, W.Va., and what was then Mill Trail Farm, Jane Lew, W.Va.

"We normally buy bulls in partnership with somebody to spread costs and the risk," Hay says, adding with a laugh, "[but] that means we also share the profit."

The partnership purchased an interest in BCC Bushwacker 41-93 at the 1995 National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo. The plan was to use him to breed Fortune 2000 daughters, Hay explains.

What looked like a sound investment took a challenging turn when Bushwacker injured himself breeding cows. When the partners wanted to sell, Beck says, Riggs bought out some of the partners' shares and took the bull home to ErReR Hill. Steve Schmuck, herd

manager, rehabilitated him to the point of being able to service again and collect semen.

"That turned out to be a bonanza for him financially," Beck says. "They have taken what Bushwacker has made for them and upgraded the cattle they own and upgraded the way they care for the cattle; it's becoming a classic Riggs enterprise."

Since then, Riggs has purchased interests in at least 20 other sires and a minimum of 15 donor females, including RC Anita T Bando 918903 and Minert's Edella 951, the dams of Bushwacker and Fortune 2000, respectively.

A growing market

With the help of his partners, Riggs has put on seven April bull sales. In November he will hold his sixth production sale.

"We've sold females from Florida to Maine to California," Hay says. "There aren't a whole lot of states we haven't sold to."

Galen Fink of Fink Beef Genetics, Manhattan, Kan., says he approached Riggs four or five years ago with an avenue for marketing ErReR Hill bulls out West. "We had access to a large number of recipients," Fink says, noting that finding recipients had been a problem for ErReR Hill. "We provide a place for the embryos, plus a bull-merchandising avenue."

Fink transfers almost 1,200 embryos per year, with 100 of them coming from Riggs. Fink says the bulls that sire the embryos he selects have to be older, proven bulls with high accuracies. "We like to see at least 80 to 100 daughters on AHIRSM (Angus Herd Improvement Records)," he says. "We look for the best balanced bulls. Usually by the time you get that many daughters, all the other traits are up in the 90s."

Fink is a purebred cattleman who markets herd sires nationwide to the commercial breeder. Selling close to 600 bulls per year by private treaty and through an annual bull sale, Fink says the venture with Riggs is split. "When the calves are weaned, they take the heifer calves and we keep the bulls out here and jointly merchandise."

It's in the meat

"Our main focus is the carcass," Hay says. "Some people show cattle, but that is not our priority." Riggs has made an aggressive decision to produce quality cattle that will provide better beef for the consumer's table.



“One of the hardest things to get a focus on [was] trying to produce things that people want, instead of producing things we want,” Hay says, “focusing in on the end user, whether that is someone in a restaurant or at their dinner table, or somebody buying a heifer to take home. Our goal is the carcass side of it, and the driving force is to satisfy the consumer.”

He adds that the majority of the customers who purchase bulls from ErReR Hill are smaller-scale, local farmers with 10-12 cows. ErReR Hill will buy their entire calf crops, giving those small-scale producers a market.

“What we’re doing is buying back calves from people who buy bulls from us,” Hay says. Every year, ErReR Hill feeds out 200 feeder calves. “Nothing is fed out that is not ErReR Hill Farm breeding,” Hay says. What doesn’t make it as a bull or replacement ends up in the feedlot.

“There are quite a few convenience stores and restaurants we supply meat to,” Hay says, explaining the farm sells fresh meat to local restaurants on Thursdays and at a local farmer’s market on Saturdays. Frozen meat is sold locally and shipped to other states.

All of the meat is labeled with the ErReR Hill Farms’ Millennium Meats brand and is guaranteed to be free of added hormones. Aside from salt and mineral, feeder cattle eat only what has been raised on the 12 separate farms that make up the 1,700 acres of ErReR Hill Farms.

Hay’s knowledge of the end product is far-reaching due to his six years of experience on the Cattlemen’s Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB).

“The one thing I am most proud of is [that] I was on the committee that helped look at all of the table-ready [products],” Hay says. “[I helped] get all of that into the works for the new product initiatives.”

In addition to the CBB, Hay is also a past president and current director of the Pennsylvania Cattlemen’s Association and is the vice president of the Pennsylvania Angus Association.

Functional females

Even though ErReR Hill is aiming to produce a desirable retail product, he stresses that their females have to be able to forage and raise a good calf. Says Hay, “In the females, we want to keep improving the feminine qualities, while still having enough muscle to produce good bulls and quality feeders for people to eat.”

Every year, a large number of Angus females and bulls are identified as

Pathfinders. According to American Angus Association rules, a qualifying PathfinderSM female is identified by early puberty, early breeding and early calving, followed by regularity of calving and above-average performance of her offspring. There must be a minimum of three calves to evaluate these maternal traits and her ability to produce superior calves for weaning weight. A Pathfinder bull must have sired at least five qualifying females.

Of the sires in which Riggs has acquired an interest, three are Pathfinder sires and more than half are sired by Pathfinder bulls. Nearly all of Riggs’ sires and donors are directly related to Pathfinder parents, confirming there is strength in ErReR Hill’s numbers.

“Our goal for some of these young bulls is that, hopefully, a couple of them will take off and [become] bulls of the future,” Hay says.

A piece of the whole

Riggs can hardly be identified as an entrepreneur only in the cattle business, as ErReR Hill Farms is only one piece of a six-branched enterprise under the Riggs Industries Inc. umbrella.

“There are 630 workers employed through Riggs Industries,” Riggs says. In addition to the farm, Riggs says he has also established Somerset Steel Erection, Somerset Welding & Steel, J&J Truck Bodies & Trailers, Lincoln Supply & Equipment, and Lincoln Contracting & Equipment.

“Everyone is an employee,” Riggs says, adding he employs two sons and six grandchildren. Every one, including himself, receives a paycheck.

When asked his philosophy for staying in business, he states simply, “I’m too bull-headed to quit; it takes staying power and a good reputation to back it up.”

Beck says, “He’s a very basic, simple man who has been extremely successful as he devotes his life in a very basic, grassroots, business-like manner. Using straight talk and straight dealing, he’s done really, really well.”

“I’m just an ordinary farmer,” Riggs concludes.



► ErReR Hill Farms buys back the calf crop from its bull buyers and raises them as feeders for its own Millennium Meats brand.



► Riggs raises 250 females, which produce 300 to 350 natural and ET calves per year.



► **Right:** ErReR Hill Farms, located near Friedens, Pa., covers 1,700 acres and sits at an elevation of 2,200 feet.