

Hope on the Hoof

Two years after Hurricane Katrina wiped out Gulf Coast cattle operations, Angus breeders around the country help rebuild lost herds.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

Maybe it's because his total loss was so incomprehensible. Maybe that's why it's the death of one cow that still haunts Louis Pomes.

The Saint Bernard, La., cattleman, who lost 290 cows out of his herd of 320, says, "I had a cow walk three quarters of a mile back to find her dead calf. She laid down the next day and died from exhaustion."

Ditto for Earl Armstrong, who lost 1,800 out of 1,900 head. When Katrina hit, the Boothville, La., rancher had seven bulls and a heifer in the pen at his headquarters. The bulls drowned but the heifer swam into the barn hayloft. She died of thirst. "When we came through in the airboat we never thought to look in the hayloft," he says. "If she had just made some noise or jumped in the water we could have saved her."

Maybe, just maybe, because of the value they each put on the animal they couldn't save, it is just as fitting

the cattlemen put so much stock in the donated bull each received this spring.

"The bull donation program is great," Pomes says. "Our bull came in May. He was only 16 months old, but when I turned him loose that little man did his job. That's what I named him — Little Man. He bred some nice cows."

"I was glad to get my bull," Armstrong says. "He came all the way from Kentucky. For somebody to put out that much effort to help somebody else ..."

The bull donation program started with Pleasureville, Ky., Angus breeder David Neville in August

2006, a year after Katrina blasted the producers.

"I was sitting at home reading the *Louisville Courier-Journal*," Neville says. "A friend, Byron Crawford, wrote a column about what the Fellowship of Christian Farmers (FCF) was doing to help the hurricane victims. John Adams, the local contact person for the group, put together donations of feed, hay and fencing supplies.

"I told my wife, 'Susan, this is the type thing we can do.'"

But rather than donating supplies, Neville figured the hurricane victims needed bulls.

Set in motion

Neville started a domino-like chain of

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**"I lost everything
a person can buy."**

—Louis Pomes



events. He called Crawford, Adams, then Dave Maples, executive secretary of the Kentucky Cattlemen's Association (KCA).

"I had three questions. One, do they need bulls? Two, can they take bulls, and three, is it appropriate to donate bulls? Sometimes when people try to help they create more problems than they solve," Maples says.

Maples called his counterpart in Louisiana, Bob Felknor. In minutes Felknor called Neville with an answer to each question, which was absolutely positively yes.

Next Neville called a friend, John Luke, in Ezel, Ky. The cattle hauler agreed to ship the bulls. "I thought he was going to give us a break," Neville says. "But someone donated diesel fuel, and Luke donated his time."

After finding out from Adams that the bull donations could be handled through the FCF, a charitable 501(3)(c) organization, Neville asked for 90 seconds of talk time at the Central Kentucky Angus sale. Angus breeder John Venable jumped on board. At first he volunteered one bull, then two, but by the time the truck left in September 2006, the Winchester, Ky., cattleman and his sister/partner in the operation, Jane Brown, loaded out seven bulls. All told, 17 bulls made the trip south after a local veterinarian donated his time to do the required breeding soundness exams (sometimes called a BSE). Larry Congleton at the Tri-County Livestock Exchange in Smithfield, Ky., offered to house the bulls until they could be shipped.

"Some of my friends thought we couldn't get two bulls together," Neville comments.

He adds, "Just because I was listed as the contact person, people thought I was the one who did this. There were literally a hundred people behind me. If it wasn't for



►Boothville, La., cattleman Earl Armstrong lost 1,800 out of 1,900 head of cattle from the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina.



►Above: This cow walked three-quarters of a mile to get back to her dead calf, then laid down and died from exhaustion.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOUIS POMES



►Left and above: After most of his cattle drowned in the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina, Louis Pomes is working hard to build up his herd again.



► **Above:** Pleasureville, Ky., Angus breeder David Neville says he had 100 people behind him in the bull donation program for Hurricane Katrina victims.

► **Right:** Angus bulls have been used exclusively on John Venable's family farm for the last 102 years.



► **Above:** Neville relied on bull donations from Angus breeders like Venable (right), who donated a total of 16 Angus bulls to the Katrina project started by Neville.



► **Above:** Neville sent 2-year-old Angus bulls to ranchers whose herds were affected by Hurricane Katrina.



► **Above:** An Angus bull donated by Yon Family Farm, Joplin Regional Stockyard and the Louisiana Cattlemen's Association Foundation is helping Pomes build back his herd.

► **Right:** Pomes started his cow herd with two bottle calves when he was 18 years old. Now he's in the process of building the herd again after it was nearly destroyed after Hurricane Katrina.



the FCF and what they were doing, I don't think I would have had the impetus to do it. And if it wasn't for Dave Maples at the KCA and Bob Felknor at the Louisiana Cattlemen's Association (LCA) this would have been a nightmare."

While Neville and company were working on the Kentucky end of the bull donation project, Felknor was hard at it in Louisiana. He arranged for the bulls to be unloaded at McNeese State University in Lake Charles. He had the local cattlemen's associations in the affected areas gather names of the producers who needed bulls. Then he arranged for drawings in the parishes.

The good deeds and bulls kept coming. A producer in Texas sent bulls straight to Louisiana. Glen Williams in Louisiana delivered six bulls. A breeder in Idaho sent bulls south. At Dave Maple's urging, six county cattlemen's associations in Kentucky had fundraisers to buy bulls to send to the Gulf Coast.

Neville was invited to speak at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) convention in February 2007. That set off another team effort, resulting in two bulls from Yon Family Farms in Ridge Spring, S.C., heading to Louisiana. First, Jackie Moore of Missouri's Joplin Regional Stockyards bought a bull credit at the NCBA PAC auction. The LCA Foundation chipped in more, then Kevin and Lydia Yon supplied the actual bulls at a discounted rate and provided the shipping. Then, in March 2007 another truck left Kentucky carrying nine more of Venable's bulls, as well as bulls from other breeders.

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"We've sent 53 or 54 bulls by now," Neville says, "And most are from Angus breeders."

The right thing to do

To Venable, it simply seemed like the right thing to do. "I wanted to help somebody," says the 83-year-old cattleman. "I wanted to do something."

Venable was rewarded with a phone call. "A lady called me one night. She had gotten one of our bulls. She was three or four miles from the coast. She said it was devastating.

There were no fences left. She was very grateful, and I was happy I could contribute to people that had a disaster."

Disaster is probably an understatement. In addition to 290 head of cattle, Pomes lost his 26 registered Paints and Quarter horses, his barns, his hay, his tractors, and hay equipment; and all his fences and his pastures were covered in debris. He also lost his home, a rental house and another older home he used as a bunkhouse.

To add injury to insult, Little Man, his donated Angus bull, cut his penis on the

debris left in the woods.

"I was afraid I was going to have to put him down," Pomes says. "But the vet and I worked on him and worked on him. I have him in my I.C.U. (intensive care unit) pasture where I can feed him extra, and he's coming around."

It was the same story for Armstrong. He, too, lost all his fences, tractors, barns, and on and on. Between he and his wife, Lynn; their five children; and Armstrong's father, they lost five homes.

"One bull doesn't solve all their

More than cows

Remember watching the news during Hurricane Katrina? Louis Pomes was one of those brave souls plucking survivors off the roofs of their houses.

As a heavy equipment operator for Saint Bernard Parish, one of the hardest-hit areas, he was called in the Saturday before the hurricane struck to start moving equipment to higher ground. On Sunday he fetched his unwilling father from his house and took him to a shelter, then put his three dogs in a makeshift pen in a loft in a government building. Then on Monday morning, the water came over the levee.

"We confiscated boats off the roofs of houses and started rescuing people," Pomes says. Three days later he found his first body and tied it to a house so it could be recovered when the water went down. It was not a pleasant chore for Pomes, who has spent his entire 45 years in the parish.

"For the first week, the only time I slept was when I would put my head down and doze in the boat. Then I'd wake up when I'd hear

somebody calling. It never occurred to me to go see about my own stuff."

It was also a challenge to find something to eat and drink. "There was nine feet of water in Wal-Mart," he reports. "We floated the boat in and got water and beef jerky. Our first meal was hot dogs we got out of a floating freezer."

Finally, after a week, he found out all 26 of his lovely stallions, mares and foals drowned. And he started to get a body count on his cattle. He also realized his home had floated 2,000 feet out in the pasture and filled with water.

But there was no time to grieve over his losses. The parish president gave orders to start rescuing animals after the people were rescued. Pomes was already on it. He had a few bales of hay in his horse barn that the salt water didn't reach. He took them to other people's horses and fed them on the side of the road. He bandaged their wounds with veterinary wrap until a rescue team from Louisiana State University (LSU) could come in with trucks and



► **Above:** Louis Pomes has most of the Hurricane Katrina debris cleaned up from his pastures, with the exception of this walk-in freezer and the trash he can't reach in the trees.

► **Right:** Pomes' horse barn is in ruins after Hurricane Katrina filled it with 8 feet of water.



problems,” Neville says. “It doesn’t get their houses built back, but I hope it gives them a little hope.”

A hopeful future

The signs of hope are visible. Pomes is back to 140 cows. After working for a year and a half to clean up his pastures, he has his cattle and horses buried, most of the debris gone, and his fences rebuilt.

Pomes says, “Things are looking up. We were on a controlled breeding season before the hurricane and now we’re getting back on

it, except for a few of the cows I bought. Our pastures are getting back together. A lady gave me two horses, and I’ve bought two. Cattle and horse people are different. They are very caring people.”

Besides, quitting wasn’t an option. “I lost everything a person can buy,” Pomes says. “I didn’t want to lose my credit and my land. The only way was to borrow more money and get back in business.”

Even at 63, quitting never occurred to Armstrong, either, although he had to round up cattle 12-13 miles up river. Or when he

heard his dead cattle were spotted 35 to 75 miles out in the Gulf.

“I don’t know how to explain it. You just do everything you can do,” says Armstrong, who is slowly rebuilding fences and his herd. “The only thing that will get me to leave is if the Mississippi runs out of mud.”

Pomes is even looking to help others in the same fix. “I’ve got some nice bull calves coming on. I want to donate them to the program. There are ranches in Texas and Ohio that are flooding.”



trailers and transport them to the Lamar-Dixon Expo Center in Gonzales. There they were cared for and hopefully reunited with their owners. He estimates they were able to save 100 out of 150 horses in the parish. They also pulled 400 dogs out of the flood, including one hardy canine that survived three weeks trapped in a house.

Pomes put his 30 surviving cows on a dead levee with no grass and started hauling hay and water to them, five gallons at a time, from the river. He did that for more than three months.

At least he didn’t have to worry about spending money. Besides the fact he didn’t have a day off for three months, there wasn’t so much as a vending machine or a store open in the parish. But he did graduate from taking naps in the boat to sleeping on a piece of sheet rock on the gravel roof of the government building.

Two years later he drove by the pile of tin and poles that was one of his hay barns. Later he parked and walked around his rotting horse barn, the eaves still draped with marsh grass from the eight feet of

water that filled it when the water came over the levee. His dead horses’ halters are still hooked to the side of a stall.

“This was a nice barn,” he said as he looked at one of the empty stalls, now grown up with weeds. “It was a really nice barn.”

In his 70-year-old white frame farmhouse, he tried to step around his grandson’s mound of ruined Disney videos. Even after it filled with salt water, the curtains still hang from the windows and the dark trim on the interior doors show the house’s character. He walked over to a display shelf, also surprisingly intact. He cradled a broken, miniature pirogue a dear friend made for him when he was in the last stages of cancer. Pomes held tiny shotgun shells, a shotgun hardly bigger than a toothpick, and the sides of the pirogue. “I’m going to try to find somebody that can fix it.”

After he walked out the front door, now minus its steps, he said, “It was a nice house. I’m going to try to fix it. I’m thinking about trying to jack it up on beams. It was a really nice house.”



► Debris still lingers as a visual reminder of Hurricane Katrina’s effects.



► The halters from Pomes’ dead horses are still fastened to the stall wall.