

# STAYING POWER



Above: Young bulls are waiting in lots for the start of the South Mississippi Gain-On-Forage Bull Test.

## The South Mississippi Gain-on-Forage Bull Test and its manager get high marks for longevity.

Story & photos by Becky Mills, field editor

At Holmes Cattle Co., the only things older than Frank Holmes are the bricks on the front of his house. In the late 1800s, those bricks came down the Mississippi River on a barge to Lake Pontchartrain, then were hauled the rest of the way with oxen.

They're not going anywhere anytime soon, and Holmes, 85, appears to have settled in nicely with his bride of 58 years, Mrs. Jean. The forage bull test he helped found seems to be making a name for itself in the longevity department, too. This marks the

35th year for the South Mississippi Gain-On-Forage Bull Test Program.

"I felt like it was something we could do to help the beef cattle situation in the area," says Holmes, who has managed it the whole time. "It has helped identify and provide superior sires and has done an awful lot for education."

When he started the forage bull test, he says, "There was total ignorance about breeding soundness exams (sometimes

referred to as BSEs), ultrasound, EPDs (expected progeny differences) and health programs. Now, we're working on national ID."

All this because Frank Holmes can grow grass. More specifically, reseeded ryegrass that he developed and patented. Although the patent expired years ago, the prolific ryegrass, seeded along with oats every fall, provides the groceries for 100-120 young bulls a year from mid-November through May.

### Developed slow

For Greenwood, Miss., Angus breeder S.R. Evans, the gain-on-grass test goes along with the philosophy of his home operation. "We are grass-based and don't

creep-feed. We send our bulls to the forage test so we can get gain information on grass. We get more than enough gain to separate the bulls."

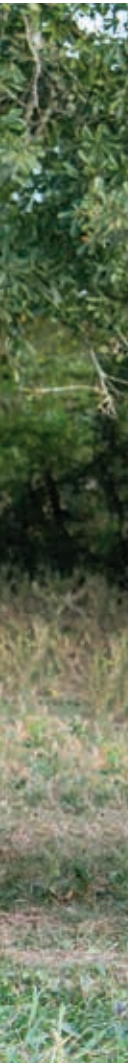
However, he doesn't attempt to test the bulls at home. He's sent them to Tylertown since Day 1.

"South Mississippi has better ryegrass than I do," Evans explains.

While some bulls do post gains of 5 pounds (lb.) per day near the end of the test, they normally don't post the off-the-charts gains of bulls on grain-based bull tests. Year in and year out, across breeds they usually average 3 lb. per day, he says. It's enough to show differences between individuals.

There is also the feeling bulls won't marble without grain. Mississippi State animal scientist Rhonda Vann, who does the

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carcass ultrasounds for the test, says differently.

“Some bulls are able to marble on grass. It depends on the genetics of the animal and their breed,” she says. “The marbling scores of the bulls raised on forage are actually a more accurate reflection of what their offspring can do on forages.”

Breeders also like the condition of the young bulls when they come off the forage test. Kentwood, La., Angus breeder Chris Roussel sends around 50 of his weaned bulls to Holmes every year. When the test is over, Holmes feeds them small amounts of grain until Roussel’s Bermuda grass is thriving in June or July. Then, they’re back on grass until October when Roussel sells the 2-year-olds in his own sale.

“The bulls are in the best condition they can be without pushing them at an early age,” Roussel observes. “They hold up. They don’t melt. They have less feet problems.”

Evans adds, “Bulls developed on grass have longevity.”

### Economical development

Since the bulls are grazing, rather than on a concentrate ration, testing can also be done more economically. This year the fee is \$460. “I can’t develop bulls for that at home,” says Ray Gendron, Baton Rouge, La., Angus breeder.

Holmes’ natural gift for salesmanship comes at no extra charge. While some of the bulls do go back to their home farm after the test, Holmes helps merchandise the rest straight off the test.

“Frank has cattle people all over South Mississippi and Louisiana who want bulls,” Gendron says.

While Holmes doesn’t take the credit, he’s a large part of the draw for the forage test.

“He does a really good job,” says

Gendron. “People are comfortable sending their bulls to him.”

“He keeps their health under control,” says Evans. “He’s a really good operator.”

“He wants everything right,” says Richard Hay, Walthall County Extension director and president of the bull test committee. “He pays attention to detail. He rides the pastures every day and wants to make sure every person’s bulls look as good as they possibly can and are healthy.”

Hay, who is 60, says he’s known Holmes since he was in the single digits. “As long as I’ve known him, he’s carried his education and research background to the farm.”

### Prepped for the test

Holmes has a bachelor’s degree in animal science and a master’s in animal breeding and

### Angus takeover

When Frank Holmes looks over the young bulls waiting in his lots for the start of the forage test, he says, “The test is 85% Angus. When we started, I never dreamed it would be that many. Then, it was mostly Herefords.”

His son and partner in Holmes Cattle Co., Mark Holmes, says, “It is because of the demand for black-hided cattle. The American Angus Association has done a better job getting data for their producers to show their customers. The result is black-hided cattle bring more money.”

Frank adds, “Angus breeders are progressive people who want to take the facts and do something with them.”

He observes, “Most Angus bull sales are repeat sales. They were happy with what they bought the first time.”



Tylertown, Miss., cattleman Frank Holmes runs the South Mississippi Gain-On-Forage Bull Test.



Mark Holmes says the South Mississippi Gain-On-Forage Bull Test is full of Angus bulls because of the demand for black-hided cattle.

reproduction from his beloved Mississippi State University. He gained more research experience as superintendent of the Prairie Research Station near West Point.

He had planned to work on his doctorate while he was there, but that came to a halt. A freak snowstorm hit, and Holmes spent all day on his horse, checking cows and pulling calves.

“Somebody had bred 35 cows, from 2-year-olds to 10-year-olds, to a Charbray bull. I pulled nine calves that morning. When I got in, I took off my chaps and they stood straight up because they were frozen. I told Jean to pack because we were going back to South Mississippi.”

While he doesn’t have to pull calves at the bull test, he does use his research experience.

“He makes sure to gather the data in a way it is legitimate,” Hay stresses.

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Holmes is also a key part of the educational component, one of his original goals for the test. Each May, there is a field day at the test where bulls are on display and extension workers and researchers present information to breeders and commercial producers.

Much of the education takes place one-on-one, however. Hay says, “When the county agents in the area get together to work the bulls and take weights, Mr. Frank really enjoys educating the agents who don’t have a cattle background.”

“He’s about as knowledgeable a person as you’ll get in the cattle business,” says Gendron. “I can sit and talk to him for an hour and learn more from him than I could taking a course in school.”

That education definitely has a trickle-down effect, especially in combination with the superior sires the test helps identify and spread through the region. Evans buys back part of the commercial calves sired by his bulls, has Holmes background them, then sends them to a Kansas feedyard.

“The last set of steers and heifers we sent went 17% Prime,

60% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> (CAB<sup>®</sup>) [brand], with ribeye areas of 13, 15, to 16 square inches. We didn’t have anything less than 11 square inches. Their yield grades averaged around 2.9 to 3.0.”

Don’t look for the forage growing, education and data collection to stop any time soon. Hay says one year he bought some minerals from Holmes and was told to make the check out to HHH Cattle Co.

“I asked him what the HHH stood for,” Hay recalls. “He said Hard-Headed Holmes. That’s why this bull test has kept going. He’s a hard-nosed, hard-working, don’t-give-me-any-excuses kind of person. He’s been successful for a long, long time, and every year he wants the current test to be the best one ever.”

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, Ga.



Above: Louisiana Angus breeder Chris Roussel says he doesn’t have enough land to keep his cows and calves and develop his young bulls, so he sends the bulls to the South Mississippi Gain-On-Forage test.

Left: Roussel says the bulls he sends to the test are in the best condition they can be without pushing them at an early age.

## Branded

The 1950-era brands on the Holmes Cattle Co. personal cattle are the perfect representation of Frank Holmes. They are long-lasting, a testament to the value he places on friendship, a visual reminder of his practical nature, and are responsible for a story or two.

In the 1960s, one of Holmes’ friends, Irvin McDonald, a banker with no farming experience, suddenly found himself in charge of the family’s 5,500-acre McDonald Farms. He reached out to Holmes for help.

“We did a lot of good things together,” Holmes says simply.

Although the McDonald family is no longer in the cattle business, Holmes didn’t

want to throw the brand away. Since Holmes’s son and partner in the cattle operation is named Mark, the older Holmes says, “We figured the brand could stand for Mark’s Farm.”

The hand-me-down brand has proved its worth.

“Hot-iron brands saved us after Katrina,” Holmes says. “We thought Camille was bad, but we only had a quarter-mile of fence still standing after Katrina, and the power company cut it twice.”

At the mention of Mark, however, the die-hard Mississippi State man’s dry wit surfaces: “He knew how to disappoint me. He went to Ol’ Miss and made a lawyer.”



Frank Holmes partners with his son, Mark, on their cattle operation.