



Missourian's cattle hit the target set long ago.

Story & photos by Laura Conaway

In the Mississippi River Valley, outcomes can be as fickle as the weather. Varying feed costs and cattle markets keep a cowman from feeling too comfortable; but, the grass is lush and the soil dark, and a man born there knows well how to make a dollar or two.

First it requires staying power, with hefty doses of striving for better and repeating what works. Bill Masters *could* write the book.

Emphasis on could, because it's clear he'd never actually write it. Masters is much more worker than talker, as a visit to his cow

pasture shows. His Angus cattle are beautiful, whether grazing the hills before him with calves by their side or grouped as a data set after harvest. Every load sent to National Beef achieves high levels of *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand Prime, and evidence

suggests they were doing so long before they ever sold on a grid.

"When we did go to the grid and everything, I mean I was hitting that Prime market right away," he says. "I mean, we've tried to up it and up it, and it's hard to keep upping it."

There's no boast in his voice. Words that could be misinterpreted as such are stated so matter-of-fact that you know Prime has been the realized target for so long Masters hardly recalls any other outcome. He's in an area,

on a program, stacked so high with Angus carcass genetics that you might say the cattle are foolproof — if it weren't for that pesky weather.

"If it's super hot or super cold, you'll lose your marbling and lose some of your grade," he states. "It's certainly got variety, this thing, Mother Nature."

Genetic focus a tradition

To counter any sudden moves she might make, Masters holds tight to stringent management and genetic protocols, the latter from his father, Paul.

A dairy-farmer-turned-Angus-seedstock provider who "grew tired of milking two times a day," the elder Masters worked the land and livestock full-time with his wife, Mary, who was raising Bill and their two daughters.

"Everybody had money back then," Masters says of dairy life in the 1950s and '60s. "My mother came off of a dairy, and they sold milk in town in cans, and she talked about how her dad bought a new truck every year. They all had money back then. There ain't no money in it anymore."

Switch to Angus

Anticipating that trend, his father traded in milk for protein and bought some registered stock in the late 1950s. No one breed was particularly popular back then, but Paul liked Angus and wanted good ones to sell to his customers.

"People will tell you how competitive this area around here is for genetics," Masters says of his home in Cape Girardeau and surrounding areas of southeast Missouri.

"My dad used to go to Chicago, some of the big farms up that way to get something different," he says. Those genetics still run deep in the now-commercial Angus herd. As a boy, he'd ride with his dad to the sales,



honing his own skills for selection.

“I mean, how do you pick a bull? We pick a bull from expected progeny differences (EPDs) and sight. Most of our bulls are all found off of a piece of paper; and then you go look at them and go, ‘Well he’s either great or not what you really wanted.’ EPDs are what really pushed us over the top with Angus. The highest accuracies live there.”

Today only about 5% of his cows are bred by natural service. The rest access genetics from all over the country through the use of artificial insemination (AI) — a technology with which Masters has been familiar and successful since the 1960s.

“AI was primitive back then,” he says. “Now we’re synchronizing and breeding groups at times and giving all the shots. Back then you tried to catch them in standing heat and breed them 12 hours later.”

He recalls years of thawing with no thermometer and breaking off the top of sealed glass ampules to draw up semen with a straw. Of 150 cows, they’d maybe have 40% take — an impressive feat given the circumstances and state of such reproductive technologies at the time.



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Hard times

Paul was ahead of his time and gone too soon, a chapter his son would rewrite if he could.

“He had an accident and was killed in ’71. It took us a little while to get pulled up by our bootstraps; we all grew up fast.”

Masters was 9 and subsequently raised in his father’s shadow. Reluctantly and painfully, his mom and sisters tried to keep the seedstock business and 400-acre farm afloat.

“We kind of went sideways for a while,” he says.

That was when transitioning to commercial cattle started to make sense, but his dad’s talents carried on in his only son when a professor and friend of the late farmer taught the son how to AI at age 11. He’s been doing it ever since to success rates of 50%-70%.

“I’m not a salesman,” Masters says. “It was tough to try and make enough hay and



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keep everything fed and go to school and then do paperwork. So [commercial cattle were] a lot easier” for the circumstances they were dealt.

“There have been times when we raised feeder calves and never got anywhere. We didn’t get any premiums or anything,” he says. Auction markets often sold calves in groups without notice of genetics or ownership.

Seeing them through

It wasn’t until enough people suggested Masters aim for a grid and he started harvesting cattle at

National Beef in Dodge City, Kan., in the mid-1990s that his father’s early efforts shined so bright.

“Our biggest thing was whenever we started finishing cattle — raising the end product,” he says. “I think that helped this farm the best, because if you don’t raise your cattle all the way out, you never know what they’re really doing.”

Today, after decades on the grid and gathering feedback on how to make that herd ever better, he raises AI heifers out of AI cows bred to high-accuracy sires. Most of the steers achieve the top mark available, CAB Prime.

A lengthy history with Missouri’s Show-Me Select heifer-development program has brought added value, too.

“If you’re getting \$1,700 a head for fat cattle and you’re getting \$2,200 to \$2,500 a head for replacement heifers, if you get \$500 to \$600 a head more, it kind of supports the cause to get more equipment and spend more on better genetics.”

That’s something he comes by naturally — working hard, striving for more and better. In 2011, Masters was presented with the Missouri Master Farmer Award, based on his use of innovative ideas, financial

recordkeeping, conservation practices and general excellence.

It’s not rocket science, Masters says. “We’re just farmers.”

The numbers and the impact on beef consumers suggest there’s more to the story he won’t write. He just pulls his hat down low and his overalls up to tackle life with a toughness that carries him through. Seeing the cattle excel brings the comfort he earns. ■



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Editor’s Note: Laura Conaway is a freelance writer and photographer from DeLeon Springs, Fla.