

For Charles McKee and his wife, Linda, registered Angus bulls still bring the advantage of predictability from the world's leading database.

# Everyday Quality

*Maybe just 'common folks,' Oklahoma couple produces uncommonly great beef.*

Story by **ANTHONY PANNONE;**  
photos by **GARY FIKE**

Charles and Linda McKee flew the coop 18 years ago.

In 1994, they trucked 20 Herefords and personal effects from Fayetteville, Ark., to McCurtain, Okla., where they have since nestled into a career as Angus cattle ranchers, and where every day can bring new life to the herd.

The couple married while Charles was working on his animal science degree at the University of Arkansas–Fayetteville and Linda worked at a bank.

“She put me through school,” he humbly admits.

After graduation, McKee began working in east Arkansas as an extension agent specializing in row crops, which makes sense because he also holds a master's degree in agronomy. He did that for 10 years, until 1983, when he flew into the chicken business, producing breeder hens for Tyson just outside of Fayetteville.

Chickens, like newborn babies, required the McKees' undivided attention. “Breeder hens tie you down real close,” he says. “They required 44 weeks start to finish, no vacations.”

It's not that McKee didn't like chickens, though. In college, he wanted to be a veterinarian.

“I just liked animals,” he says. But again, 10 years brought another wind of change, sweeping the McKees from their roost.

“There were no problems,” he says of the move. “People are great here, just like Arkansas.”

## Building on Angus

Thanks to an abundance of high-quality Angus bulls, they began putting together a herd with success that comes from the American Angus Association database.

“You could find more information on Angus than on other breeds,” McKee says. “We liked the look of the bulls and started picking them. They worked pretty good.”

As the herd grew, he began selling cattle, first at weaning and some as yearlings. Then one day, after adding a new roof to his feeding pen, McKee decided to try retaining ownership.

“I really get the most out of my genetic decisions when owning cattle through harvest,” he says. The first 40 head went to the closest custom yard he could find, followed by three groups the next year.

He soon realized why more people don't retain ownership: Either they have never considered it, or they don't have the resources.

“It takes a good deal of money to feed cattle,” he notes.

So how did two chicken farmers do it?

“We cashed in a bunch of CDs (certificates of deposit),” he says. “I try to operate on a cash basis; it keeps me out of trouble.”

So far, he has skirted major upsets and credits that to a ramped-up vaccination program.

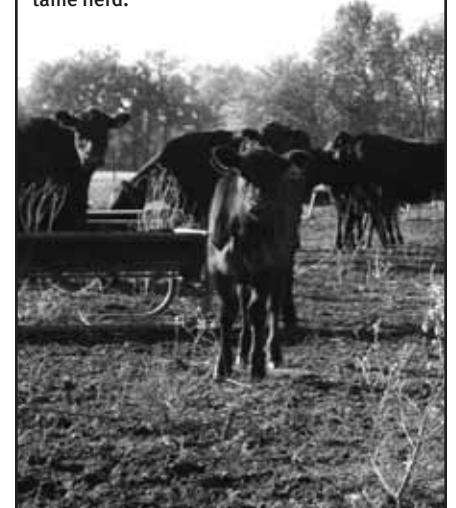
“The key to success is to have healthy cattle prior to entering the feedlot,” McKee says. “I can't afford to have a bunch of sick cattle at the lot.”

He and his wife created their own recordkeeping system. They keep tabs on all their cattle, going back at least seven years.

“My wife's the one who keeps up with everything,” he says. A complete set of records, including tag numbers for every cow, are kept in loose-leaf binders. “I don't know how else you know what you're doing.”

They know the cattle and keep health

The McKees work their cattle alone, just the two of them, so it's important to keep a tame herd.



---

**“The key to success is to have healthy cattle prior to entering the feedlot. I can’t afford to have a bunch of sick cattle at the lot.”**

— *Charles McKee*

---

a top priority because that governs profit. When the feed bill arrives every two weeks, the McKees pore over it.

“We can tell which cows perform and those that don’t,” he says.

They’re so meticulous, in fact, that once when looking over records McKee noticed that after three weeks the cattle were consistently dropping in performance. He researched and spoke with a veterinarian, and it turned out his cattle were suffering from *Mycoplasma pneumoniae*, a bug without normal cell walls that presents many challenges in treatment.

Normally, the health program on the Oklahoma ranch works well for the McKees and their cattle, which marble well after 150-170 days on feed at McPherson County Feeders, Marquette, Kan. That’s where they start on silage for 30-60 days before going to a ration of cracked corn and distillers’ dried grain.

From 2008 through 2010, 362 of their steers averaged nearly 50% Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand acceptance and better than 90% Choice. There were a few more Yield Grade (YG) 4s than McKee preferred, so he tried a Simmental-Angus composite bull three years ago. After sampling enough steers to see they achieved better YG only at the expense of marbling premiums, he’s not sure if that plan will continue.

The bulls used to seed the herd came from Gardiner Angus Ranch in Ashland, Kan., and Kirkes Black Angus Ranch at Talihina, Okla. Registered Angus bulls still bring the advantage of predictability from the world’s leading database.

### **Focus on the herd**

The McKees work their cattle alone, just the two of them, so it’s important to keep a tame herd. In fact, their cattle remain docile because they include that trait in selection when buying bulls, quickly selling any that become aggressive.

“I’m 65, and I don’t run as fast I used to,” he says. “But I like doing the work.”

And the cows appreciate the dedication, remaining productive and in the herd until they are typically 10-12 years old.

Every day is calving season on the McKee place. It’s not common to find an operation that keeps detailed records, retains ownership on feed and hits the CAB target without well-defined calving

seasons. But the year-round program works well in this case.

“Almost no cycling without breeding, so sometimes we even pick up a calf as we go along,” he says. The average calving interval is 11 months, with 5%-7% of cows giving birth twice a year.

McKee says he thinks artificial insemination (AI) would be a “great way to go.” But he has never used it because he

manages the herd on eight separate, unconnected pastures and without suitable AI facilities.

The ranch, mostly prairie and glades enclosed by sparse hardwood ramparts, is close enough that cattle have a view of the Kiamichi Mountains. When the creeks that meander the land overflow their banks, it looks like “lake front property, which doesn’t help the fences,” he notes.

Playfully claiming his brain is not big enough to keep precise count of the herd, McKee says at any given time approximately 300 cattle roam the bottomlands.

“Not sure if we do anything better or different,” he says of he and Linda. “We’re just common folks.”

