

Bull Hill Ranch: A Red Angus Adventure
By: Raymond Prescott
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When Jim and Alvina Meeks began their adventure in the beef cattle business, they wanted a place where they could relax with friends, escape the stress of the big city and watch their cattle graze contently on the hillsides of Laurens County in upstate South Carolina. However, the Meeks found it very hard to sit idle for very long. They soon became students of the beef industry, reading every cattle article they could find and asking questions of extension staff, local cattlemen and other industry leaders. They even set up an on-farm test of sorts involving several breeds of cattle to decide which breed would work best for them. "We were looking for cattle that could take care of themselves and were easy to look at and work around; tough but gentle," says Jim Meeks. "We also knew that we needed cows that could raise a good calf every year on grass alone. We chose Red Angus because they met these criteria better than any other breed that we tried." While Alvina agrees that Red Angus were a hands down favorite because of their performance, fertility, and calm dispositions, she admits that the beautiful red color was what won her over in the beginning.

That was fourteen years ago, and today, thanks to lots of hard work and a commitment to excellence, Red Angus cattle from Bull Hill Ranch are some of the most respected animals in the breed. The Meeks are still striving to produce cattle that will work hard and return a profit for their customers. Their search for top quality Red Angus genetics has taken them all over the United States, but the vast majority of the females that make up the 160 head of brood cows came from right here in the Southeast. "We have found that cows have less trouble adapting to the heat and the fescue if they're from a similar environment," says Mr. Meeks. The original Red Angus cows were purchased from top breeders throughout the Southeast, mainly through the Grasstime Red Angus Sale, an annual consignment sale sponsored by the Southeastern Red Angus Association in April. As the Meeks attended this sale each year, they met many other enthusiastic Red Angus breeders and took an active role in both the regional and national Red Angus associations. During this time they met Al Enfinger, a 25 year veteran of the Red Angus business, whose "Florida bred" cattle did a great job for the Meeks. They purchased the entire Enfinger herd in 1998, and completed the foundation of their herd. These days, most of the females that enter the herd at Bull Hill Ranch are produced here at the ranch, but Jim and Alvina are always on the lookout for outstanding animals that can make a contribution to their breeding program.

In 1999, Raymond Prescott joined the team at Bull Hill Ranch as the ranch manager. Raymond brought a great deal of experience in the purebred industry, including nearly twenty years of raising Red Angus cattle, with him to his new position. Raymond admits that he enjoys the rolling hills and scenic views of the upstate, but is quick to point out that the opportunity to work full time with Red Angus cattle and enthusiastic breeders like the Meeks is what lured him to bring his family to South Carolina. "I have had the opportunity over the years to work with several breeds of beef cattle, but none of them have as much to offer to the commercial beef cattle industry as Red Angus. From being the first breed to require weaning weights for registration, to the "total herd reporting" concept and cow efficiency EPD's, the Red Angus breed has kept its focus on the commercial cattleman and provided leadership for the entire beef industry for the past fifty years!" says Prescott. "Working with the cattle at Bull Hill Ranch has been a great opportunity for me because Jim and Alvina's philosophy on the cow business is the same as mine: 'produce cattle that excel in the economically relevant traits in the heat of the Southeast without any pampering or special attention.'" Evidence of this philosophy is seen all over the ranch with cows grazing fescue and bermuda grass pastures and wintering on hay alone, no creep feed or hand feeding for the calves, and bulls and replacement females developed in large pastures with limited supplements.

“Our cattle are ready to go to work for our customers the day they get them home because the cattle have had to work for us since they were born,” says Meeks. Prescott adds, “These cattle know how to efficiently convert grass to pounds of protein. It’s what they’re bred and selected to do.” Bill Hendrix has known the Meeks family for over 30 years and has helped with the daily activities of the ranch since it began. He too is quick to point out how well the Red Angus perform. “These cows have had to work through some of the toughest drought conditions I’ve ever seen, and they just keep on going like they’re powered by Duracell,” says Hendrix. Someone might need to check to see what type of batteries Mr. Hendrix is running on. At age 72, he took a brief leave of absence from his duties this year to “redo his heart’s plumbing”, but he’s been back on the job since June, bushhogging, baling hay, and feeding and caring for the cattle.

Demand for Bull Hill Ranch Red Angus genetics has grown over the years. Perhaps the word is getting out about these functional, easy keeping forage converters. The ranch currently markets 30-40 bulls per year through private treaty sales, primarily to commercial cattlemen. Females are also sold privately and in consignment sales such as the Grass Time and Harvest Time auctions put on by the SERAA. Embryos from several top producing Bull Hill females have been exported to Australia, a group of heifers now make their home in upstate New York, and a shipment of bulls from the ranch took up residence in Puerto Rico last fall. According to all reports, these cattle are performing well for their new owners, and thanks to the extensive use of artificial insemination and embryo transfer in the Bull Hill breeding program, genetic advancement will be available to Bull Hill Ranch customers for many years to come. According to Prescott, “We bred 110 females A.I. last year, and we hope to use A.I. even more this year because it helps us provide our customers with the best genetics in the breed. We also use A.I. to accurately compare our cattle to the rest of the breed by sampling genetics from other operations.”

Jim and Alvina have worked tirelessly over the years to promote Red Angus cattle both at home and abroad. Jim served two terms as President of the Southeastern Red Angus Association, and currently serves on the board of directors of the organization. Alvina has served two terms as the Secretary/Treasurer of the SERAA, as well as director of advertising and membership. The Meeks have attended numerous national Red Angus conventions, and donated outstanding embryo packages for National Junior Red Angus fundraisers in 2000 and 2001. This year Bull Hill Ranch hosted the National Junior Red Angus Round-Up where juniors from all over the United States and Canada participated in livestock judging, a cattleman’s contest, a sales talk competition, barnyard Olympics and a fishing rodeo. Jim and Alvina are both heavily involved in planning and preparation for the 2005 National Red Angus Convention that will be held in Greenville, SC in the fall of 2005. Raymond is also involved promoting Red Angus on both the regional and national level. He is looking forward to serving as a member of the Red Angus Association of America’s board of directors starting in January, but his greatest joy is that daughters Bethany and Erica have chosen to take part in promoting Red Angus through exhibiting cattle in state and local livestock shows. The girls recently purchased their first “heifer of their very own”, and of course, it’s a Red Angus!

If you’re lucky enough to catch the Meeks sitting down these days, it will probably be at a booth in the Red Barn Restaurant, that they recently opened at the ranch in Gray Court. Customers can relax while watching the Red Angus cattle grazing on the surrounding hillsides, and enjoy a fine dining experience with a dose of southern hospitality. Jim and Alvina still enjoy watching the cattle graze today, as well, and they still have the same work ethic and commitment to produce an excellent product for their customers. Whether they’re offering you Red Angus cattle or raspberry cheesecake, they want it to be the best you’ve ever had. That’s just the way things are at Bull Hill Ranch.

