When the American Simmental Association recently published its annual “Leading Breeders by State list” the name of Donnie Harper sat perched at the top of the ledger. In just a few short years, the northeastern Louisiana producer had leapfrogged to an enviable position among the area’s Simmental cattlemen. “I was raised on this farm by my parents, James and Shirley, who have passed on. My folks were mostly cotton and soybean row crop farmers, although they always had a few Polled Herefords around. As a kid, Herefords were the only cattle I knew. I was raised with my older brother, Jimmy. Jimmy still lives here on the farm, but makes his living off the farm, as a Baptist preacher and a deputy sheriff,” he explained. “Our original farm was partly inherited by my mother and partly purchased by my Daddy.”

The farm is situated near the tiny town of Crowville, but their mail is delivered through the post office located in Winnsboro (population: 4,800). The nearest larger town is Monroe, 50 miles to the northwest, where his daughter and son-in-law, Sharon and Dustin Baugh reside. Sharon and Dustin are parents of Donnie’s two grandsons, Harper, 8, and Dustin, 7.

For years, Harper’s cattle operation revolved around commercial Angus until the mid-2000s. “I saw an ad for Simmental placed by Gene Strother, of Amite, Louisiana, and thought it might be a good idea to add some hybrid vigor to my herd through crossbreeding. I bought a bull from him and casually mentioned that I wouldn’t mind having some registered cattle,” he recalled. “Mr. Strother called me a year later and told me that he was going to cull his herd because he was having some health problems and needed to cut back. He let me pick his herd and I bought 12 cows. Those cows produced 12 calves, 10 heifers and two bulls. The next year, he had open heart surgery and told me he was going to sell all his cattle so I ended up buying 25 more,” he said.

A modest, self-effacing breeder has quietly, but quickly built the largest Simmental herd in Louisiana.
A Unique Arrangement

The Harper brothers both reside on the original family farm, but do not work the land. Because it is so fertile and conducive to row crops, most of it is leased to neighboring farmers on an 80% to 20% share crop agreement. The renters are free to decide what crops they want to grow, but usually stick to cotton, corn, soybeans, and in at least one instance, sesame seeds.

Jimmy and Donnie co-own the original farm, and both have acquired additional land in the area. “Jimmy is not into the farming aspects because he’s so busy with the responsibility of his two jobs,” Donnie explained.

Since the farm has been leased out, Harper turns to other landowners for enough space to maintain his cowherd. He rents pasture, not only from his neighbors, but from his brother as well. Although the cattle are able to graze much of the year, enough hay is purchased to get them through from December until mid-March when the grass usually greens up.

By leasing out the cropland and concentrating his effort strictly on his cattle, Harper’s cost outlay for equipment is minimal. He owns a couple of tractors and uses a front-end loader for various tasks like feeding and cleaning pens.

Based on advice from Strother and Ishee, he has been feeding his bulls, replacement and first calf heifers a ration that includes soybean hull pellets. “It is an outstanding growing ration, their feet stay sound and they really thrive on it. You can give them all they want. I order it from Mississippi and it is delivered loose by 18-wheel semis. I use my front-end loader to feed it, but also hand feed it by bucket to the heifers,” he states.

“Since I am my own labor force, I try to keep things from getting too complicated,” he concluded. “I was born and raised in this rural setting and that’s how I look at my cows — I’m just a country boy who enjoys working with cattle.” ◆
Currently, Harper maintains a cowherd of 80 registered Simmental and SimAngus™ cows, along with a smaller, commercial contingent of 25 Angus females. “At one time, I had 200 cows, but since this is such a heavy row crop area, I’ve had trouble finding enough pasture. At my age, (64) I figured I’d be better off running fewer cows,” he commented.

He credits Strother and Tim Ishee, another long-time Simmental breeder from Laurel, Mississippi, for their sound advice and counsel. “I had seen an ad for some Australian Shepherds that was placed by Tim. I called him and we discovered that both of us had black Simmentals. He told me ‘if you’ll come down here and look at my cattle, I’ll knock $20 off the price of a dog’,” he chuckled.

“So I went down there and we’ve become good friends. I bought some cows from him and he helped me locate a real good bull that he had raised and sold to another breeder. I bought that bull (MR Ishee BLK Harmony 001), and he has been really, really good,” he continued. In March of 2009, Harper realized his quest to become a registered cattle breeder when he obtained ASA member number 264677.

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He breeds about 30 cows by artificial insemination, with the balance bred by natural service. “Since I have this outstanding five-year-old bull, I like to use him heavily. Absolutely no calving problems with him and his calves grow like crazy. In fact, Tim Ishee continues to use some of his semen on his own cattle,” he added. All of Harper’s cows, including the commercial Angus, are bred exclusively to Simmental sires.

Recently, he purchased 15 three-quarter Simmental x one-quarter Angus embryos from Ishee, implanted them in his purebred cows and already has eight calves on the ground. “There is a definite market for SimAngus genetics in our area, and the interest is growing every year,” he commented.

He is impressed with what he sees out of his SimAngus combinations. “I see superiority among my SimAngus when compared to purebreds. A little more growth and the calves are harder. A lot of people still want to go with straightbreds, but you can’t argue with what crossbreeding does for the commercial cattleman,” he said.

Although summer temperatures can range up into the high 90s and low 100s, along with very high humidity, his black-hided cattle are able to handle the conditions. He points out that the cows head to shade during the heat of the day, but are out grazing in the evening and early morning.

Harper markets an average of 20 bulls annually right off the farm, by placing ads in local and state farm publications. “I get a lot of phone calls and completely sold out my current bull crop. Prices for our bulls have been increasing right along and demand has been very strong. I know they might bring a little more in some regions, but this is a farming area and these local commercial breeders are reluctant to spend a lot of money on bulls,” he says. “My customers are primarily commercial Angus breeders, but I also sell bulls to a few Brangus guys.”

His cull cows and heifers, along with bull calves that don’t measure up to his sale standards are sold at the nearby auction barn in Delhi.

A member of both the Louisiana Simmental Association and the Louisiana Cattlemen’s Association, he also sells a few club calves for 4-H and FFA projects. “I price those animals a little above what I think the calf might be worth over the scales,” he said.

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