# FAITH, FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND A LIFETIME OF BUILDING BETTER ANGUS

## Ralph Mills' Legacy Continues One Generation, One Bull and One Relationship at a Time

*By: Diana Van Leuven*

As the morning sun rises over the rolling hills of Putnam County, Tennessee, Ralph Mills looks across the same farm where his life began nearly seven decades ago. Nestled among the pastures is the old barn that still serves as a reminder of his family's history. Just across the road once stood the log house where he was raised.

"This is home," Mills says with a smile. "I've been here all my life."

For Ralph, farming has never simply been an occupation. It is a calling rooted in faith, strengthened by family, enriched by friendships, and built upon a lifetime of hard work.

Ask him the secret to his success, and he doesn't hesitate.

"Being a Christian and doing business based upon Christian principles is truly the reason for my success," he says. "Everything else starts there." Those principles have shaped not only one of Tennessee's most respected Angus operations but also a life dedicated to serving others, supporting agriculture, and preserving family traditions.

### A Family Legacy Begins

The Mills family's Angus story officially began in 1963 when Ralph's father purchased a neighboring herd of registered Black Angus cattle and secured membership with the American Angus Association.

That decision changed the future of the family farm. Growing up wasn't always easy. "We were raised pretty modestly," Mills recalls. "There wasn't a lot of extra money, but my dad always believed if we couldn't afford to buy the very best, we'd learn how to raise the very best."

That philosophy became the foundation of their breeding program.







Ralph's first show heifer came in the early 1970s when he was just a young 4-H member. Full of excitement, he headed to the Tennessee State Fair believing he had a competitive animal.

Reality came quickly. "There were twenty-one heifers in my class," he laughs. "Mine finished twenty-first." For many youngsters, that disappointment might have ended a dream.

Instead, it ignited one.

When they returned home, Ralph's younger brother summed up the family's determination perfectly. "We may not be able to buy champions," he said, "but we can grow them."

The family invested in superior genetics, carefully selected herd sires, and spent years improving their cow herd one generation at a time. Nearly a decade later, the hard work paid off.

"We went from one end of the line all the way to the other," Mills says. "We started winning."

It wasn't luck. It was patience, discipline, and countless hours studying pedigrees, performance data, and cattle structure.

## Education That Could Never Be Taken Away

While cattle remained his passion, Ralph's father insisted education come first.

"He always told us the government can take your car, your house, or just about anything else," Mills recalls. "But they can't take your education."

Those words stayed with him. Mills attended Tennessee Tech University, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration while working full time.

"I worked my way through school," he says. "It took six years, but looking back, those were probably the best six years of my life."

That education would prove invaluable. "I always liked being the boss," he jokes.

More importantly, it taught him something many producers overlook.

"A farm is a business," Mills says. "If you treat it like a business, you'll make better decisions."

That mindset has influenced every investment, breeding decision, and management practice throughout his career.

## Success Beyond the Farm

After graduating, Mills built a successful manufacturing career, eventually purchasing and expanding his own company.

The business flourished, providing the financial flexibility to continue investing in the family farm.

When he sold the company in 2009, he found himself exactly where he wanted to be.

Back home. "I've always loved farming," he says. "It keeps me out of trouble."

Today, Mills manages approximately 100 head of registered Angus cattle as a one-man operation.

His efficiency isn't accidental. Every improvement on the farm has been carefully designed to allow one person to safely handle cattle without sacrificing animal welfare or performance.

## Always Chasing Better Genetics

If there's one word that describes Ralph Mills, it's "student." Even after more than fifty years in the Angus business, he's still learning. Rather than relying solely on local genetics, Mills regularly travels throughout the country searching for elite breeding stock.

Nebraska.
Missouri.
Iowa.
Kentucky.
Kansas.
South Carolina.

Wherever outstanding Angus cattle are found, chances are Ralph has visited the operation. "I have to see them in person," he explains. "Pictures don't tell you everything. I want to see their feet, their structure, how they move, and how they're built." He calls it playing "mad scientist."

Combining bloodlines from across the nation allows him to continually improve performance while maintaining structural soundness and maternal quality. Those breeding decisions have produced impressive results.

At the University of Tennessee Bull Test, one of Mills' bulls established an extraordinary average daily gain of 6.79 pounds per day—a record that still stands.

"It wasn't an accident," Mills says. "You study genetics, use the right cows, and sometimes everything comes together."

## Investing in Safety

Recently, Mills upgraded another important piece of his operation through Ag1 Co-op. His new Arrowquip cattle handling system has transformed how he works cattle.

"I'm 68 years old," he says. "I finally got to the point where I could own the best chute available."

Safety drove the purchase. Working alone means every piece of equipment must perform reliably.

"I wanted something one person could operate safely and quietly," he explains. "The engineering behind this system is unbelievable." The investment allows him to process cattle more efficiently while reducing stress on both livestock and handler.

"It's made a tremendous difference."



## Nutrition That Delivers Results

Equipment isn't the only investment improving performance. Working closely with Ag1 Co-op livestock specialists, Mills recently incorporated Purina's CX8 technology into his feeding program.

The results quickly caught his attention. After comparing annual breeding soundness examinations, bulls receiving the enhanced nutrition demonstrated approximately a 15 to 20 percent improvement.

"We did the trial, and the numbers spoke for themselves," Mills says.

Today, the product is incorporated throughout his feeding program, including his replacement females.

"If it improves reproduction, every little bit helps."

For a seedstock producer whose reputation depends on fertility and performance, those improvements matter.

## A Lifetime with the Cooperative

While new technology continues improving his operation, one partnership has remained constant throughout his lifetime. Ag1 Co-op.

"My dad was a customer back in the 1960s," Mills says. "We've been doing business with the cooperative ever since." Over the decades, Ag1 has supplied feed, fertilizer, fencing materials, livestock equipment, nutritional guidance, and countless other products needed to keep the operation running. But Mills says the greatest value isn't found on an invoice. It's found in relationships.

"I can call them, place an order, and know it'll get taken care of," he says.

Recently, Ag1 delivered the steel materials needed to rebuild portions of his handling facilities.

"I gave them a list," Mills says. "A few days later everything showed up exactly like I needed."

That reliability matters. "They know your name."

Unlike large retailers, Mills says the cooperative understands agriculture because many employees are farmers themselves.

"They appreciate your business. They understand what you're trying to accomplish."

## More Than a Customer

Being part of a cooperative means becoming part of a larger agricultural family.

"You aren't just another customer," Mills explains. "You're a member."

While patronage dividends are appreciated, Mills believes the greatest benefit is something less tangible. "It's the relationships."

Those shared experiences create trust that simply can't be replicated elsewhere. "When you need help, they're there."

## Giving Back

Mills has spent decades giving back to the agricultural community.

As an active member of the Upper Cumberland Angus Association, he helps organize one of Tennessee's premier Angus events while supporting scholarships for future agricultural leaders.

Over the past twenty-five years, the association has awarded more than $220,000 in scholarships to students pursuing agricultural careers.

"That's something we're proud of," Mills says. Helping young people succeed ensures the future of agriculture remains bright.

Each October, Mills also hosts the Profit Ribbon Bull Sale on his farm alongside fellow breeders Jim Ligon and Richard Brown.

Rather than a traditional auction, the event features a silent bidding format that allows buyers time to evaluate cattle while enjoying fellowship, great food, and hospitality.

This year's sale will be held October 30.

Visitors enjoy smoked brisket prepared by the Putnam County Cattlemen's Association while bidding on carefully selected Angus bulls and females developed by respected Tennessee breeders.

For Mills, it's another opportunity to build relationships while promoting quality cattle.

## The Foundation Never Changes

After more than fifty years of breeding Angus cattle, Ralph Mills still gets excited watching calves hit the ground each spring.

He still studies pedigrees.

He still searches for better genetics.

He still believes tomorrow's calf crop can be better than today's.

But above every breeding decision, every business venture, and every accomplishment stands the same foundation that has guided him throughout life.

Faith.
Family.
Friends.

"Everything starts with Christian principles," Mills says.

Those values have shaped his family, strengthened his business, earned the respect of fellow cattle producers, and created friendships that span generations.

Standing on the farm where his story began, it's easy to see that Ralph Mills' greatest legacy isn't measured by championship banners, performance records, or successful sales.

It's measured by the lives he's influenced, the integrity with which he conducts business, and the example he continues to set for the next generation of farmers.

In an industry built on trust, hard work, and perseverance, Ralph Mills represents the very best of what American agriculture continues to be—a man whose faith guides his decisions, whose family inspires his purpose, whose friends strengthen his journey, and whose commitment to excellence ensures that the next generation of Angus cattle will always be better than the last.