

NOT ALWAYS LINEAR

*Pratt family finds contentment in raising cattle
that serve their customers.*

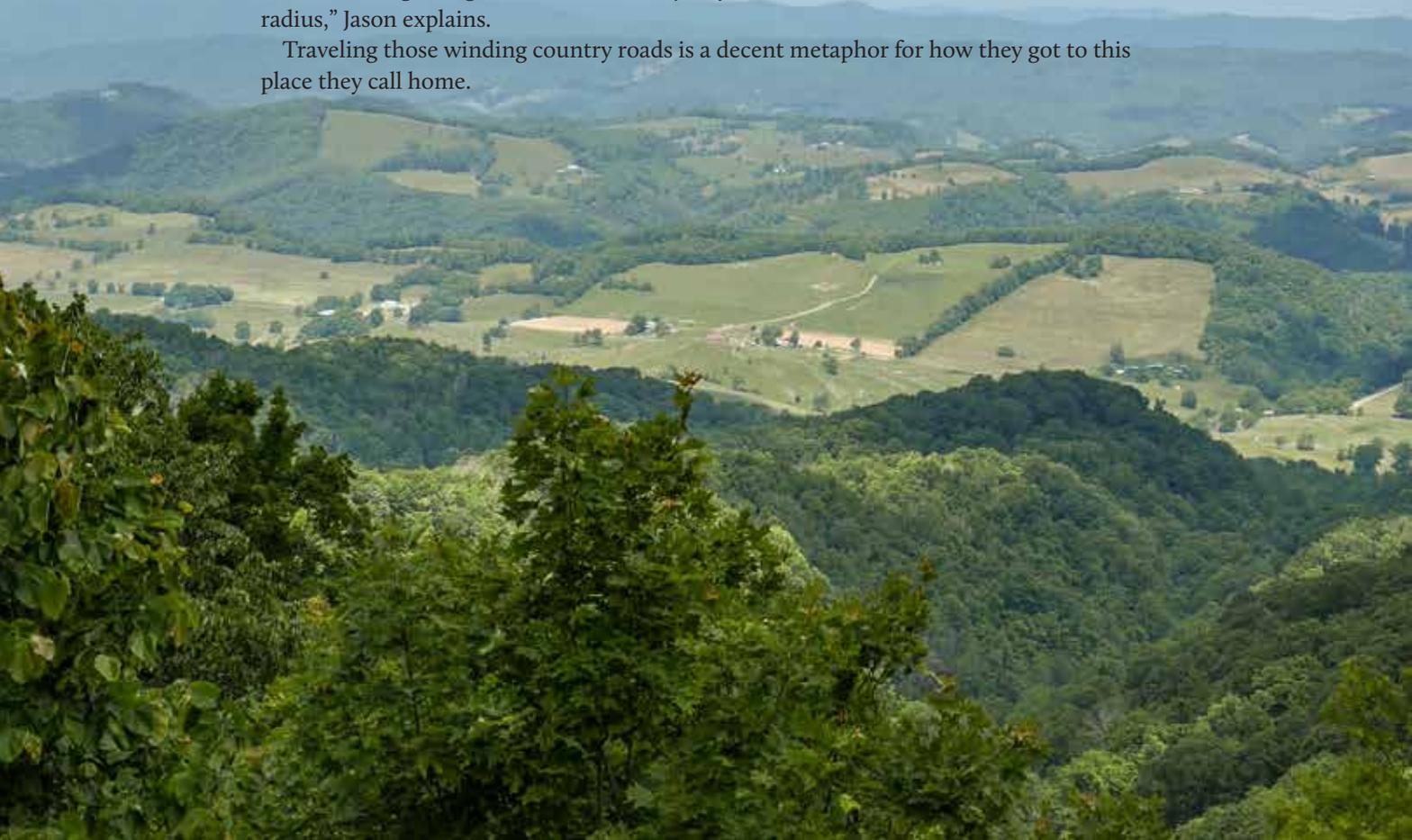
by Miranda Reiman, director of digital content and strategy

A visit to Pratt Cattle Company, Atkins, Va., starts with a meandering trip down Bear Creek Road — it leans to the right and curves back to the left, down a draw and over creek.

There's an Angus herd in the pasture and a nod to the past with an Echo Ridge Farm sign at the end of the lane. Whether Jason and Paige Pratt are getting to their ground on Nick's Creek or heading to the hay meadow on the other side of Walker Mountain, there is no direct route to almost anywhere they're going.

"We market the majority of our bulls within about an hour drive ... well of normal driving an hour radius. Some of them take three hours because you've got to get across three mountain ranges to get there, but the majority of our customers come in about a 100-mile radius," Jason explains.

Traveling those winding country roads is a decent metaphor for how they got to this place they call home.



IT WAS FATE

The Pratts always saw cattle in their future — both before they met and after — so it's fitting they're selling about 100 Angus bulls in two sales a year with Jason's parents, C.W. and Shirley.

Yet, it was a series of very fortunate events that put them in the same place at the same time, and now tackling their goals and raising a family together.

"We were both children who grew up in the '80s, with one pair of Payless shoes. Our families both farmed, and it was hard," Paige says.

Her mom, a veterinarian, had off-farm income, and Paige always planned on the same.

"I majored in pre-med because I figured it was something I could do to pay for cows," she says.

Paige had already aced anatomy and organic chemistry before she let herself admit that her heart was always going to be in the cattle business. A switch to animal science her senior year led to a master's and then doctoral work in animal breeding. A collaboration between her graduate work at Texas Tech and her original alma mater brought her to Manhattan, Kan., one March. That's where she met Jason, who was there for one of the few in-person gatherings of his online ag business studies cohort.

"I'm telling you, the good Lord ..." — it's the only explanation they have for how they met and clicked.

Many texts, phone calls and cross-country trips later, the couple married in 2011. By their 10th anniversary they had lived in two different states and five houses. They added a daughter, Elizabeth, and son, Garrett, to the family, too.

"We learned a lot and gained a lot ... and spent a lot of money moving," Paige jokes.

The original plan wasn't to start in Virginia, move near her home ranch in Kansas and then pack the critters and head east again. But they followed the opportunities as they came.

"We pulled the trigger on moving out there probably a little before all the stars were lined up, but they looked like they were going in the right direction," Jason admits. The details are in a lease that was lost in Kansas and a chance to buy land for less per cow unit in Virginia.

"It's been a good opportunity here ever since," Jason says.

THE SWEET SPOT IN THE MIDDLE

The base herd started as C.W.'s FFA project. He grew up milking cows, but got into Angus in the late '60s. With Ike Eller, a Virginia Extension animal scientist, as a mentor, C.W. was an early adopter in collecting performance data.

Eller suggested installing scales and taking weights, and from that came estimated breeding values (EBVs) and ratios. C.W. placed bulls on test within the state.

"That probably helped build our herd as much as anything," Jason says. "I grew up basically with a set of cows that was pretty well-managed, and then we've been able to continue to build on that."

Pounds, fertility, carcass quality and structure — if their selection list sounds like it covers all the main bases, that's because it does.

"My dad always says if you can just be in the middle of the pack, eventually everybody that chases extremes one way — whether that's extreme phenotype or extreme numbers — they always kind of come right back to the middle at some point," Jason says.

Most customers sell at weaning.

"We're balancing the maternal cow with getting as much growth and carcass merit as we can have," Paige says.

They have always been focused on the product, Jason adds, because they don't necessarily sell cattle, they sell beef. A handful of customers retain ownership and see the cattle through finishing, but the Pratts dream of offering a buy-back program and helping their bull buyers learn more about their carcass and closeout data in the future.

"There's no award we could win that would be more rewarding than watching our producers get top dollar for their calves and be successful; and I think our guys are hungry for carcass data," Jason says.

But for all the focus on the end product, they know the foundation is the cow herd, and that's why they place such an emphasis on fertility. Jason recently figured the average calving interval of dam's with bulls in their sale at 368 days.

"The two quickest ways out of here are to have a docility issue or not to breed on time," Jason says. "It used to be that they didn't breed, now it's not breed on

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time. We're trying to get it to where it's no longer just pass/fail."

Their forage situation varies, but quality is often more of an issue than quantity. Yet, they supplement as seldom as possible.

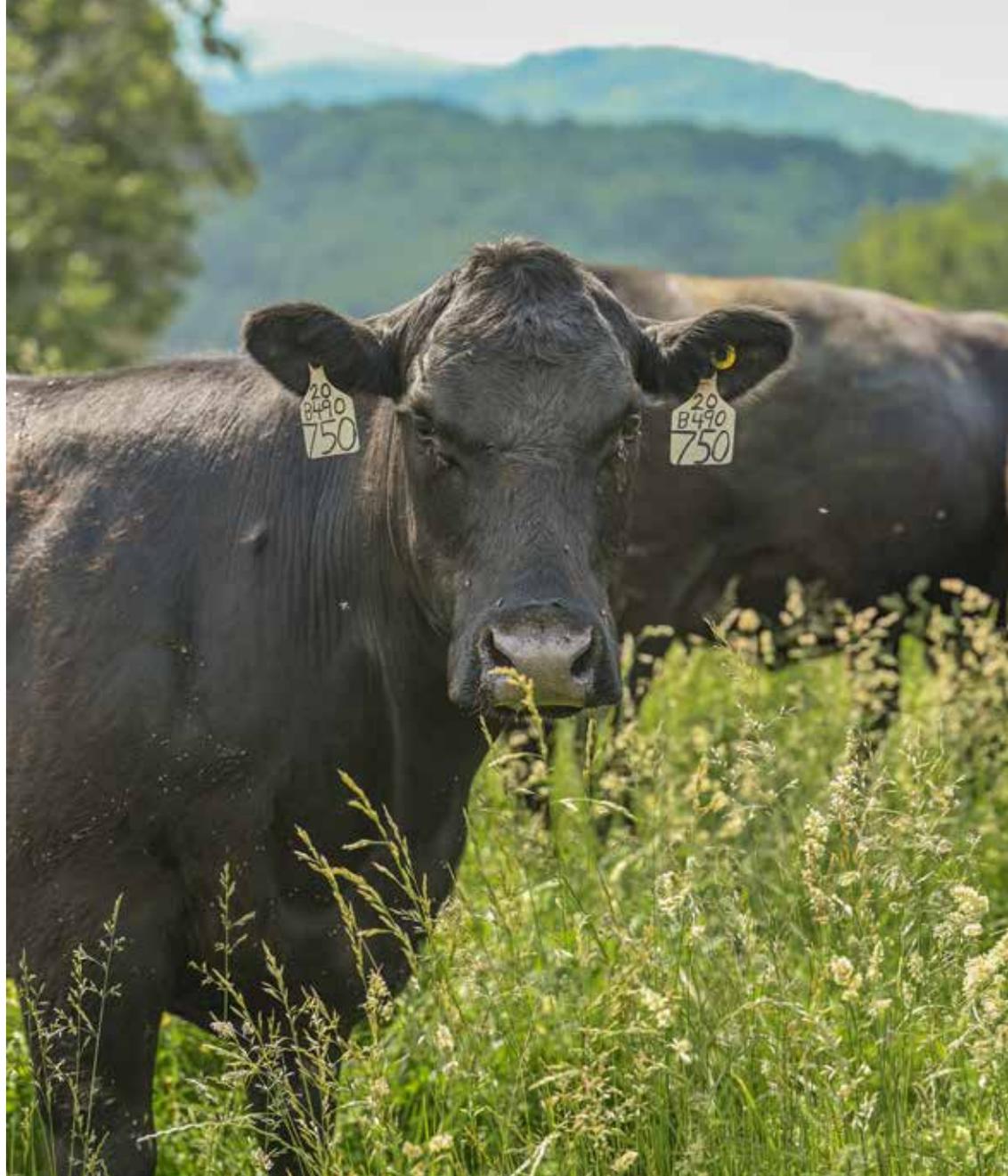
"They've got to kind of make it on their own here," Jason says. "We could put these cows in an artificial environment, but it's very challenging to make cattle that are going to work for your customer if you put them in an artificial environment."

They're looking forward to seeing how the functional longevity (FL) expected progeny difference (EPD) performs, and they've already used the foot structure EPDs to narrow down their potential sire pool.

"We put so much pressure on things, we're down to just a handful of bulls that will actually work for us in the breed right now, and so we've had to try to pick and choose where we could give and take a little bit," he says.

LIVING THE DREAM

Jason is full-time on the farm, and Paige is the beef genomics specialist for Neogen by day. Most of their collective free time is spent with the cows, getting involved in ag policy at the state level or delivering bulls. C.W. still provides selection advice and supports the operation by running errands and keeping up on relationships. Shirley gets the kids off the bus, sees that



they get to their homework and keeps their bellies full.

“We could not do what we do without the help of my mother-in-law. She’s the reason I’m able to have my job,” Paige says.

They’re a team in ways they didn’t imagine it working out when they left Virginia the first time.

“It all comes full circle, but it’s like anything, the path doesn’t always make sense at the time,” Paige says.

Early on their accountant warned them they could live their dream, but they better get laser-focused on what that was.

“I want to tell you that you can do two things: have a high standard of living and high expenses, or you can reinvest it back into your agriculture enterprise, but you cannot do both,” Jason says, recalling that expert advice.

So they haven’t.

“I think part of the way in which we have survived the ups and downs of the business is that we both have that grit in us that we can do without,” Paige suggests, drawing on that 1980s ag upbringing.

Evidence includes living four people to a single-wide trailer until they could purchase a home in their budget or making do with an older piece of equipment until the timing was right.

“I think one thing we’re very blessed with is neither one of us have any desire to run around trying to make ourselves happy. We find happiness right here, together,” Paige says. “And man, that’s a blessing straight from the Lord, because it changes your life when you can find contentment.” **AJ**