



The husbandry of cattle has been important from time immemorial. In Europe, where much of modern bovine genetics is derived, wild cattle appear in early wall art in caves occupied by Pleistocene man. Nobody knows when domestication began, but it is known that invading Norsemen were introducing cattle into native Scottish cattle as early as the eighth century. Those cattle were largely mixed colored with trends toward black. Horned cattle dominated, but polled cattle—or “doddies,” as the natives called them—were chronicled in Scotland in 1752. By 1797, the first statistical accounts revealed that hornless cattle were increasing.

Until that time, most of the cow world was concentrating on milk production and yoke service or demands for pulling heavy loads. What set England apart was the interest by a few influential breeders to select for edible beef. That accelerated after the union of Scotland and England in 1707.

Trading cattle between the two regions had brought red-hided English longhorns

Seein' Red

Born in Scotland, home in Kansas.

By Stephen L. Wilmeth

“The mention of cattle in the Bible occurs 151 times. Chickens are mentioned seven times. It just proves that anybody with any sense at all knows full well you can’t squeeze milk out of a chicken!”

—TIM RICHINS, NEW MEXICO & TEXAS
COWBOY EXTRAORDINAIRE, 2025

north to put more frame into the smaller Scottish cattle. This injected, recessive red color would play out over the years and become important much later. Prior to the England-Scotland union, much British farmland was managed on a communal basis, which made it nearly impossible to improve breeding practices. That changed as the oppressive feudal system gave way to more individual ownership. The first measurement of change was an increase in market weights. In 1710, the average weight of cattle was 370 pounds. By 1795, it had increased to nearly 800 pounds. Crop improvements showed similar trends and certainly contributed to the improvement of cattle.

In 1760, the emergence and influence of English breeder Robert Bakewell started a trend that would impact beef cattle production to this day. He liked his beef and had definite ideas about what constituted a proper beef animal. He wanted wide tops and deep chests. He also selected early maturing animals and he wanted them to be fleshing ani-

imals. To get to that, he selected for traits even if it meant breeding back to the parentage. Before the term was invented, Bakewell was actively practicing linebreeding. His techniques were not always popular with his high-brow colleagues. Their reactions varied from raised eyebrows to slanderous contempt charges of incestuous abhorrence, but King George III ventured forth to get a close-up review of what he was doing. In the process, the old boy let it be known that he found attributes in this new discovery in stock breeding. Others did, too. The influential breeders of shorthorn cattle jumped into linebreeding and became the first breeders to adopt it on a wide scale.

Among them, Charles Colling stood apart. He studied Bakewell and took the practice of in-and-in, or close breeding, to even higher realms. In doing so he eclipsed Bakewell's success. He also helped drive the demand for shorthorn cattle to the point that nearly brought extinction to another line of cattle that would sweep the beef-cattle world like none other. The benefit he bestowed upon Aberdeen-Angus cattle, however, will never be lost. Shorthorn genetics transferred into those early cattle contributed to their lasting impact.

Hugh Watson of Keillor, Scotland, started his quest to breed cattle in 1808. He began with six black cows and a bull, preferring black mainly because it was available. Not a lot is known about his techniques, but it seems he emphasized polled cattle and Angus



PHOTO COURTESY MUSHRUSH RANCH ARCHIVES

phenotypes. These cattle became the Aberdeen-Angus breed. From the first herd book printed in 1862, Watson had the honor of recording the first bull and first female.

It was left up to William McCombie to elevate the breed toward stardom. He had several things going for him, including a family with means and, as a cattle dealer, a broad sweep of breed strains from which to select. In establishing his Aberdeen-Angus herd, he used Bakewell's methods, but only to a point. He emphasized that it should only be used until "typiness" was achieved. He believed linebreeding had to be incorporated with out-

crossing to be successful. With this approach, he reached out, gathered, and consolidated the prevailing genetic pools. His crowning achievement was garnering grand prize for the Best of Beef Animals at the International Exposition held in Paris in 1878.

In 1879, the Polled Cattle Society was formed. It later became the Aberdeen-Angus Cattle Society, and its herd book was printed without the hyphen as the Aberdeen Angus herd book. Both blacks and reds were entered without prejudice. Those red-hided English longhorns introduced in the 18th century would forever leave an impact with their recessive red genes.

Home to Kansas

The first Angus cattle arrived in 1873 when Scottish-born George Grant purchased ranch country close to Victoria, Kansas. Grant was a promoter who advocated crossing cattle with various available stock, including Texas longhorns. The results were as expected with larger framed cattle moderated and the Bakewell theorem revisited with wide tops, deep chests, and fleshing individuals.

America's first herd book was published in 1886, containing 5,200 entries with an active membership of 112 breeders. Two decades later there were more than 1,200 breeders.

From the start there was discontent. That culminated in 1889 when the smaller contingent of ostracized red cattle was precluded from entry with the blacks. At the time, little



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A Rancher's Vision: Cattle that can survive and perform under tough western ranch conditions are essential. Legacy and a life's work are indistinguishable. AT TOP: From their Flint Hills operation, Joe and Connie Mushrush have served the Red Angus industry as association members/officers, breeders, and goodwill ambassadors. OPPOSITE: Red Angus cattle are known for their gentle dispositions. Here the author's then 18-month-old great-granddaughter, Scottie Jane Abele, inspects a pen of the ranch's replacement heifers. They were as interested in her as she was in them.

did anybody know that such a divorce was probably the best thing that ever happened in the Angus industry. The reds were always as genetically robust as the blacks. Some forward thinkers suggested they were the true untapped genetic resource. That mentality finally materialized in 1954 when a group of red breeders convened a meeting in Fort Worth. That historical event gave rise to the Red Angus Association of America (Association).

From the beginning, their approach was different. Influential breeders starting with Forbes, Hetzel, McDaniel and Chiga steered the cattle industry toward a greater focus on the commercial side, including marketing, crossbreeding data, registry of total herd reporting, and the introduction and expansion of genetic trait selection through expected progeny differences.

Modern-day breeder Jack Roberts of Dona Ana County, N.M., explained the importance of what the RAA breeders did this way:

“The reds remain a more pristine Angus genetic pool. They are closer to the moderate-framed cattle that so much of our ranches must have to be sustainable. They introduced us to more esoteric genetic interpretations that simple observations and subjective judgements could never provide. They remain a precocious, early maturing and easy breed to live with. For years they also provided a much more affordable entry into the Angus business that the blacks evolved away from, and they emerge as the best cattle for western weather extremes. Considered as a whole, it is the reds that best represent the original, royal lineage of the Angus breed.”

Two and a half hours east of where the first Red Angus arrived in America is the mix of ranch country that includes Strong City and Elmdale, Kansas. In that Flint Hills country is the home of Mushrush Ranches. There is no better place to assess the modern red Angus business than that family owned and operated business.

Joe and Connie Mushrush met as students at Kansas State University. There was



PHOTO FROM WILMETH ARCHIVES

The author first bought Mushrush bulls in 2008. That genetic base remains intact today. Butterfield Trail Ranch cowboys Pepe Mendoza and Pablo Gutierrez load some of those red cattle in an alley during the epoch drought of 2024-2025. RIGHT: The author's granddaughter, Indie Lee, and his wife, Kathy, anticipate flipping a coin to get the honors of teething this bull.



magic and they married between semesters in their senior year. Their story is that their agreement to marry contained a pact. They agreed never to live in town; they would have only two children; and, above all, they would never have hogs. According to Connie they broke every part of the pact! They eventually had six children, depended on hogs to provide early capital, and they lived in town before fortune and circumstances allowed them to live full time on the ranch. Along the way, they developed one of the premier breeding programs in the world.

Joe and Connie came along as an extension of the original group of individuals who created the association and didn't simply promote a line of beef, but set in motion the marriage of production and the science of performance-testing principles. The coat color of their breed became their signature, but more important, their mission was more about ideas and ideals than coat color.

A process that began in 1973 with collaboration between Dr. Richard Willham of Iowa State University and the Association started to estimate genetic predictions derived from parentage. It was a computerized prediction

of heritable traits that could be assigned to offspring and would then be printed on Red Angus performance pedigrees. The days of going to bull sales and matching wits with other buyers solely on subjective assessments of what genetic worth might be were over.

Other breeds would join the fray and actually take the lead, but the Association took it back when Drs. Rick Bourdon and Bruce Golden of Colorado State were enlisted to again concentrate on the science. The rest can be assessed as history, but cracks began to show in the new century when some of the Old Rock began to worry about a growing emphasis of promotion over performance. Interestingly, sustainability, as defined by the nimbleness to adapt to conditions that evolve over time, may well prove to be the hallmark of their new/old vision of a broader horizon.

Joe and Connie have both spent much of the past 20 years dedicated not just to their breeding program, but also to the Association. Both have been board members and Joe served two terms as president. It is no secret that they are grounded in the Association of old in never being content with the status quo. Their efforts survived and improved because of that resolve. As such, they are stepping forward with a cadre of breeders united in that philosophy and now intend to push a new envelope ever further and wider.

The visionary seed-stock ranchers aim to elevate their historic brands into steaks with a story. The group is planning to further develop a proprietary genetics-driven supply chain and management system designed to fulfill the demand for high quality Angus beef with documented and marketable sustainability benefits.

This group intends to welcome a reunification of all Angus. There will be no distinction between reds and blacks. Angus cattle are Angus cattle. That is the way it was originally, and the union of the two serves to propel both to a broader response to modern demands. ■

Stephen L. Wilmeth is a rancher from southern New Mexico. “We bought a load of bulls from Joe and Connie Mushrush in 2008. Mushrush genetics have been our focus since.”