



My Old Kentucky Home

Few scenes capture the embodiment of American agriculture quite like Franklin, Ky., the small town just a few miles north of the Tennessee border that Joe Neely and his wife, Deanna, have called home their entire lives. Homesteaded by Neely's great-great-great-grandmother in 1810, the farm is truly breathtaking. Red barns and black cattle dot the lush, green pastures, while ancient oak trees tower high above the dark soil. The only sounds are Tex, the resident guard dog, flapping his tail against his post on an old truck bed and the occasional *ping* of an acorn falling from high in the trees' canopy onto the roof of Neely's pickup truck.

It almost sounds as if the crickets sing "Dixie" as the sun sinks slowly onto the horizon, and Neely's southern drawl begins to recount his days as a young man in the Angus business.

Last year, Joe and Deanna were inducted into the Angus Heritage Foundation, an

► **Above:** Joe Neely and his wife, Deanna, make their home in Franklin, Ky. The past president of the American Angus Association made his living with Angus cattle, soybeans and wheat.

Somewhere south of the Mason-Dixon Line, a career cattleman tells his story of Angus heritage.

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honor presented each year to individuals and families who have made their mark on the Association and the breed. The couple, along with their oldest son, Dave; daughter, Polly; and Dave's oldest son, Nathan; were recognized at the Angus Convention in Indianapolis, Ind., during the annual Awards Breakfast Nov. 7, 2016.

A stream runs through it

It's not exactly a river that runs through Joe Neely's land; it's more of a stream. Nonetheless, it's the Kentucky farm's namesake.

"My dad came up with the farm name of Meadowbrook because we have a creek that

runs right through the middle of our farmland — through all of our pastures. It seemed pretty appropriate," he says with a smile.

The stream snakes slowly under a winding road framed by towering oak trees, their leaves just touched by gold on the tips as the summer gives way to fall. It gurgles softly over smooth rocks through a meadow behind a stately brick home, past a small herd of black heifers and winds its way quietly into a grove of trees on the horizon. Time seems to slow down, even stop. It's beautiful, really, like a Rockwell painting come to life.

"I've been here all my life," Neely says. "I've never known much of anything except farming and cattle."

Neely and his younger brother, Ben (whom he affectionately calls "Brother Ben"), have been equal partners in the operation for decades.

"Needless to say, sometimes when I've been out running around, going to cattle sales and going to board meetings and things like that, Brother Ben got left at home doing the dirty work, along with my older son and my wife," he says.

Angus Across

 America



Just because the past president of the American Angus Association Board of Directors sometimes had other engagements, it doesn't mean his heart wasn't deeply rooted in that Kentucky soil.

"My father started me out in the Angus business at an early age," he explains. Beginning with 4-H, like many farmers in the area, Neely started out raising tobacco for the club. In 1945, he transitioned to feeding steers. After a few years of that, Neely remembers his father saying, "Son, we need to buy you an Angus cow and let you raise your own steers."

The pair consulted a neighbor and bought an Angus cow with a heifer calf, from which

three more Angus heifer calves were born. Neely and his father became members of the American Angus Association in 1951, and a legacy began to unfold.

Until 1961, Neely and Brother Ben partnered with their father. When he "got tired," the brothers operated as Neely Bros. The duo farmed about 3,000 acres of corn, wheat and soybeans along with operating their Angus business.

Neely admits he and his brother were always more interested in the cattle enterprise than they were cropping, but grain offered a welcome income boost.

"We just sort of went with the flow," he recalls. "We had to make a living some way.

We had five families that all made their livelihood here on the farm."

Neely and his brother dispersed their share of the cattle operation in 2007, and called it quits in farming in 2009. Dave and his cousin, Chuck, each keep just what they can with their off-farm jobs and maintain about 50 head between them.

Private practice

During their years of operation, Neely and his brother sold all their cattle by private treaty.

"We never had a cattle sale," he explains. "Unless we were going a couple hundred miles or so, we usually delivered all of our stock for free. We pretty much covered Kentucky and Tennessee."

Neely says he, his father and his brother never followed the "fads" Angus cattle went through as the breed developed.

"We've always been sort of in the middle of the road," he says, noting that he likes to keep cow size on the large side at about 1,400-1,500 pounds. "Some people might think that's a little big, but it affords us more flexibility in the bulls we use."

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► Dave, Joe's oldest son and his cousin Chuck still keep about 50 cows between them near the home place.



► **Above:** Neely admits he and his brother were always more interested in the cattle enterprise than they were cropping, but grain offered a welcome income boost.

Marketing their stock private treaty had its advantages and disadvantages, he admits, but stands by his decision because of the time and money required to pull off a successful on-farm sale.

“One of the advantages,” he says, “you can fertility-test all your bulls in one lick. You can get them delivered and get your money in one lick.”

Deep roots

Delving deeper into his family’s history, Neely says his great-great-grandmother brought a lot of true grit with her when she settled the land more than 200 years ago from Spotsylvania, Va.

“She came here by covered wagon with five small children,” he begins. “She was widowed. She came here with five children, and she lost one child on the way. Except for that one, the rest of my ancestors, or many of them, are buried here on the farm.” He adds that an old family cemetery accompanies the property.

Neely says he and his family members have always been a close-knit group. Growing up, he says, everyone stayed within about 10-20 miles of the home place. Picnics were a way to bring everyone together.

“It made for a close family, and I’m thankful for that,” he says.

“I came along at a good time,” he continues. “I was old enough to get in on all the big events — the wheat threshings and the hog killings and the barn raisings — but I wasn’t old enough to do a lot of the hard work,” he laughs. “So I cherish those days.”

Neely admits that his involvement in the cattle industry has changed about as much as other farm enterprises have over the years, but those Kentucky roots run deep.

► “I’m still enjoying looking over the fence and seeing some old black cows, but I’m sort of glad to let some of the younger generation do the work,” Joe Neely says.



Tough times

Neely served on the American Angus Association’s Board of Directors from 1980 to 1986, and as president of the Board in 1987. The 1980s were tough years for the Association, he recalls, noting that registration numbers hit rock bottom in 1986.

In 1978, the Board purchased the *Angus Journal* and voted in the *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand program.

“Due to the dwindling number of registrations and those acquisitions, there was a strain on our finances,” he recalls. Salaries were cut. Jobs were lost. Times were hard.

Even so, as cattlemen know, you have to spend money to make money. That’s exactly what started to happen in 1983, just five years after the adoption of CAB, when the program sold its first million pounds of product.

“We had invested \$325,000 in that program before we made a dime,” he remembers. “Needless to say, as excited as we were about the program, it was all we had to talk about in those days. When we had our



Board meetings, we went out on breaks, and we scratched our heads and wondered, ‘Well, are we going to keep funding it?’ And we always did. Of course, look where we are today.”

After hitting bottom in 1986, registrations made a comeback in 1987 and have continued to climb since. Today, the American Angus Association registers as many animals as all of the other major cattle breed associations combined.

“I’m proud to have served during that time, and I appreciate the effort the men and women have put into the affairs and the Association since then,” Neely says.

We all have things we’d like the chance to do over, but Neely says he’s satisfied with the decisions he’s made.

“If I had it to do over, I probably wouldn’t do it a lot different,” he admits. “I’m still enjoying looking over the fence and seeing some old black cows, but I’m sort of glad to let some of the younger generation do the work.”

He smiles.

“A lot of my best friends were made in the Angus business. It’s a great fraternity.”

No slowing down

Even at 80, Neely admits his retirement hasn’t exactly turned out as he’d planned.

“I still have more to do than I can get around to,” he quips. “Maybe that’s because I don’t move quite as fast as I used to.”

He still has a keen interest in the affairs of the Association, he says, as he’s been involved in the Association’s annual meetings since they were hosted in Chicago. A past president of the Kentucky Angus Association, Neely was instrumental in forming the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville. He notes that he’s excited to see the Angus Convention moving around to different parts of the country.

“Anymore, I’m more interested in seeing my old Angus buddies from across the country than I am in seeing the cattle,” he admits with a smile.

The sun sits on the horizon as the final rays of sunlight slip behind a field of soybeans, leaving just the afterglow of the orange sunset. Neely pauses in the doorway of an old red barn, his hand resting on the chipped paint.

“I got anything else worth telling?” he laughs.

Just like the whispers through the old oak trees and the rustle of fallen leaves on the soft Kentucky meadows, there’s a good chance he does.