

National Western



Painting the West Black

The National Western has a colorful history — but you can't make any color without black.

by **Shelby Mettlen**, assistant editor

It's interesting how a monochromatic breed can paint such a diverse canvas. The Angus breed celebrated 75 years of Western heritage at the 2017 National Western Stock Show (NWSS) in Denver, Colo., but its history didn't start there.

A historian, a Board member, a herdsman and a breeder haven't so much as missed a single trip to the National Western since their families or they themselves started the tradition a half century ago. These Angus leaders tell their stories of Angus in the West.

Stockyards to Stock Show

It all started as a patch of dusty stockyards off the railroad in what is now one of the most populous urban cities in the western United States.

Dan Green, livestock historian extraordinaire and frequent contributor to *The Angus Report* and the *Angus Journal*, grew up in the Livestock Exchange Building in the Denver Stockyards, where his family owned and operated the *Record Stockman* from 1937 to 2008. The publication brought livestock market news and radio broadcasting from the heart of the Denver Stockyards to

ranchers and agricultural professionals throughout the area.

Denver was chosen as a railroad watering hole due to its central proximity to Chicago in the East and the West Coast, Green says.

The Denver Stockyards served only as a livestock auction market prior to 1906, when it became perhaps the most legendary livestock exhibition in the world. Adjacent to the stockyards lay a jungle of packing plants, where, prior to the introduction of cattle feeding, grass-fed cattle were led to be harvested.

The NWSS was introduced by the Union Stockyards Co., which was owned by the railroad and ran the stockyards.

"They started it because they wanted to say 'thank you' to the ranchers who consigned cattle to Denver, and they thought the city folks didn't properly appreciate the smell and the dust of having the stockyards in town," Green explains.

The Union Stockyards asked a local brewing company to supply free beer, put on a barbecue and invited the circus to put on a show. The circus pitched its tent on the Hill, where the Stadium Arena stands today, overlooking the stockyards. Thus, the Hill and Yards were born.

Spreading Angus west

Angus cattle were making appearances at the NWSS since its first show in 1906, but at



PHOTO BY JD ROSMAN

the time, Hereford cattle dominated the vast grazing lands of the western states. Progressive breeders in the Midwest, East and South recognized the immense potential the West could offer with its seemingly endless acres of grassland. Ranches began to increase herd size and creep west.

What Green says was the pivotal event for Angus in the West was the introduction of cattle feeding. Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and eastern Colorado stood out as the states best suited for feeding cattle, with their abundance of grain, favorable climate and close proximity to the stockyards.



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“The next thing they discovered is the best cattle to put on weight and have the carcass traits packers were looking for was the Angus-Hereford cross, so-called ‘black baldies,’” Green explains. When cattle feeders started asking for that cross, the Angus breed got to work painting the West black.

Three-quarters of a century ago, the American Aberdeen-Angus Breeders’ Association stepped in to promote its breed at the NWSS. Much has changed since the organization’s decision to drop “Aberdeen” from its name.

“Everything they do, the American Angus Association brings in a great deal of expertise, organization and structure,” Green says. “The Angus breed is very innovative. Once they came to Denver and organized everything, it greatly contributed to the spread of Angus cattle in the West.”

Go in’ showin’

Soon, the National Western grew from a small exhibition in a tent to the Granddaddy of livestock shows.

It seems glamorous. Black cattle with perfectly blown-out coats and leather lead ropes led by cattlemen and women with clean boots and custom hats parade around the stadium arena as judges with lengthy résumés evaluate cattle on a laundry list of phenotypic traits. Commercial buyers,



PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

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exhibitors and urban dwellers alike flock to the National Western each year to see what the show has to offer.

Behind the scenes, the cattle are far cleaner than the exhibitors, but it’s no problem to these folks. Cattle breeders live for Denver. It’s a tradition, a way of life. One that isn’t given up easily, but instead is built upon for generations.

“It’s just the mystique of Denver,” says

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Charlie Boyd of Boyd Beef Cattle, May's Lick, Ky. and president and Chariman of the American Angus Association Board of Directors. There's a uniqueness about the show and city, and the intelligence of the spectators and exhibitors is unmatched, he says. "It's a place to go learn and see."

Boyd's family has owned the champion Angus bull five times, one of which went on to become a prominent artificial insemination (AI) sire in the industry. Boyd's great-grandfather and grandfather started the tradition of exhibiting cattle at the National Western as many as 50 years ago, and Boyd can't recall a show that's been missed since.

"They would bring the cattle in on rail cars," he says of the earliest shows his family attended. "That's how long ago it was."

Of course, Boyd wasn't around in the days the railroad reigned, but he agrees that the National Western remains the only "true" stock show today.

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Commitment

"I've seen a lot of bad weather, truck breakdowns and trailer problems," says Ed Richardson of Fairland, Okla. The herdsman, cattleman and manager counted 2017 as his 43rd consecutive year strolling the barns of the NWSS.

Just 22 years old when he attended his first show in Denver as a herdsman, Richardson admits, "I was scared to death."

"We had 12 head on the Hill and 45 head

in the Yards, and I was green," he says. "I got educated quick."

That first year, he had the experience of a lifetime.

Richardson was fitting a bull for a Hereford breeder at the time, when he recalls hearing a familiar voice behind him.

"I was brushing on this bull, and I heard his voice. I turned around and I just kept looking up, because he was a big man, and I thought, 'My God, that's John Wayne.'"

He was a Hereford breeder, perhaps, but The Duke certainly made Richardson's first year at the NWSS a memorable one. Subsequent years have been just as memorable, he says, just leaving him a little less starstruck.

"You build a family," he says. "Sometimes, it's not that supportive financially, but the friendships you make, you don't forget that."

A herdsman since the age of 14, Richardson says he has no plans to quit.

"I've done it all my life," he says. "I enjoy it."

It's a people business, Richardson says, full of great families and intelligent individuals. "It's a cross-section of all different kinds in the cattle business. It's a rewarding experience."

Generations of tradition

Chris and Sharee Sankey of Sankey's 6N Ranch in Council Grove, Kan., have a long history with the National Western. Sharee



PHOTOS BY ID ROSMAN

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has been making the trip since she was 6 years old, while her parents showed Quarter horses. After a change of tune three years later, she started showing Angus heifers at 9 years old.

"It's pretty dear to my heart," she says of the show. "I've been coming ever since."

Chris and Sharee showed the national champion Angus bull in 2008 and 2013, two of the fondest memories the pair can recall.

"It's a family affair for our ranch, and our kids and their spouses, and now our grandkids, are all involved," Sharee says. "I'm a fourth-generation Angus breeder, our kids are fifth and now we're onto the sixth, so [there is] lots of generational history for our family here in Denver and in the business."

Chris was just two years behind his wife, visiting the National Western for the first time at 8 years old. He admits he's seen a lot of changes in technology since then, not only in cattle genetics, but in the ways cattle are marketed as well. One thing that's stayed the same is the people.

"The constant has been the families and the ranches and the cattle production side of it," he says, "just the enjoyment of coming to Denver and the thrill of being at the National Western. We all look forward to it. You understand, if you're in this industry, this is the place you have to come at the first of the year."

Chris also describes the National Western Stock Show as the last true stock show and says he and his family embrace the history of the National Western.

"It means so much to us," he says, "but we're looking forward to the future."



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