

The Cradle of Angus in America

Nearly 135 years ago, four Angus bulls were brought to the United States. Their final destination — Victoria, Kan. — became the birthplace of the nation's most popular breed.

by Brad Parker

On the windswept Kansas prairie rests a flat piece of rock that marks the end of a life and a limestone pyramid that memorializes the beginning of a legacy. As the sun rises each morning, the pyramid's shadow reaches out to the stone like a grateful hand to thank the man whose name appears on both.

Atop the pyramid stands the figure of a black, polled bull. He stares across the land, surveying what was once part of George Grant's estate, the first pastures in these United States upon which Aberdeen-Angus cattle grazed.

Today many of the residents of Victoria, Kan., know Grant only as the founding father of their town or a name on one of the streets running north and south. If you want directions to the forgotten cemetery where the memorial stands, you may have to ask the retired farmers enjoying their morning coffee at the convenience store, because the young woman behind the counter isn't sure what it is you want to see.

The blacktop road passing by the cemetery doesn't carry as much traffic as it once did. Interstate 70, just a few miles to the north, has seen to that. Now most of the travelers on the narrower stretch are locals taking a shortcut between Hays and Russell,

the towns that Grant used as reference points to find his parcel of dreams.

A noble dream

Grant was a cloth merchant in Banffshire, Scotland. When he learned Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, was near death, he bought all the black crepe he could find. Later, when the prince consort's loyal subjects were in search of mourning badges, they only had one place to go, and Grant made a fortune.

Some say it was his life's ambition, others say it was doctor's orders, but something brought Grant to America in 1871. He traveled the country from New England to California and back again. On the return trip, he fell in love with the virgin prairies of Kansas, particularly that stretch between

Hays and Russell.

He convinced the Kansas Pacific Railroad to sell him 2,500 acres of its right-of-way, and by the next year Grant had amassed 69,000 acres. Most reports say he spent around 88¢ per acre, although some estimates go as high as \$2.

Grant promised the railroad that he would "people these prairies with the best blood of England." He sold most of

the acreage to wealthy English families for around \$11 per acre, promising that life on the Kansas plains would help their pampered sons become hardy men. To ensure that only the upper class settled in his colony, he eventually required buyers to purchase an entire section, 640 acres.

He convinced the railroad to build a combination grocery store, hotel and post office on the land, and he named it Victoria Manor to honor his queen. There he dreamed of starting a colony of gentlemen-farmers. But most of those who were actually to come to Victoria were neither gentlemen nor farmers.

Many of the settlers who followed Grant were "remittance men," noblemen's younger sons who were unaccustomed to work and all too happy to spend the regular remittances, or allowances, from their parents. Such men usually went into the ministry or the army, so an adventure in untamed territory of a new state was a welcome alternative. Unfortunately, farming and stock raising weren't their kinds of adventures.

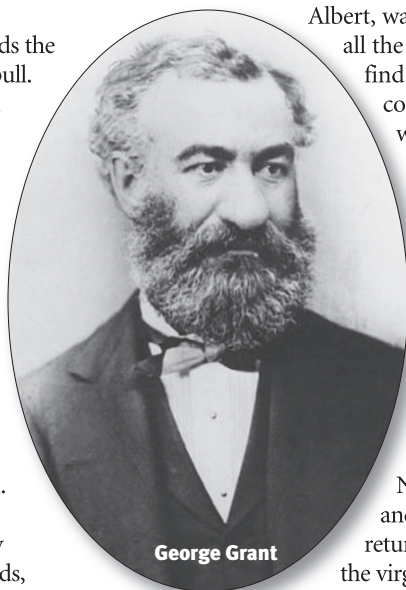
Coming to America

On April 1, 1873, the steamship *Alabama* pulled away from Glasgow, Scotland, glided down the Clyde River, and began its journey across the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. It arrived in New Orleans, carrying the first 30 or so colonists, livestock and supplies bound for Victoria. From New Orleans, the *Alabama* steamed up the Mississippi River to St. Louis, where the passengers and supplies unloaded for the rail trip to Kansas. They reached their destination around May 17.

Included in the livestock were four Angus bulls. At the time, those bulls probably were considered of minor importance to the entire undertaking, but they "later proved to be the most lasting contribution of the colony to American agriculture and the means of giving the venture historical importance," wrote Otto Battles in the March 1942 *Aberdeen-Angus Journal*.

Battles went on to write that there didn't seem to be any authentic record of the bulls' pedigrees; but John MacDonald, who had charge of them during the journey, stated that he thought at least two of them were from the McCombie herd in Scotland. MacDonald, being an experienced cattleman, did attest that all four were good individuals; and, in Battle's words, "history has proved them to have been good sires."

These bulls weren't the only Angus brought from Scotland under Grant's direction. At least one other shipment was made. On May 10, 1876, the steamship *City of Limerick* left Liverpool for Philadelphia.



George Grant

The American Angus Association turns 125 this fall. Recognition of the milestone will occur at various Angus events during the year, beginning with the National Western this month. As part of the celebration, the Angus Journal will feature glimpses of the past throughout the year.



Among the cattle, sheep and dogs on board were four Angus heifers and another bull, Royal George. He was a son of Royal Benedict from the Booth herd; and his dam was Cream the Fourth, also known as “England’s Glory,” for she was the pick of the queen’s herd at the Home Farm in Windsor.

Grant exhibited the five animals at the Great Centennial Show in Philadelphia before bringing them home to Victoria.

Proven worth

In the 1800s Shorthorn cattle were considered the most useful breed for the New World. Grant’s Angus were thought to be freaks because of their color and lack of horns. Many referred to their introduction to the Scotsman’s herd as one of his idiosyncrasies.

In the beginning, the only heifers about Grant’s ranch were Texas longhorns. The resulting calves proved hardy stock, as did their sires, through the rigors of winter on the open plains.

Not only were the cattle productive, they were consistent. The vast majority of the calves were polled and black. One visitor to the Grant herd wrote, “In driving through a herd of 800 head, it was singularly remarkable to see red, dun and even light mixed-colored cows, with the calves jet black, hornless and otherwise so perfectly resembling the sire. This is a most favorable recommendation of their blood.” The visitor went on to comment that the sires were from the herd of George Brown, Morayshire, Scotland. Whether these were among the first four bulls or were later imports has been lost to history.

That uniformity made the breed popular among cattlemen, livestock judges and marketers throughout the Midwest. Many calves were sent to feedlots in the Corn Belt, where they were highly favored because they gained weight quickly, then brought high prices as finished cattle.

Grant’s Angus stock made impressions at the stock shows in Kansas City and Chicago. Although there are no records of their winning any prizes, they gained a lot of attention, especially in carcass classes.

Something of a failure

The first year was to be ominous for many of the settlers, according to a biography of Grant in the May 1928 issue of *The Country Gentleman*. A prairie fire swept from Hays to Victoria, and Grant had to winter his entire herd in the Kaw Valley near Junction City, Kan. Fortunately, the other settlers hadn’t built large herds yet, and a few stacks of hay that survived the fire supplied their needs.



►Above: For 65 years George Grant’s grave was marked only by a humble stone and surrounded by a simple fence. In 1943, a monument to the cattleman’s legacy was erected by the American and Kansas Angus associations, among others.

►Right: On May 17, 1973, the figure of an Angus bull was placed atop the George Grant memorial as part of the Angus Centennial celebration.

The next year grasshoppers destroyed the colony’s crops, and some cattle had to be pastured farther north along the Paradise Creek, while others were fed with hay and grain brought from the Kaw Valley.

After that rough start, times may have gotten easier in Victoria, but they never were easy.

Sickness and disease took their toll on the settlers. Many of the remittance men grew tired of life on the plains and returned to their titled lands in Britain. Others moved to the East where things weren’t quite as difficult or into nearby Hays City. A few remained, though, and their headstones stand in the same lonely cemetery as Grant’s.

Victoria did not turn out to be the little bit of England for which Grant had hoped. On the north side of the railroad, opposite his colony, immigrants from along the Volga River in Russia established the community of Herzog. These folks were a hardier lot, and they thrived where Grant’s associates faltered. The town kept his queen’s name only because the railroad refused to change its maps.

The legacy

Five years after the founding of his

colony, on April 28, 1878, Grant died at age 56. His cattle were disbursed throughout the Kansas City trade area. Several of Grant’s animals were purchased by Joseph Rea, Carroll County, Mo., who would himself soon become a well-known breeder and importer of Angus cattle.

Although Grant was dead and his herd was scattered to the winds, the popularity of the Angus breed had taken root. By the early 1880s, large numbers of them were being imported, and the U.S. beef industry never would be the same.

Grant was buried just outside the Presbyterian church he built for his colonists, although the church was later moved to Hays with the last few members of the congregation. For 65 years Grant’s grave was marked with only a humble stone.

On Aug. 4, 1943, the limestone pyramid was erected in tribute to his contributions to the cattle industry. On May 17, 1973, the memorial was rededicated and that small sentinel was placed at its summit, forever to gaze into the past and to remind the Angus breed in America from whence it came.

