



Weaver Angus Farm

—Parlaying the Funds Successfully

Weaver Farms has expanded and diversified since that start in the cattle business in Champaign County, Ill., but it has remained a family operation with the element of success playing a continual role.

In the early '40s Bob moved to Peoria, renting a farm and starting an Angus and dairy operation with his brother. He also worked for Tim Pierce at Woodlawn Farms, picking up some experience on the show road and traveling from the Champaign County Fair to the International and Denver Stock Shows.

Bob and Floyd, operating as Weaver Bros., held one of the first club calf sales in the country. It was a "hot one" and things were rolling—with "no money but a lot of guts" the brothers purchased Robin Nest Farm. They raised purebred Angus from the start, but their livestock ventures were varied: they milked up to 50 dairy cows, produced Berkshire hogs and got into the poultry business on a large scale.

As one of the first commercial broiler raisers in Illinois, they produced 40-60 thousand birds annually in the mid-1940s. When that business became too competitive to yield a healthy profit, they turned to turkey production. As poultry production moved south for efficiency reasons, Weaver Bros. concentrated on the processing and

Bob Weaver bought his first calf in post-depression times with a special Production Credit loan for 4-Hers. Since that first purchase, as he puts it, he's been parlaying the funds.

In 1935, Bob and his brother Floyd pooled their funds from steer projects to buy a bred Angus cow and her heifer calf for \$220. The cow had a bull calf, so they sold him for \$300, added \$25 to that and bought a yearling bull. They used the bull, took him to a few county fairs and sold him for \$2,000.

Weaver says that was "like striking an oil well in Texas" as he relates his start in the Angus business. When the brothers reinvested that \$2,000 in several Angus heifers, they were really in the business and Bob has been in it ever since—parlaying the funds very successfully.

distribution phase of the industry, and purchased their first Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise in 1963.

Bob's Family Involved

In 1949, Floyd decided to go to medical school. Bob bought his brother out, continued the Angus operation and also expanded the chicken franchises. Since that time

he and his wife, Virginia, have coordinated the operation and their five children all have become involved with one phase or another.

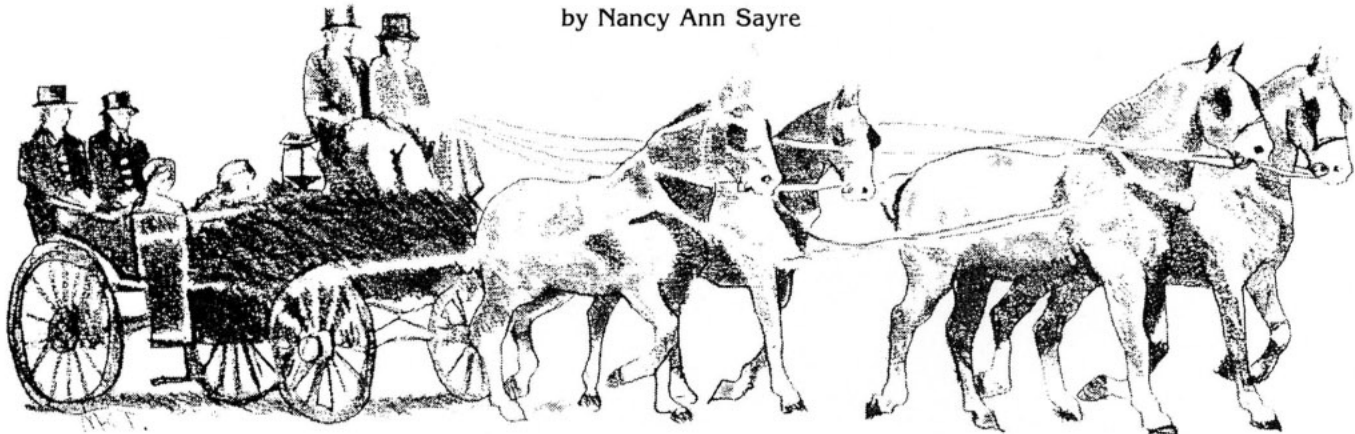
Jerry owns some of the cattle and has his own Weaver's Country Fried Chicken enterprise; Phyllis is in charge of advertising for the chicken franchises (there are 20 Kentucky Fried Chicken stores); Steve owns cattle and manages that operation; Karen manages the office for both the cattle and chicken businesses; Chuck also owns cattle and has an active interest in the farm, although he is in law school presently.

Hackneys and Carriages

Bob's love for horses cannot be ignored in the farm's history for it has added an interesting facet to the operation. After seeing a 6-horse hitch competition at the International Stock Show, he decided he would put together a hitch of his own. Raising Hackney horses and collecting carriages may have started out as an expensive hobby, but it has since developed into a fascinating form of investment for Weaver (at least one carriage has more than doubled in value within the last few years and there is an ever-growing demand for the horses).

The Carriage House at Weavers contains one of the most extensive and valuable collections in the country—the antiques range

by Nancy Ann Sayre



Weaver Farms includes much more than Angus cattle. Through his love for horses and sport driving, Bob Weaver has developed one of the nation's finest carriage collections and Hackney hitches.

from sporting vehicles to the more elegant imports from England, Germany and France. It is a museum in itself, but a working one since all the carriages can be used. Weavers participate in events across the country, including the 1981 inaugural parade.

The stable houses many champion Hackneys selected for their color, bloodlines and extreme leg action. As American interest in the sport of driving is renewed, popularity in Hackneys has risen accordingly and the Weaver breeding operation could be considered a business in itself.

Progressive Angus Story

An interesting and diverse history lies behind Weaver Angus Farm as it is known today, but most importantly it's a progressive Angus story—a successful one to say the least.

From the first bull they exhibited at local fairs to a home-bred Denver champion in 1966, through a long list of more recent national winners, Weavers have been breeding functional, competitive Angus cattle.

The center of their program has always been the Angus female; they have made the most of her producing and milking abilities. The early herd foundation was based on Bardolier breeding and in the early '70s Weaver Angus underwent a gradual but important change in the type of cattle it was breeding.

Roger Worthington started with Weavers in 1971 (he left to work for Ankony in 1976, but returned to Weaver Angus again in 1980). At that time Steve was finishing college, but had an active interest in the cattle, and Weavers' goal was to change the cow herd around. Gearing toward larger Angus females to keep in stride with a changing cattle industry, they were looking for growthy and marketable cattle.

In response to an ad, Steve and Roger visited Ted Watson in Montana and they really liked what they saw. A few heifers and older cows were purchased in the fall of 1973 and the next summer, when Watson offered the pick of his herd, Steve and Jerry returned to buy an additional 20 cows.

A Setback Suffered

A bull calf at Watsons' made quite an impression on Steve that summer, but he was one of two calves not for sale. When Jerry and Roger traveled west to buy some steer calves the following November, they were able to buy two-thirds of the calf—he was Black Marshall 482 "Sport". Weavers campaigned Sport quite successfully over the next two years and used him extensively as a herd sire. The exceptional size and growth of his progeny put them in high demand and he was one of the most popular Angus bulls of his day.

Unfortunately, in 1978 Sport was reported to be a carrier of the recessive syndactyly gene. Recognizing that this line of cattle certainly had a lot to offer despite the mulefoot problem, Weavers tested for syndactyly what they considered to be several of their better cows. From there, they cen-

tered their breeding program around females that were proven free of syndactyly.

Embryo transplants made it possible to build a line of cattle that took advantage of Sport's superior genetics, but were free of the detrimental gene. That took years to do though, and a setback was certainly suffered—not only in marketing, but generation turnover, the key to progress, was interrupted as well.

"The last 10 years in the Angus business have really been revolutionary," says Steve, "and people have made tremendous strides in producing the kind of cattle that we like . . . we had to sacrifice some progress."

His own reaction to the discovery of the genetic problem? "Well, you cry . . . then you spend four or five years trying to work through things, we're still working. In anybody's cow herd the young cows are going to do the job best, but we only have a handful of females left in the herd born from 1976-79 . . . that sure hurts you."

"I'm not sure I've settled all my feelings. We're in a situation in the breed now where we are seeing some other problems come up. You can breed around these problems or you can get rid of them, but anytime you eliminate a bloodline you shrink the breed's genetic pool. The Sport cattle milk well and

they grow well . . . we're not going to throw it all away."

Concentrating on Transplant Work

Despite this setback, the cattle purchased in Montana formed a solid base for the Weaver herd. The females basically stem today from three cow lines, tracing to Marshall Lass 360, Zaramere 79 (dam of Sport), and Betty Black 217. The "Lass" line is predominant and includes Sporty Lass 610, a well-known show ring winner that is proven clean of syndactyly and has several daughters in the herd.

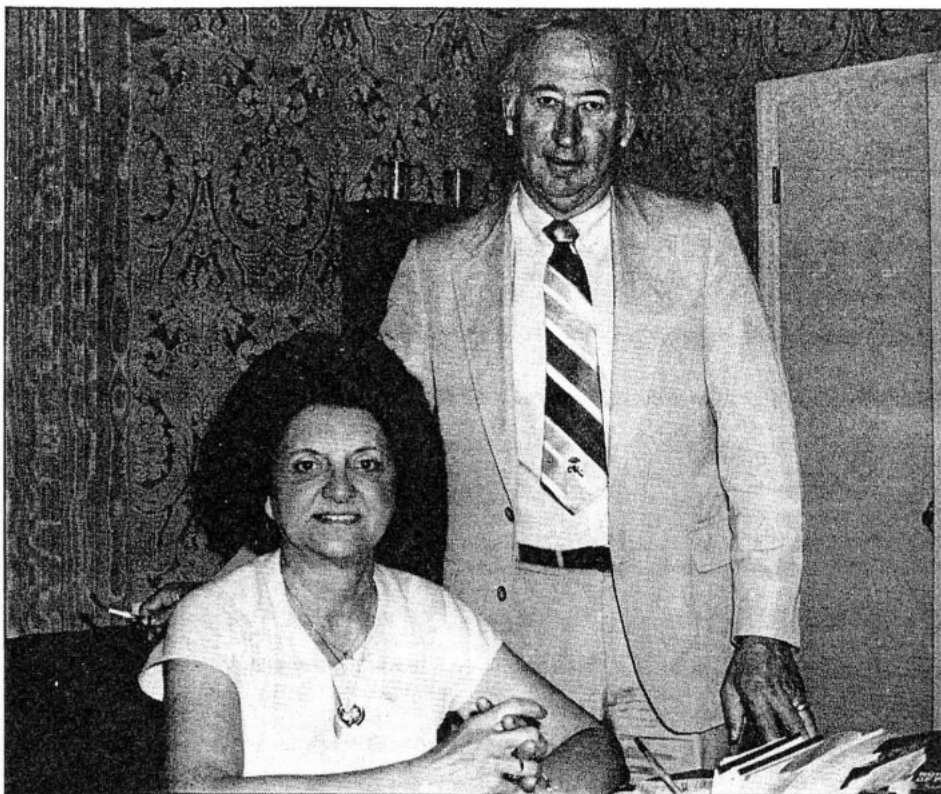
The herd numbers around 80 head now, but Weavers are in the process of selling many of the cows. Concentration at this point is on the transplant program with emphasis on the younger females (10-15 cows at a time are in transplant on the farm).

All transplant work is done at the farm and in order to expand the genetic base of the Weaver females, some outside cattle have come into the program on a share basis. Superior cows are selected and Weavers do the transplant work in return for the opportunity to keep some of the resulting heifer calves.

Soundness Stressed

They are always looking for something good at Weaver Angus. "You never can get

Bob and Virginia Weaver



"The first Angus calf transplant in the U.S. was born here in 1977," notes Steve Weaver. He manages the cattle operation at Weaver Angus (owned with his father and brothers) and is most excited about potential in the transplant field.

Although pregnancy rates for frozen embryos are low at this point, results from recent tests are encouraging and Steve sees this as a valuable tool in breeding cattle.

"The biggest problem now is not being able to get enough pregnancies out of the cows we want calves from."

"I anticipate flushing these cows over the course of a year and freezing those embryos. By working with a good commercial cattle producer who has cows that will milk, we could synchronize those recipient cows and put the embryos in them the next time through the chute . . . then just turn the clean up bulls out. That way my work would be done and we could get a few hundred calves born at one time of the year."

"A major headache with a transplanting program is the calving interval—you spend years getting a 60-day calving interval, eliminating reproductive problems and working hard at it . . . you may not have the reproductive problems, but suddenly you are calving year-round again. I don't appreciate fighting winter scours, summer heat and everything else. . . . it's a lot of work."

"There are problems with records on cows in transplant too, since transplant progeny are not reflected in their breeding value. We're not getting top figures on our top-producing cows and some of our other cows rank higher than they should."

"You don't like to try and sell a top bull calf and tell a buyer the dam's breeding value is 100. I'll be really happy when the day comes that we can figure out how to ratio our transplant calves and evaluate what kind of a job a cow is doing."

Another concern is the issue of using only Angus cows as recipients and Steve feels strongly that a calf worth transplanting should be raised by a good milker.

"I think the milk production of our donor cows would be far superior to any commercial black cow you could buy and could also compete with a Holstein running on pasture and silage. . . . so I'm convinced we are not giving the transplant calves any advantage."

Weaver recognizes embryo transplanting as a management tool that should be used to its full advantage.

"It's only a tool though and won't change the genetics, it just helps a breeder get where he wants to go. A problem that too many cows are in transplant across the country? Definitely—everybody thinks they've got a cow to transplant and they just won't all work."

They have been finding females that will work at Weaver Angus though, and the future is exciting . . .

"Perhaps we'll get down the road a few years, have all these really good cows and just turn them out with a bull . . . what do you think of that?"



Roger Worthington, Steve Weaver, Dick Burns and Jerry Weaver (pictured from left to right) are the work force in charge at Weaver Angus Farm today.

to look at a bull soon enough and you never find too many to look at" is a general rule that speaks for their progressive and aggressive attitude when it comes to sire selection.

An attempt is made to use bulls that are bred differently from most widely used sires, reflecting their concern for the narrowing genetic base of the Angus breed. Their extensive transplant program has allowed the use of a variety of bulls and young sires are selected to take advantage of maximum genetic progress.

Soundness and efficiency are stressed along with growth characteristics; Steve feels strongly that some sacrifice in height to keep cattle sound on their feet and legs as well as efficient in roughage conversion will pay off in the long run.

Professional Approach

A professional approach to management and marketing has been the key to success in the many Weaver enterprises—Angus cattle included. They have made a point to have personnel who deal easily with other people and are professional about their jobs.

At present, the Weaver Angus operation is headed by Steve Weaver, Roger Worthington and Dick Burns. Steve and Dick are mainly responsible for herd management and the daily farm decisions, while Roger travels extensively to promote Weaver cattle and their semen. Each of the three gets plenty of industry-wide exposure though, always selling and always looking for good ones to buy.

Weaver cattle have been sold through almost any channel available, but the majority of recent sales have been at private treaty. Bulls are sold as calves and most are moved to the west and southwest, since the local Illinois market consists of more club calf buyers than commercial cattlemen. Several bulls have been exported; semen sales have been a consistent source of income; and now, with expansion of the transplant program, sales of pregnant recipients have increased.

The added glamour of show ring winnings has undoubtedly played a strong role

in the success of Weaver Angus and popularity of their cattle. Showing and the accompanying exposure are important aids in merchandising, but they are kept in careful perspective by Weavers and combined with a solid breeding program.

Steve expresses a concern over widespread opinion that a popular show bull cannot also excel in performance. He feels an animal should be able to fill both roles, and that a breeder's program should prove as much.

Honest Analysis Is Important

They believe in records at Weaver Angus and they use them. Stressing milking ability and fertility along with growth, they generally find their biggest cattle are their heaviest performers. Recent management practices have raised some problems with performance records though. Since most of their bulls are sold as calves, yearling ratios lose much of their meaning, and Weavers also feel the transplant program tends to distort breeding values on cows.

To offset these problems weaning weights are more heavily stressed, measurements and visual selection are used, and dam production records are studied.

"Most important though," comments Steve, "you must be honest with yourself. If a cow won't milk, you don't want to use the offspring. Perhaps with transplanting and a better-milking recipient, you could market the calves anyhow . . . but someday it's going to catch up with you. As long as there's a business, we plan on being in it . . . so you have to be honest with yourself."

Weavers try to set a few goals every year and perhaps that is what has kept them in stride with the business. The farm is a family operation, run professionally and very successfully. What are their goals now?

They aim to have at least 100 transplant calves on the ground this year and they certainly want to expand that program; plans are in the making for a 50th Anniversary sale in 1985; but most importantly, Weavers plan to stay in the business and keep moving forward . . .

"We breed cattle to make a profit, but we sure want to have better cattle when we end up, we want to be making progress." ▽