

# A General Among Colonels

By Jim Cotton  
Editor

**A**mong the professions, it's said conductors of symphony orchestras enjoy the longest lifespan. Many stay engaged, immersed in their work well into their eighth decade, some still conducting in their 90s.

Arturo Toscanini remained active until his death at 87. Boston's Sir Arthur Fiedler conducted until his death at 85 in 1979. Eugene Onnandy passed away at 86 and was still influential at his post, the Philadelphia Orchestra where he officially retired in 1980. His predecessor, Leopold Stokowski first mounted the podium in 1909 and conducted orchestras the world over until his death at 95. He founded the American Symphony Orchestra at the age of 80 in New York City. Cleveland's George Szell maintained a vigorous career until the age of 73, and Hungarian-born George Solti continues with the London Philharmonic at the relatively junior age of 77.

There appears much to be said for choosing a profession one likes, where one can lose himself or herself and never become bored or calloused toward the subject. Music emerges as one of those areas of study, and if Colonel Roy Johnston were here, he might suggest his profession qualifies as another. The Colonel Johnston lived into his 90th year.

And when he finally laid the gavel aside at the age of 77, he was still in command. His lifelong appreciation for the livestock business and interest in its species remained undimmed until his departure from this life.

Something gripped a young man, a very young man, when he first braved the auction block and faced the crowd. If there he gained a sense of vision and a foothold on his future, it was a powerful attraction indeed. It propelled him into national prominence for decades and earned the reputation from peers and clients alike as the greatest of the great or near great.

**Johnston really began** the Angus portion of his career in Muskogee, Okla., at the sale of L.R. Kershaw, a breeder who reportedly wanted a man in the box who could "sell fast."

Colonel Johnston had, by that time (1938), proved he could sell at a good clip. After all, he was no greenhorn having spent more than 20 years selling mules throughout the mid-South. Besides his acceptance as the top mule auctioneer of the nation, the Colonel had amassed countless feeder cattle and Hereford sales.

He's been called the "Dean of pedigreed auctioneers", an accolade earned largely after he rose to prominence in Angus circles.

How many young auctioneers started their careers at

a bake sale, selling pies? Must be dozens, and Roy Johnston began paying his dues in that setting as well. His employer, a Mr. Otis Freeman, was a renowned auctioneer of the Macon County (Mo.) area. Roy was simply a "hand" hired for farm chores at \$15 a month plus mom and board. The year is not recorded but it was likely during WWI or before.

Susceptibility to hoarseness handicapped Col. Freeman, and when asked to sell the pies before next morning's sale, the colonel demurred. Young Johnston stepped forward and offered to sell the pies. In saving the colonel's voice, a star was born.

Then, a week later, Roy filled in for an ailing auctioneer at a farm sale. He



**Colonel Roy G. Johnston**  
**June 20, 1898 - December 17, 1988**

*Two-term board member of the American Angus Assn., beef cattle and livestock judge, auctioneer, Angus marketeer, seedstock producer, cattle rancher...He is survived by his wife Jeannie, his bride since 1963. His funeral service December 22 was conducted at the Raymore (Mo.) Christian Church and graced by a solo from longtime friend and national entertainment figure LeRoy Van Dyke. Pallbearers included Weldon Jackson, Bob Spangler, Ray Sims, Veryl Jones, Ed Tomson, Claude Barnes, Lyle Haring, and Jim Bush.*

booked three more farm sales before that sale was over.

The local banker took note and urged Roy to enroll in the American Auction College (later to become the Kansas City Auction School). The loan was made, Roy applied himself, and cried 73 farm sales during his first year out on the mad. He was still in his late teens. This phase of his career spanned seven years, the seedbed for growth.

Roy was gaining a reputation and under the tutelage of the highly regarded veteran PM. Gross, he began broadening his range of capabilities. Roy hung around the Kansas City mule market and started filling in when the block was vacant. Roy so impressed the yard owners they offered him a regular position. The year was 1930 and Roy spent the next 18 years cultivating not only a trade but a trademark style that would serve him well for a lifetime.

**He chalked up his** first Angus effort during these important years. In 1934, he was selected from a field of 42 auctioneers to sell the prestigious International Livestock sale at the famous Chicago location. Added was the bonus of selling the International Grand Champion steer. There was

no contest after that. Roy did the honors for the next 40 years. From that block in 1969, he sold the champion to t.v. personality Arthur Godfrey for \$30 a pound... recorded on live television.

As World War II approached, Roy could see mechanization would spell the decline of the mule trade. The Kershaw sale in 1938 and the Hamilton Bros. sale held at Good Hope, Ill., spawned the Angus years and sales in 47 states, Canada, Mexico, and Cuba. His style, presence, sense of drama, and staccatopace challenged the tradition and the crowd warmed to it immediately. Roy became not only a highly respected member of the Angus industry sales force but also began investing in seedstock and was a principal or partner in several notable herds and operations of that era.

The Oxbow Ranch of Prairie City, Ore., was one of his interests as was the Tarkio Ranch of Wyoming. Roy dispersed the Oxbow cattle at his Silvertop Farms in Missouri. Many foundation herds sprang from that source as the cattle were of especially high quality. The Tarkio herd was eventually dispersed and was labelled the largest registered Angus dispersion in history to that time.

One other notable dispersion Roy cried was the J.C. Penney-James Angus dispersion sale in 1965, a million dollar-plus event.

Roy Johnston's career included expertise in not only cattle but recognition as one of the nation's foremost judges of mule flesh. Plus he was no stranger to selling swine, most commonly Poland China hogs. Versatility was a built-in quality; he apparently could move in many circles with

grace, knowledge, and personal charisma.

**According to Angus** chronicler W.J. McKeag, one of the Colonels signature chants included, "Oh, I believe I would - ". One occasionally hears the phrase today and wonders if it came from this source and if it's delivered with the same conviction and persuasion as the authors. He was supposed to have retired after 57 years above the ring at the Thompson Angus sale in Vienna, Mo. His last recorded sale, though, was for Bell and Sons, Osceola, Iowa, in the spring of 1977. He was nearly 80 years of age.

Colonel Roy G. Johnston witnessed an amazing and enviable era in the Angus panorama. He was the companion and confidant of such legends as Foss Palmer of the *Drover's Journal*, *American Angus Assn.* Executive Secretary Frank Richards, breeder J. Garrett Tolan, and crossed paths with fellow Missourian President Harry Truman. The two often exchanged observations in the Kansas City airport when Mr. Truman was traveling as a United States Senator.

All things considered, Roy Johnston and Arturo, Leopold, or Sir Arthur might find more in common than first glance would suppose. They lived for their work. They were in charge. They left memories and touched the lives of many who will not forget.

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