

A Century and Ten

Votaw Family roots and respect run deep on the plains of Nebraska.

BY TROY SMITH

Cattle were plenty and people few when the Votaw clan settled on the Nebraska plains. The family was of hardy Quaker stock but weary of trying to cultivate a poorly drained Illinois farm. Their search for country high and dry led them to file their Nebraska claims more than 110 years ago. Those were days when Longhorns were yet common but yielding to influence from the British breeds. Eli Votaw chose Angus.

Long respected Angus breeder Eli "Bus" Votaw Jr. still owns and operates the ranch his father homesteaded. Bus and his wife, Bette, merchandise some 200 registered bulls annually, and it all started with the first Angus bull purchased by Eli Sr., back in 1889. But the development of Votaw's E Bar V Ranch began even earlier.

The senior Eli's brother, Wil, was actually the first Votaw to walk on Nebraska sod. During 1883 he scouted potential sites for the family's relocation and returned to Illinois convinced that southwestern Nebraska was the promised land.

In the spring of '84, Wil and Eli boarded the "homestead car" provided by Union Pacific Railroad as free transportation for homesteaders and their belongings. Stepping off the train in Maxwell, Neb., the brothers loaded their few implements and tools in two wagons and headed southwest through the canyons to a site near Wellfleet, Neb., which Wil had chosen.

Sharing a dugout shelter, the brothers set to the tasks of breaking sod and planting corn. Within a few months, their parents, Abner and Amy Votaw, five brothers and two sisters arrived and each filed a 160-acre homestead and a 160-acre tree claim.

Within a year, Wil and Eli built a sod house straddling the line dividing their homesteaded parcels. They worked their claims, planted trees and dug wells for other area settlers. In fact, they became well-known as well-diggers, doing the work by hand in an area where it took



True partners in the Angus seedstock business for 45 years are Bette and Eli (Bus) Votaw.

TROY SMITH PHOTOS



E Bar V Ranch and this part of southwestern Nebraska is characterized by canyons rimmed with cedars.

considerable digging to make a good well. Eli recorded one job requiring a hole measuring three feet across and 320 feet deep.

This high and dry country proved to be mighty dry at times and a severe drought in the 1890s proved to be too much for some settlers. Many gave up and left, leaving their claims to those who could tough it out. The Votaws held on and by the time the dry spell ended, they controlled considerably more land.

It was common for single ladies to file homesteads of their own and one such young lady was Lilly Latimer, whom Eli married but lost during childbirth. Eli remained single until the age of 41 when he wed a school teacher 20 years his junior. To the union of Eli and Grace Votaw were born nine children.

Eli remained in that canyon country for the remainder of his long life, as did brothers, Frank and Walter, and one sister. Their adventurous brother, Wil, at age 35, entered the University of Nebraska and eventually moved to Colorado and then California. Brothers Homer, Edward and Herbert left for Colorado too, but not before they had established a flour mill, the village power company in nearby

Maywood, and a lumberyard in Wellfleet.

Walter eventually became an implementation dealer but before that, he and Eli worked the country buying cattle and hogs from area farmers. Walter dealt for fat stock, usually five or six animals at a time, while Eli rode herd on their purchases. Then they would drive their herd to the next place to add more. When enough numbers were accumulated, shipment was made to a terminal market.

Eli developed a close business relationship with the Omaha Livestock Market and it helped him become established in the cattle business. In those early years, some commission firms would buy cattle coming into Omaha, then ship them by rail to stockmen in western Nebraska. The stockmen cared for the cattle for a year and then they were returned to Omaha and run through the market again. The rate of interest charged was high, sometimes as high as 25 percent, but the stockmen were allowed to keep any calves born while the cattle were in their care. It was a boost for some of the ranchers involved, but a really good deal for the commission firms. They received

the interest plus two commission fees on each bunch of cattle — once when they first came to Omaha, and another when they returned after a year in the country.

It was in Omaha that Eli bought his first Angus bull. That was in 1889 and only registered Angus bulls were used thereafter. Despite that early start, the E Bar V Ranch remained a commercial operation until sons Eli Jr. (Bus) and John ventured into the seedstock business.

Bus was just a skinny kid, fresh off the farm and wet behind the ears when he found extra work that broadened his exposure to the world of purebred cattle. During the 1930s he accompanied neighbors showing Angus feeder cattle in stock shows in Omaha and Chicago. Bus availed himself of the opportunity to study his Angus lessons.

In 1937 Bus bought his first registered pair, followed by the purchase of three heifers and his own herd sire. A stint in the service during World War II slowed progress a bit.

“Then, in ‘44 I bought some high-priced cows at a Kansas sale,” says Bus. “Kansas was thought to have had some of the best stock at that time and I bought

some costing \$500 to \$580 apiece. Every-one thought I was nuts."

During the late '40s, Bus got serious about the Angus business and continued to acquire herd-building females. He concentrated on Scottish blood and to this date, many E Bar V females trace back to early Perth champions.

In 1950 he acquired a wife, a move Bus calls the smartest he ever made. Bette Brodbeck grew up in North Platte with little exposure to the cattle business. Her grandfather did own a ranch and meat market, but most of Bette's cow savvy came after she became a cattle-man's bride. She rapidly became an active participant in ranching decisions and encouraged Bus's involvement in Angus association activities. Bette was a charter member of American Angus Auxiliary and served as the organization's president during 1993.

"For me, getting involved seemed a sure way to learn more about the industry," says Bette. "It really was. And it was a good excuse for going with my husband to shows and sales."

Bus started marketing his cattle by private treaty and through consignment sales. The first was the Heart of Nebraska Angus Sale in Broken Bow, Neb., which was founded in 1947. A few years later came the Western Nebraska Angus Association Sale held annually in North Platte. Bus served as the regional association's secretary.

"Bette did the work and I got the credit," he says with a grin. "But it's been that way ever since we got married. She keeps all of our records."

Votaws sold cattle through some other consignment sales and through joint production sales held with other area breeders, including Bus's late brother, John. But marketing emphasis shifted in 1968 when the E Bar V sale facility was completed. The sale barn was one of the region's first, built specifically for on-the-ranch purebred cattle auctions. During recent years, the annual February auction has seen 100 bulls and 60 heifers come under the gavel.

Bus and Bette never followed the show circuit seriously, but their three daughters did exhibit Angus cattle locally and at some regional and national shows. Chris was named runner-up in the Miss American Angus contest in 1970, and due to the winner's inability to make scheduled appearances, served as acting queen during that year. Sisters Kathy and Kerri



The family of E Bar V Ranch founder Eli B. Votaw Sr. standing (l to r) are Janet, Lilly, John and Abner. Seated are Delmar, Grace, William, Eli Sr., Eli Jr. and Amy

won national Angus queen titles in 1973 and '77, respectively.

"We were pretty busy traveling with the girls for a few years. That exposure proved to be valuable if somewhat unexpected advertisement," says Bus.

If the girls and the cattle brought attention to the Votaw name, so did the Votaw reputation for honesty and integrity. Consequently, Bus was elected to two terms on the American Angus Association's Board of Directors, beginning in 1975. And for as long as most can remember, both Bus and Bette have been popular Nebraska delegates to the Association's annual meeting.

The Votaws have remained active industry supporters despite some health problems Bus has suffered during recent years. Always ready promoters of beef, his heart problems prompted their study of beef's part in a heart-healthy diet. And further education has only strengthened their resolve to promote their product.

More of the day-to-day responsibilities for the farming and cattle have been turned over to herdsman John Dockweiler. Bus and Bette think highly of Dockweiler, who is building his own registered herd from a foundation of E Bar V females. Dockweiler's attention to detail allows Bus and Bette to concentrate their efforts on genetics as well as marketing.

"We've always tried to breed cattle with depth of body and plenty of muscle," explains Bus. "That's what attracted my dad to Angus in the first place. Just like he wanted back then, we want some growth in these cattle. But not at the cost of fleshing ability and soundness. Look around and you'll see this is rough country with steep hills and canyons. So the cattle have to be able to travel over this terrain. And the females have to milk enough to raise a calf without creep. I still believe a cow should wean a calf weighing half her body weight, without creep feed."

That philosophy seems to appeal to a good many commercial cowmen, because in addition to the cattle sold through the production sale, about 100 bulls and nearly that many females are sold privately each year. E Bar V cattle have been sold to buyers from all across the nation and into Central America, as far south as Guatemala.

Interest in their product is far-reaching enough to prompt Bette to order an extra set of sale bills for this year's production sale. The extras are printed in Spanish.

"We've been fortunate that so many people have taken notice of our cattle," she adds. "But we have to keep doing whatever we can to help them notice."

