




Rachel Breck

Guided by Enthusiasm and Love of a Challenge

by Nancy Ann Sayre



If you've ever met Rachel Breck, you remember her for her energy. She is an enthusiast about everything. Her life reflects as much, and high among a wide range of interests are Angus cattle and their breeders.

"When I got to be 70 my children thought it was time for me to retire from the cattle business—they thought it was too much for me."

At 74, she smiles after saying that. She may have reduced her herd to a dozen cows a few years ago, but she has hardly retired from the cattle business.

Her interest in Angus and fellow breeders is stronger than ever; her smile is a familiar sight at shows and sales; and she is now building up her herd numbers again.

"My ideal will be about 25 cows—that's enough to enjoy."

And enjoying it she is. In Hedgerows Farm she has a piece of New England (200 acres near West Cornwall, Conn.) well suited for a few purebred Angus. The setting is typical of the area and picturesque—red barns tucked into hillsides, small pastures lined by stone walls and many wooded acres. The farm and herd may be small in many eyes, but the quality of the animals combined with Rachel's enthusiasm makes up for any lack in volume.

Hedgerows Farm is perhaps best known in show circles for Topp Hill Annie 4106 and Hedgerows Jestress 5209. The herd traces back some thirty years though and Rachel has been a leader in northeastern Angus circles for much of that time.

"I bought my first animals in 1950, back when the greatest praise you could give a heifer was to call her a doll baby . . . I had champions then, but it's appalling to see what we were breeding."

Rachel bought some top individuals in the early days of her herd, but worked to keep bloodlines similar. Dor Macs Bardoliermere 60 "Maximilian", the 1957 International grand champion, had a strong influence in those pedigrees. Then in 1963, Rachel imported Buccaneer of Lisronagh, a son of Pearlstone of Gaidrew, from Ireland. He caught her eye when she saw him as a calf and she bought him on a return visit to Ireland, bringing him to the states as a year-

ling. He was "typey" and a good bull in his day, but dramatic changes in the purebred industry were just around the corner.

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She smiles when she holds up contrasting pictures of judge Herman Purdy and herself behind a "doll baby" and later Topp Hill Annie 4106. She feels she should have known better long ago than to breed the "belt-buckle" type.

"The change to modern type was much harder for someone my age, but we should have known better. . . breeding them smaller and smaller didn't make any sense, but that's what the judges liked. I should have known from my experience with Herefords that those small cattle wouldn't work."

Rachel raised Herefords in Arizona with her former husband before she bought the Connecticut farm and got into the Angus business. In fact, she credits much of her working knowledge of beef cattle management to those years.

"I was just an extra pair of hands during the war and I learned because I had to. Pulling calves, castrating and treating cows all had to be handled when we rode pastures." (She also relates how she tried her hand at roping, but never pursued that training!)

Anyhow, when the purebred industry began to demand larger cattle, Hedgerows changed stride too.

"It took me quite a few years, but I was determined not to just sell out all my animals. I wanted to breed up, which takes longer, but it's far less expensive and much more fun . . . it was a real challenge."

Rachel owned half interest in Camilla Wye 60A with Topp Hill Farm (of Hillsdale, N.Y.), and his influence of Canadian and Wye breeding helped her progress toward larger cattle. It was the purchase of the entire Topp Hill herd in 1974 though that put Hedgerows in the national limelight. Rachel bought the herd in partnership with her daughter Lorna Anderson and although they owned the cattle just a few years, the impact on Hedgerows Farm was great.

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Topp Hill Annie 4106, born shortly after Hedgerows acquired the herd, earned 14 championships in 8 major shows during that first year—capping her career as grand champion female at the National Western in 1976. Hedgerows sold the heifer just after she claimed the purple in Denver, but Rachel still remembers “Annie” with a special smile.

“Some animals just show better than others. Annie was a real ham-actor and couldn’t wait for the applause to begin . . . I called her the Gertrude Lawrence of the cattle world. I spent a lot of time with her and I’m convinced she knew me, even when she was at Fairview Farms . . . it was tragic that she died when she was only five.”

Hedgerows Jestress 5209 kept the farm’s name among champions the next season and Rachel was excited to be recognized for her national wins. She laughs though when explaining that she had not changed at all as a person, but all of a sudden everyone knew who she was.

Rachel is particularly grateful for the excellent help and guidance she had while she owned the Topp Hill herd (known then as Hedgerows II). Bill Rishel was working for Topp Hill when the cattle sold. He stayed on to help Rachel for a few months, then Jake White took over as manager. Although Jake remained with the farm only a few years (leaving shortly after the herd was reduced again) Rachel appreciated the opportunity she had to learn from both him and Bill.

The Hedgerows Farm history has included several managers and herdsman. One of the first was Richard Frank—he had never worked with cattle or held a halter before coming to work for Rachel, but he

stayed in the Angus business and is now doing extremely well in Canada. Archie Wildman was associated for 16 years with the farm. Now there is a new face around the barns—Peter Woods is in charge of the Hedgerows cattle.

Those who have helped Rachel include many others, but her relationship with Jake White and his wife Elinor is particularly close. She values his teaching and friendship.

“Jake is a great friend and was so helpful. He imparted his knowledge so tactfully and that was important to me . . . people have always been so nice to me.”

Rachel has loved the people and friendships most of all. She has friends in the Angus business across the country and in other parts of the world as well. She has traveled back to Ireland seven times since she saw the

Buccaneer bull on her first trip and has many close friends there. She also visited Iceland on an Angus “mission”—she was invited there to discuss the potential of importing Angus and Hereford semen in that isolated cattle country.

When talking about her associations made possible through Angus paths, Rachel literally sparkles, but one of her truest interests has always been with junior breeders and exhibitors.

She has given countless trophies and donations to junior shows; she has specially priced steers to encourage juniors; she and her late husband started the Connecticut junior heifer show which has since been named the Manley Breck Memorial Heifer Show. The list is long and her main concern has been fostering learning experiences for young people.

“It’s nice to see children get started with heifers so they can show and compete and then have a herd of their own . . . and I’d rather see kids lose at the beginning and then work hard to improve. It’s easy to be a gracious winner, but it’s much harder to learn to be a gracious loser first . . . learning to stand on your own feet is so important.”

“Helping juniors is the one thing I’ve been happiest about because I’ve always been so interested in education—long before I had anything to do with 4-H or junior heifer shows I had worked with many young people in New York City.”

Her background in education is indeed strong. When she was 10, Rachel started working for the Professional Children’s School in New York (a school for child actors, skaters, musicians or others whose long rehearsal hours required con-



Keeping pace with what judges sought, Rachel Breck made a successful change in the type of cattle she was breeding. Judge Herman Purdy is pictured with Rachel and two differing champions—in 1960 with Hedgerows Royal Lady 2 (left) and 16 years later with Topp Hill Annie 4106. Reflecting, Rachel feels she should have known better than ever to have bred the “belt-buckle” type . . . “breeding them smaller and smaller didn’t make any sense.”



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densed schooling). She became a member of the school's board when she was 19—signing the State Charter which she says was probably illegal to do—served on the board for 36 years and was president for the last four of those years. This involvement put her in contact with a wide range of people. (In fact she appeared on several radio and television programs including the Voice of America and the Ed Sullivan Show.)

Since then Rachel has served on two other school boards. This active interest in young people and education naturally spilled over into her involvement with Angus breeders.

She loves to see young people who are willing to work hard be recognized for what they can do. Susan Holston, past Miss American Angus and current public relations chairman for the Angus Auxiliary, got her first calf from Hedgerows and Rachel took her under her wing. The respect between the two achievers is mutual and Rachel is proud to consider Susie her "first protégé".

Rachel admits that she is especially excited to see a young girl excel in the cattle world. When asked about being one of the first active and outspoken women among Angus breeders herself, she smiles again.

"I think perhaps the fact that I'm a woman has been rather an advantage . . . people have been fabulous to me. And the minute you're willing and able to work, you're accepted for that—not because you're male or female."

"The hardest time I had in getting started though was finding out where there was a Connecticut association and offering my services. The men couldn't believe a woman who was a breeder then actually wanted to help. So anyhow, I worked my way up from the ranks of members to president and learned the ropes."

Since joining the state association in 1953 Rachel has gone far beyond "learning the ropes". Her list of responsibilities and accomplishments in various capacities is long. She has been president of the New England Angus Assn. as well as the Connecticut group, and actively involved with the Eastern States Angus Assn., the Eastern National Livestock Show and Eastern States Expo. She has been a Connecticut delegate for 21 years and is appreciated most for both her willingness to put a new idea in motion and her constant concern for honesty.

Her enthusiasm and long span of involvement has led her to pave a few new roads as a woman. In 1980 she was the first woman

to run as a candidate for the board of directors. Although she wasn't elected, she thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of running and feels certain there will soon be a woman on the board—the way perhaps made a little easier by Rachel's initiative.

Rachel's interest in the cattle business has been a natural path, based on her love of animals, but a look at her family and upbringing helps explain her total energy and diverse accomplishments—the qualities that really set her apart.

She was born in New York City and went to school in Farmington, Conn. Her course through the livestock world is a far cry from that of the usual "Miss Porter's" alumni, but she was brought up around cattle. Her father raised Guernseys on a farm near Mt. Kisco, N.Y.

"We lived to go to the farm on weekends and summers. . . I've always loved animals, in fact they had a hard time keeping me out of the pastures."

Peter Woods, a new face at Hedgerows Farm, is in charge of cattle there.



"My father was a banker-lawyer, but he wanted us children to grow up around farming and animals . . . he was a forward-looking man—interested in crop rotation and conservation practices (well ahead of their wide acceptance) as well as the breeding of quality Guernseys. We were very close."

If her love of farming and New England traces to her father, then perhaps her vitality and energy stem from a mother who lived to be 95 and traveled around the world after she saw her 82nd birthday.

Family acquaintances have brought her in contact with a variety of people—it was through her sister that she first received the invitation to travel to Iceland; her friendships made through a brother in the music world and her brother-in-law Benny Goodman (King of Swing) have allowed her the opportunity to spread her Angus enthusiasm in many circles.

Rachel herself started out in costume design and has since nurtured her artistic talents. She has had several exhibits of needlework, driftwood compositions and three-dimensional shadow boxes. A tour through her house filled with paintings, puppets and other art work (much of it of course centered around black cattle) is proof enough of the varied talents of this lady. She says she has never been bored a day in her life and it's easy to see why.

Conversations with Rachel though will usually center around other people and she seems to enjoy doing anything that keeps her in contact with others.

"Anything to do with public relations is heavenly when you like people the way I do . . . I think that's really why I like the Angus business so much. There are such interesting and nice people and I've made so many friends over the years . . . it's really a way of life for me."

Certainly she is a widely recognized figure at Angus events across the country and her enthusiasm is still as strong and contagious as ever. But it's not just the people she enjoys—this breeder is devoted to her Angus.

"Breeding cattle is a challenge and I'd like to feel that I've left the cattle business just a wee bit better than when I took it up—just to have bred a few good animals is all that matters."

And each cow in her small but well-loved herd matters terrifically: "At my age I think I get more pleasure out of the few animals I have than the many I had at one time and couldn't know so intimately." A