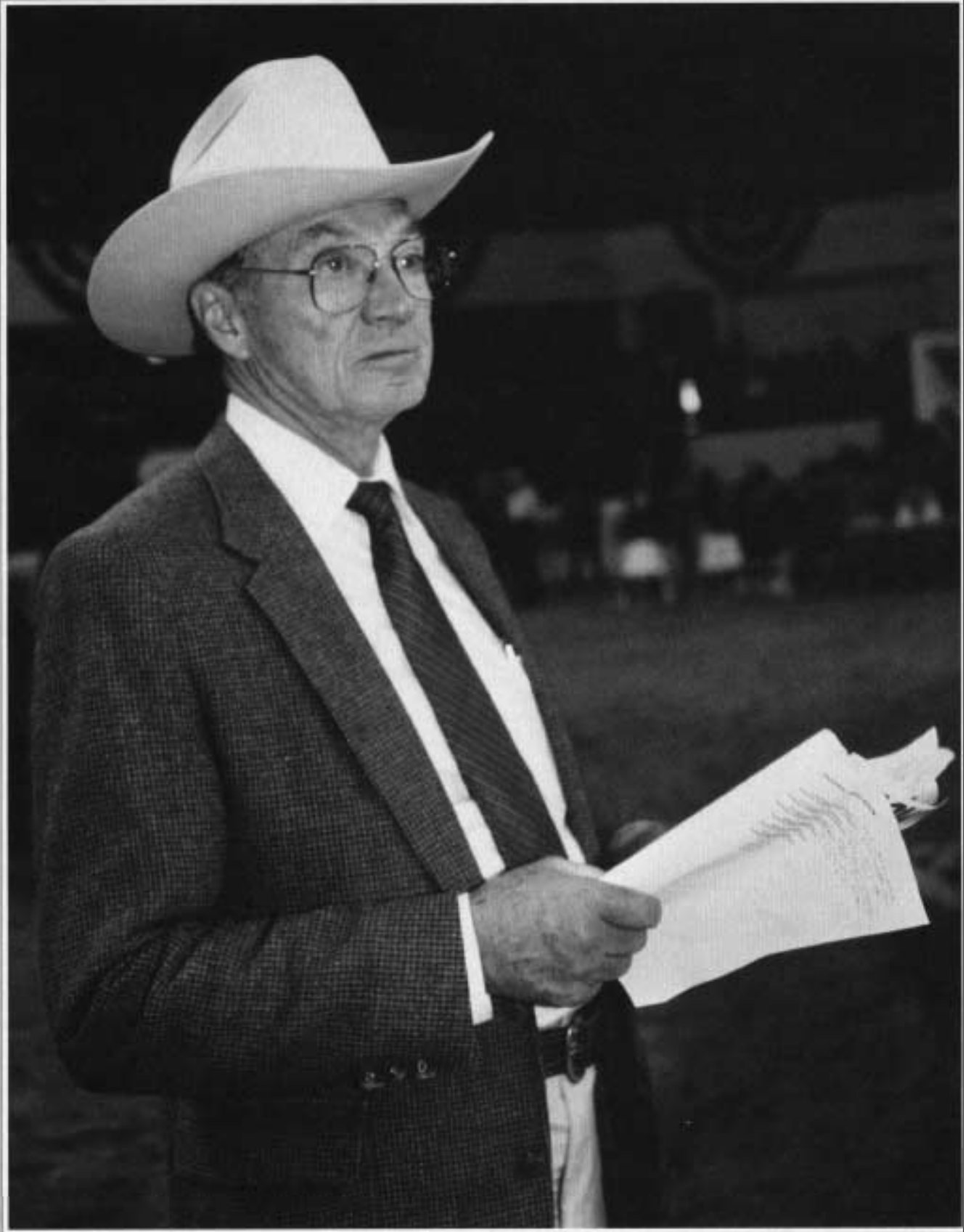


J O H N B A R T O N



A Fieldman of Integrity

Story & photos by Jerilyn Johnson



Choice, not chance, determines a man's destiny. Early in his life, John Barton decided to devote his life to the Angus industry and become a fieldman. It's a choice he has never regretted.

Barton's career has reached its concluding chapter. He is retiring as regional manager of the American Angus Association. Since 1967 he has served as a consultant, sale ringman and friend to Angus breeders in the Midwest and Central Plains states, most recently in Missouri and Iowa.

It will be the first time in 55 years that a Barton has not worked for the American Angus Association. John's older brothers, Bill and Raymond, served as fieldmen before him.

"We all have a role to play in life," says Barton. "I'd probably been happy doing something else, but I was happiest as a fieldman. No question, I've enjoyed my work and have never gotten burned out."

For a man who jokingly says he's been in more motel rooms than Gideon's Bible, sleeping in his own bed at night should feel good. Barton is looking forward to spending more time with his wife Gay, their two daughters and son, and grandchildren, and getting readjusted to life at home, not on the road.

After 25 years of service to the American Angus Association, 1.5 million miles logged, and countless Angus farm visits, sales and shows, no one is more deserving of some rest and relaxation than Barton. Still, it's difficult to walk away and leave it behind.

The Association staff and breeders recognize what a valuable asset Barton has been to the Angus industry and have honored him this past winter at several national and state banquets.

"John is one of those dependable people with a great sense of integrity and value," says Dick Spader, executive vice president of the Association. "In his

own way, he exemplifies the best in breed and beef cattle knowledge, promotion and good will."

Barton didn't take his fieldman role lightly. He believes regional managers should conduct themselves in a way so that breeders and the Association staff have confidence in them.

"When you say something, breeders should know that you're not just talking off the top of your head, that it's to the best of your knowledge," he says. "Integrity in this business is really important. People grasp pretty quickly whether you're sincere or not.

"I don't know whether I was all these things or not, but I tried to be."

A Good Background

Angus cattle have been a part of Barton's life since he was a young man growing up on a cattle ranch in west central Oklahoma. The youngest of 12 children, John's interest was sparked after buying his first Angus show steer from Sunbeam Farm at Miami, Okla. His oldest brother, Bill, began working as a fieldman for the American Angus Association in 1938. It was Bill who convinced their dad to buy his first Angus bull.

"Bill, and later on, my brother Raymond, had a lot of influence on me and my career decision," John says. "They taught me a lot about Angus cattle, the seedstock business and how to work with breeders."

After graduating from Oklahoma A&M College (now Oklahoma State University) in 1950 with a degree in animal husbandry, John moved to Winfield, Kan., where he took a job as county Extension ag agent. He and Gay were married later that year. In 1955 he began working as a fieldman for the Kansas Angus Association. Anxious to get back to the production side of the cattle business, in 1958 he accepted a job as manager of Fairlawn Farms in Topeka, Kan. When Fairlawn Farms was later sold, Barton became an ad

salesman and fieldman for livestock publications, including the *Breeder's Gazette* in Columbia, Mo., and the *Western Livestock Journal* in Denver.

In 1964, Barton made another career choice — to return to the Kansas Angus Association as secretary-fieldman. He and his family set up residence in Hutchinson and reacquainted themselves with the Angus business. Then in August of 1967 Glen Bratcher, executive secretary of the American Angus Association, hired John to take over a newly created fieldman territory. The Association was in an expansion stage with a record number of breeders and cattle registrations. Barton's new territory included Nebraska, Colorado and Wyoming.

"Glen was my judging team coach at Oklahoma State," Barton says. "I had admired him as an instructor and soon came to admire him as a boss and mentor."

Another person that positively influenced Barton at that time was Jess Cooper, an American Angus Association fieldman from McPherson, Kan. "Jess was an excellent judge of cattle," Barton says. "He had his shortcomings, but we were good friends and co-workers."

Witness of Industry Change

What has been the biggest change Barton has seen in the Angus industry?

"The development of artificial insemination (AI) and frozen semen had the most impact on breeders," he says.

When Barton was working at Fairlawn Farms in the late '50s they bred cows with fresh semen collected from a bull standing at stud in Arkansas. Semen was collected from the bull on Saturday and stored in vials. A can of water was frozen with the semen vials strapped to the outside. It was carefully packaged and shipped by airplane.

"I would pick the semen up at the Kansas City airport every Saturday night during breeding season and take it back to Fairlawn," Barton says. "We

would breed any cows that were in heat on Sunday; on Monday and Tuesday the semen would be in fair enough condition to breed a few more cows. But by Wednesday, the semen was so poor, we had to throw it out."

The role of Angus fieldman has also changed along the way. Besides a title change to regional manager, today's fieldman serve as advertising salesmen for the *Angus Journal* and *Angus Beef Bulletin*. This is in addition to their Association duties of breeder consultant and sale ringman.

"My favorite part of being a regional manager was the herd visits," Barton says. "Many times after talking with a new breeder, I'd wonder if I really accomplished anything or if he really wanted me to help him. Surprisingly, perhaps five or six years later on another farm visit, the breeder would bring up something I discussed that very first day. I'd forgotten it, but the breeder hadn't. That felt good!"

A Hazardous & Hilarious Job

Fieldmen have a lot of experiences — some of them true. Barton says he doesn't mind sharing a few of his favorites — some good; some bad; but all factual.

Back in the days when the American Angus Association used a classification system for visually appraising herds, John accompanied his brother, Raymond, to a farm in Arkansas.

While checking the cow herd, they noticed that the cows had the previous year's as well as their new calf on them. At closer inspection, they found that the yearling bull calves were not even castrated.

Puzzled by their discovery, Raymond asked the breeder, "Don't you ever wean any of your calves?"

"No, no," the breeder responded. "That ol' cow will wean it herself when it gets big enough."

"We came away from that farm just shaking our heads," John says. "It was just such a mis-managed operation."

One of Gay's favorite stories was when she and John were on a National Angus Tour. "As our caravan of trucks and cars passed by a ranch, a sheepherder paused from his work, took his hat off and placed it over his heart," she says. "He must of thought it was a big funeral procession. We laughed over that for days!"

Then there was the time John and Dick Spader made a trip to Nebraska



John and Gay Barton are now enjoying retirement at their home in Columbia, Mo.

and Colorado in John's new company car. Their first stop was at Jerry Adams' ranch in Nebraska. After parking his car near the barn, they joined Jerry in his pickup and went out to look at cattle. After about three hours, they returned to the barn to discover that one of Jerry's horses had ripped the car's vinyl top to pieces. The horse had also added a nice set of teeth marks on the car's hood.

"We took off with that roof top lapping in the wind," John says. "If that wasn't bad enough, after driving to Colorado we got stranded in Steamboat Springs for three days because of a snowstorm."

Fate has been kind to this fieldman over the years. He has escaped unscathed from a hotel fire, a car wreck and several commotions with cattle. Barton did suffer, however, a case of heat stroke while helping a breeder select some cattle out in western Kansas on a 115 degree day. And he's survived an emergency appendectomy in Oakley, Kan., which he blamed on a piece of blackberry pie eaten the night before.

Word to the Wise

It's been said that when a man is too old to set a bad example, he hands out good advice. But in Barton's case, he has always set a good example and been generous with compliments and advice.

"He's one of those unique people who works well with anyone around him," Spader says. "John's the kind of fellow younger employees seek out for advice."

His best tip for new breeders or young breeders just starting out? "Gather advice, read, visit other breeders, put together a five-year plan, a good marketing strategy and then grow into this business methodically."

It distresses Barton to see breeders come in with enthusiasm, but quickly become disillusioned because results they'd like to see don't happen soon enough. "Breeders should realize that this is a long-term commitment. They can reach a successful plateau in five years — or it may be 15 years."

Barton believes that educating and setting good examples for our youth is very important. "Young people are a lot more impressionable. When giving advice to juniors you should try to do it in a constructive way."

He advises regional managers to remember that all breeders are created equal. "Throughout the years, I've tried to treat the small breeder just the same as the large breeder," Barton says. "They are just as important to the Angus business. I've been criticized a time or two by large breeders for not paying close enough attention to them, but it just wasn't my style."

Barton would also like to leave the Angus regional managers with this last bit of sage advice:

Always get a hotel room on the first floor; buy a hard top company car; and never, never order blackberry pie at the restaurant in Oakley, Kan.