

A Visit With *Colin Kennedy*



Sometimes in a sort of reverie we may call the roll of the truly major livestock journalists of the ages—names such as Alvin Sanders, Fred Hahne and Sam Guard come readily to mind. All of them have passed from the scene. However, Colin Kennedy remains. Oh yes, the years have exacted a certain toll. The step is a bit slower and work at the typewriter unfortunately is not possible. Still, the razor sharp, Scotch-Irish wit, the hearty laugh, the amazing sense of humor, the sparkling eyes—these qualities remain undiminished by the passage of time. At 78, Colin Kennedy continues to be the embodiment of an incredible era in livestock journalism. He is still “super sharp” and always ready to regale the visitor with stories and anecdotes gleaned from over a half century of experience with the livestock press. These were the priceless savory bits which often seasoned his columns and added interest to his stories. This is the story of an incredible life—this is the saga of Colin Kennedy, the Sage of Webster City.

by Angus MacTavish

Colin Kennedy was born on a stock farm near Battle Creek, Iowa. The month was August, the year was 1906. Colin's father, David Kennedy, had some reputation as a stockman in those early days in western Iowa. David Kennedy raised Shorthorn cattle but had a noted preference for Angus and often assisted the noted Isenberger Brothers in fitting Angus cattle for their annual sales. It was in this atmosphere that the young Colin Kennedy spent his early years.

It was in 1924 that Colin arrived at Ames, Iowa, where he enrolled as a freshman at Iowa State College. He recalls that he first expressed an interest in mechanical engineering, but soon changed his major to ag journalism. The latter field would be his forte for over a half century. Student days at Ames later provided grist for the editorial mill and little wonder for it was a colorful era at Iowa State. Curtiss was the dean and Colin recalls such instructors as Kildee, Stephenson and “Bill” LaGrange. Colin took agronomy from the feisty “Bugs” Firkins. L.B. Pierce was a student and the canny Scotsman, George Edwards, was beef cattle herdsman. Colin had classes under a young instructor named J.C. Holbert.

The years at Iowa State were interesting ones. Colin spent some hours working at the veterinary farm. Ironically, some of his best marks were in dairy science courses. One fellow student

from the Iowa State years stands out vividly in memory as an especially good friend—Angus breeder Wayne Lacock.

Colin was awarded his degree from Iowa State in 1928. Following graduation, he accepted a position as farm editor for the Waterloo Courier. His excellent record in dairy science courses at Ames served him well during his two

Today, Colin looks back on a most eventful life—there were endless experiences, innumerable colorful personalities, and no regrets!

years there, for he authored several features on prominent dairy herds in that locale. Also, he visited numerous cattle feeders in that area. In the ensuing years, Colin would write a number of excellent articles on cattle feeding operations. Commercial cattle would remain a paramount interest for him. In 1930 Colin accepted a job with the Drovers Journal and moved to Chicago. The years there were interesting ones and Colin had the opportunity to cover a wide range of breeds and species of livestock. He worked under the noted “Fos” Palmer. Such luminaries as Frank Richards and Charles Corkle

were his colleagues. Colin smiles when he recalls the experience of working with the colorful Frank Richards, for whom he reserves especially high praise. “He was probably one of the great breed secretaries of all time,” he opines. The Drovers Journal years covered the period from 1930 to 1941. “It was a great experience with a strong publication,” says Colin. There followed a one-year stint with The National Provisioner. The Chicago years proved to be interesting and eventful for Colin.

It was in 1942 that the late Bill Barton persuaded Colin to accept a position with the American Aberdeen-Angus Breeder's Assn. Barton was an interesting personality and, according to Colin, quite brilliant and extremely capable. Many will recall that the Association office was located in Chicago at this time. Tomhave was secretary. The breed was growing at an accelerated pace and the volume of work was rapidly increasing. Colin remained with the Association until 1946. The next move would return him to his native Iowa.

The Journal years

In 1946 the late Fred Hahne approached Colin about a position with the Aberdeen-Angus Journal. Naturally, the post involved a move to Webster City. Colin has never regretted the move. His Angus Journal years were interesting to say the least. Colin would work for the Journal until its sale in

1979, a period of nearly 33 years. During most of that period, he served as managing editor. The late Fred Hahne continued as publisher until his death in 1952. Richard Hahne Sr. served as editor and later as publisher.

Colin points out that it was an incredible experience to work six years with Fred Hahne, whom he numbers with the greats. Colin recalls Fred's gallant struggle to hold the Strathmore herd together and to publish the Journal during good times and lean times. He emphasizes that it was Fred's persuasive influence that prompted his own move to Webster City.

Colin's early years with the Journal coincided with an amazingly colorful era in the life of that publication. In addition to the Hahnes and Bill Barton, Colin worked with such diverse personalities as Gay Quammen and "Red" Anderson. Naturally, Colin was burdened with heavy editorial responsibilities during most of the Webster City years. He covered seemingly endless shows and sales and special events. He wrote literally hundreds of feature articles, then an important portion of the editorial fare offered by the Journal. Colin worked long hours at his typewriter. (He found it impossible to write in any other manner.) He recalls it was never possible to get editorially very far ahead. Hence, there were those constant deadlines with which to cope. "Make no mistake about it," Colin emphasizes "writing is tough work at best." (The people who think writing is an easy task are those who haven't tried it.)

During Colin's long tenure with the Journal, many a reader turned first to his famed Angus Trails column. Colin created those paragraphs every month during the years 1957 through 1979. To many, Angus Trails represented a high water mark in livestock journalism. The column abounded with wit and common sense observations. A regular source of comment was the so-called "Old Skeptic." The "Old Skeptic" was a colorful and sometimes contrary personality, but he got the point across! This character was more than Colin's alter ego—it was often the voice of reason, raising important and necessary questions.

Fond memories

As stated earlier, Colin has always been vitally interested in the commercial aspect of the cattle business. Thus, many of his favorite stories concerned commercial operations and other large ranches. Favorite trips took him to

Mexico, Texas and the Southwest.

Two important Angus ranches Colin visited were located in Cherry County, Neb. One of them was John Drayton's famed Arabia Ranch and the other was Willow Grove Land and Cattle Company, owned by the famous Kreycik Brothers. No less memorable were trips to Delmar, Iowa, to visit with the Schmidt Brothers, who maintained an excellent commercial Angus herd.

Visits to more Eastern locations also provided readers with interesting fare. Colin has always kept an eye on the practical and some good New York herds fulfilled this requirement. Monroe Babcock was probably far ahead of his time. Dan Volker's practical operation was located at Eden and called DLV Farms. Colin truly believes one of the good Eastern herds was at Dancote



These three were all members of the Aberdeen-Angus Journal staff in 1965. From left are Colin Kennedy, Richard Hahne Sr. and Dale Runnion. A portrait of the late Fred Hahne Sr. (who is numbered among the greats by Colin) hangs behind them.

Farms near Lawtons, maintained for years by the Clayton Taylor Family.

Colin wrote the first major story concerning Wye Plantation, Queenstown, Md. Wye was not nearly so well known in those days. The importance of the Wye herd would become evident years after Colin's story. At any rate, Wye owner Arthur Houghton sent Colin an interesting glass bird. That art object remains a prized possession in the Kennedy home to this day. Colin will never forget his visit to Red Gate Farms in Virginia. Owner Ed Jenkins was a most interesting gentleman who retired from General Motors when he was only 45 years old and devoted the remainder of his life to breeding top Angus cattle.

Over the years, Michigan has been an important Angus state and has provided ample material for Colin's stories. Colin smiles when he recounts the story of a visit to Wildwood Farms. This noted herd was owned by the Scripps Family of newspaper fame. The colorful Sidney Smith was manager. "Oh, he was a feisty, little Englishman," Colin says. Colin also recalls the famous Great Oaks Stock Farm, Rochester, where many important Bardolier cattle

were bred and the capable Bob Williams served many years as manager. Great Oaks was owned by Howard McGregor, a wealthy Detroit industrialist remembered by Colin as an extremely fine gentleman.

Some famous, others not

Colin emphasizes that not all good herds were well known, nor were they always large in numbers. Colin points out that George Dyson, Rushville, Ill., rarely ran more than 25 cows. However, Colin remembers his herd as being one of the truly high quality herds and rates it as being quite important despite its small size and relative obscurity.

Over the years, Colin was privileged to have many experiences with great or "near great" personages. One memorable assignment involved a visit to

Eisenhower Farms, Gettysburg, Pa. Colin has vivid memories of President Eisenhower's vibrant personality.

Colin brightens at the mention of the late J.C. Penney. "He was a most amazing human being and a good cattleman. He truly loved his cattle," Colin recalls. The mention of the late Senator Kerr also calls forth a number of reflections. Colin chuckles, "Oh, he was some personality and he did have an outstanding herd at Kermac Ranch near Poteau, Okla." Colin also remembers Dr. Paul Keese's association with Senator Kerr. Keese was quite a capable cattleman and was also associated with the noted Essar Ranch.

Special highlights

As Colin looks back upon literally hundreds of stories, which ones stand out in particularly sharp relief? Stories regarding the immortal J. Garrett Tolan must, in Colins' judgment, be mentioned especially. It was Colin who dubbed Tolan, "The Sage of the Sangamon," an appropriate title for one of the truly preeminent Angus breeders of all time. "J. Garrett Tolan was one of the greatest," Colin believes.

Colin recalls with special pleasure a story he did about the noted Dale Redding, Minatare, Neb. The story was entitled "The Herd of a Thousand Sisters." The title was appropriate as well as accurate. Redding's large herd did contain a thousand daughters of the famous Heckettier 99th.

Colin collaborated closely with the late John Brown on a marvelous series entitled "Since the Days of McHenry." Much fascinating history of an important era might otherwise have been lost. Then there was that amazing senior citizen, Sylvester Melvin, Greenfield, Ill. Melvin founded his noted Rubicon herd in 1889. For nearly seven decades (until his death in 1962 at the ripe old age of 110) Melvin was an important Angus breeder.

Colin, not unlike many of us, is convinced that the Angus business contains a host of amazing personalities. It was Colin's privilege to have known many of these unforgettable characters. Today, Colin calls the roll of that diverse fraternity. He recalls Rube Scott, the colorful manager of Ames Plantation. Colin mentions E.T. Davis, Iowa City, Iowa. For many years Davis served as secretary of the Iowa Angus Assn. "He was quite a promoter for Angus."

Colin remembers that L.R. Kershaw, Muskogee, Okla., an important Angus breeder in the early days in Oklahoma, had his various pens of cattle labeled with prices. Colin often recalls the Scotsman "Sandy" Bruce. Bruce was herdsman and manager for HI Farms which was located on Long Island and owned by Mr. Isbrandtsen, a prominent steamship magnate.

Quite a parade of personalities pass in review as Colin remembers past days. W.A. Hopley, Atlantic, Iowa, was one of the great cattle breeders. Colin makes special mention of Hugh McWhorter, Aledo, Ill. McWhorter was an important early day breeder and a strong Angus booster. Under his leadership, Mercer County, Ill., became the "Aberdeenshire of America."

Colin emphasizes that no roster of amazing Angus personalities would be complete without listing Otto V. Battles, Maquoketa, Iowa. He bred the renowned Eileenmere 4th and sold him as a young bull to Tolan. Battles was an important breeder, judge, general promoter and writer. Colin chuckles appreciatively as he speaks about John Sheets. "He was an incredible character. He gave his all for the breed and contributed a great deal particularly in

the vast country west from the Mississippi River to the Coast and throughout the Southwest." Colin has a lot of memories concerning the noted John Fitch, Lake City, Iowa. "He was a great cattleman and he loved his cattle immensely. Nothing came before his Angus cattle." True, this list barely scratches the surface but those were some of the truly colorful and important personalities.

All-time greats

Who does Colin believe were the all-time greats that he knew? Colin emphasizes that any listing is arbitrary. I have mentioned Fred Hahne, John Brown and J. Garrett Tolan. Colin pointed out that the name of the late Sam Fullerton Jr. must be added to the

His experiences have been vast indeed and his knowledge of the Angus breed virtually knows no bounds.

list of that select company. "And we can't forget Irwin Kemp, he was a truly great and influential breeder." Colin also mentions the names of two famous brothers. Ken and Alan McGregor must be placed high on any list of the greats. Alan McGregor contributed a great deal to breed progress in the East. Colin feels that it is difficult to say enough in praise of Ken McGregor, but firmly believes that "Ken did a great deal through his charismatic enthusiasm and dedication to keep the breed alive during the tough times." Unfortunately, Ken died as a relatively young man.

Most of these titans have passed from the scene. However, not all the great men are dead. Colin would definitely include the name of Milo Wolrab, Wayside Farms, Mt. Vernon, Iowa. Wolrab's pronounced success breeding Angus cattle and Berkshire hogs is a matter of record. Colin emphasizes that "Milo must be numbered among the great stockmen of our times." Colin would agree with Sanders that as these great livestock breeders pass in review through memory, we should pronounce them "Masters of the Art of Arts". Colin considers himself fortunate to have known so many of these great men.

From 1979 to 1984 Colin was involved with the Blacks Unlimited magazine as a contributing editor and edi-

torial advisor. His Holding Pen column was a popular feature of that publication. Colin's counsel and advice continued to be eagerly sought and appreciated. These years were not as active, but it was nonetheless an interesting era. Colin was an unprecedented source of encouragement and inspiration to his colleagues at Blacks Unlimited.

Obviously, Colin's assignments have taken him to diverse and often far-flung locations. He has travelled in 46 states of the United States (for some reason he missed Maine and New Hampshire) and six Canadian provinces and Mexico. One assignment took him to the Bahamas when he authored a feature story about a large cattle ranch in that section of the hemisphere. One of the highlights of his distinguished career was covering the World Angus Forum in Scotland in 1977. He enjoyed visiting several of the major Angus herds in that country. His experiences have been vast indeed and his knowledge of the Angus breed virtually knows no bounds. True, retirement means less activity. However, Colin travels widely in conversation and in recollection. In imagination his thoughts range far from his home in Webster City, Iowa.

Home in Iowa

Colin and Melba Kennedy have been married for over 55 years. A great many of those years have been spent in Webster City. A Siamese named Sophie adds character and interest to the present Kennedy household. (Colin has often written about the succession of felines over the years.) Four children were raised in this house—three daughters and one son, David. David lives in St. Louis. Two of the daughters reside in Webster City while the third lives in Utah. Colin and Melba have 21 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren.

Today, Colin looks back on a most eventful life—there were endless experiences, innumerable colorful personalities, and no regrets! Today, memories recreate a host of adventures here and there and "Angus-where." "Oh yes, it has been quite a life," Colin opines with a smile.

Interestingly, Colin and Melba have resided at the same address—1231 Second Street—for nearly four decades. This white frame house could be called a sort of "Monticello" of the Angus world, for it is at this place that Colin receives visitors and holds forth on various topics. A visit with the Sage of Webster City will not soon be forgotten!

AJ