

ANGIE STUMP DENTON PHOTOS

# Keith Evans

After 35 years with the American Angus Association,  
Keith Evans retires.

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

A collection of scribbled pictures, some framed in beige mats, hang upon the corkboard in Keith Evans' office. The childish drawings, each a tangle of curves and lines done in sweeping strokes with washable markers, unabashedly share space with intricately detailed pastels of Angus cattle sketched by well-known artist Frank Murphy.

All are priceless to Evans, director of communications and public relations at the American Angus Association in St. Joseph, Mo., since 1978. Seated behind his maple desk, stacked haphazardly with papers and magazines, he smiles broadly when visitors ask about the colorful scribbles.

"Lindsay did that one before she was 2," Evans says proudly, pointing to a favorite picture scrawled by his granddaughter in red, black, yellow and green markers. "She's really a good artist. I bought her an easel and encourage her to be creative." Now 5, Lindsay O'Connor continues to amaze and enthrall her doting grandfather.

Escapades with his treasured grandchild are among the simple pleasures Evans cherishes. He keeps his work ethics just as simple. A well-known figure in the cattle industry, the Missouri native is respected for his common-sense thinking, ability to make himself understood, willingness to listen to others, and great success in marketing Angus cattle.

After a little more than 35 years with the Association, Evans this month will retire so he can spend more time with his wife of 37 years, Shirley; their two sons; one daughter; a second grandchild and, perhaps most important of all, Lindsay.

Evans, a quiet man who speaks only when necessary, admits his retirement will be bittersweet.



### Career start

Growing up, Keith Evans had no idea he'd ultimately earn his living stringing words together and marketing cattle nationwide. The job, though, definitely suited his agricultural background. Evans and his brother, Stanley, were the third generation to be raised in the family's farmhouse near the rural community of Converse, Mo. Around the farm, Evans did his chores but with little enthusiasm. Stanley, 21 months younger than his brother, however, loved the physical work.

"There was never any question in my brother's mind that he was going to be a farmer," Evans recalls of Stanley, who later ran the family farm and was killed in a tractor accident in 1984. "And there was never a question in my mind that I was going to do

something else. I just didn't know what."

Noting her son's good grades in English and writing, Evans' mother, Luella, suggested he consider a journalism career. Heeding his mother's advice, Evans earned a bachelor's degree in agricultural journalism from the University of Missouri in 1956. After college, he worked briefly as assistant manager of the Fort Smith, Ark., Chamber of Commerce and was then drafted into the U.S. Army. Following basic training, he edited the post newspaper at Fort Polk, La., until he was discharged 1 1/2 years later.

Back home, Evans won a job with Allan McGhee, editor of the *Drovers Journal* in Chicago. "Allan wanted me to go to work that afternoon," Evans says, remembering the day of his interview, "because they were short-handed."

As a staff reporter and photographer, Evans' starting pay with the *Drovers Journal* in 1959 was \$95 a week. He remained with the daily market newspaper, which primarily covered the livestock industry in the Midwest, for three years. "I met a lot of people and became involved in a wide spectrum of the livestock industry," he says.

Evans also met the most important person in his life — Shirley Petersen, an Iowa farm girl. The two married Thanksgiving day in 1960 and have three children — Jeffrey, Douglas (who has one son, Garrison Evans), and Pamela (Lindsay's mother).

In 1962, Evans, who was pondering a job change at the time, covered the Ohio State Fair in Columbus, Ohio, for the *Drovers Journal*. The routine assignment would mark a turning point in his career.

"We were sitting in a bar at the hotel," Evans recalls with a grin. "There was a lady there who claimed to

*From manual typewriters to computers and zinc engravings to film separations, Keith Evans has seen many technological advances during his 35 years in the advertising and public relations industry.*



"You have mixed emotions about retiring, particularly about a job you've had so long and enjoy so much," he reflects. "But I know it's time to leave. I've been here long enough. After a while, you start repeating yourself."

Dick Spader, American Angus Association executive vice president since 1981, is a longtime admirer of Evans, a former supervisor.

"In the field of PR, Keith is one of the true professionals who exists in the livestock industry," Spader says. "Any time I'm around his peers, they are extremely complimentary of the job he's done for this organization. He's leaving big shoes for someone else to fill."

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be a palm reader. She came over, and everyone gave her a dollar to read their palm.”

Evans declined. Lloyd Miller, then director of public relations at the American Angus Association, tossed a bill to the woman and told her to read Evans’ hand.

“She said she would answer one question,” Evans says. “So I asked, ‘Should I take a new job or stay where I am?’ The woman said something like, ‘Stay where you are.’”

Miller, sitting nearby, overheard the pair’s brief exchange.

“My ears caught that because I was looking for someone, and I liked him a lot,” he says.

So Miller contacted the young writer from Missouri, offered him an interview, and hired him as a public relations assistant. Eager to leave Chicago for a smaller city, Evans gladly moved his family to St. Joseph, Mo.

“That’s how we started,” says Miller, who retired from the Association in 1978 and now works as a realtor in St. Joseph. “And I never was sorry, Evans is near as perfect as you can get. He is an excellent writer, has a good farm background and is very creative.”

### **New beginnings**

As a PR assistant with the Association, Evans wrote feature stories, shot photographs, worked in the darkroom and handled press releases. He also wrote scripts and produced a much-needed film on judging cattle.

“At first, I thought I’d get bored working with just Angus cattle,” he says.

“But it turned out to be less boring than doing the same job on a publication.”

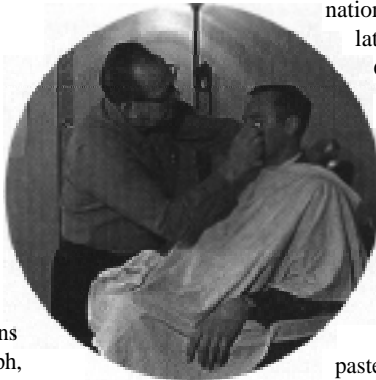
When Miller was named executive secretary of the Association in 1968, Evans was promoted to associate director of public relations and manager of the national advertising program. Ten years later, he was tapped to head the department.

From award-winning advertising campaigns to a monthly column on merchandising that he writes for the *Angus Journal*, Evans’ impact on the agri-marketing industry has been substantial.

### **Unforgettable ads**

Artist Frank Murphy, whose detailed pastel sketches of Angus cattle hang in Evans’ office and throughout the Association headquarters building, has worked with him for more than 30 years on advertising programs. Murphy’s beautiful paintings and drawings of Angus have graced the covers of the **Angus Journal** national advertisements, and other promotional materials for the Association since 1950. The artist credits the communications director for anchoring Angus as the “business breed” in the industry.

“It was during the 1960s, ’70s and ’80s that technological advances were, as with almost everything, revolutionizing the beef industry,” Murphy says. “Keith saw that these developments necessitated a different approach in the Association’s



*(Above) After 35 years of putting others in the spotlight, Keith Evans took center stage with his wife, Shirley as the American Angus Association staff and Board of Directors thanked Keith for his devoted service.*

*(Inset) Evans gets a makeover before appearing in the 1960s movie ‘What Am I Bid?’, starring Leroy Van Dyke.*



AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION PHOTOS

Shooting the Association's judging film in the early '60s, "Be a Better Angus Judge," is Keith along with Bob Snyder (right), who was associate director of public relations at the time.



Over the years, Keith has helped with several award-winning advertising campaigns. At the 1971 Midwest NAMA awards, the Association received top honors in black-and-white, single-page advertising and radio campaign.

national advertising, which called for the additional resources of an advertising agency. While agencies make great claims for their creativity and market expertise, there's no doubt in my mind that it has been Keith's vision, merchandising savvy, guidance, and, indeed, creativity, which made this phase of Angus advertising so very successful."

Bob Watkins, an advertising consultant who has worked on campaigns with Evans for more than 15 years, remembers the department's greatest advertising legacy to date—the "elephant" ads that ran nationwide for two years, starting in 1983.

"They raised a lot of hell in the industry," says Watkins, who raises Angus on a working farm in southwest Iowa. "People threatened lawsuits, but everything was right in the ads."

The series of three ads satirically pointed out the disadvantages of breeding overly large cattle, a common trend at the time in the industry. In one ad, for instance, a perplexed meat packer stands in front of an elephant and a small, empty box. "Why packers don't like to box elephants," proclaims the large headline above the trio in the photograph.

"I loved the series because it was exactly what we wanted to get across in a very dramatic, eye-catching way," Evans grins. "It was the most dramatic farm

and agricultural advertising that had ever been done. You wouldn't believe the letters and calls we got."

"The series was supposed to run one more year, but the Board of Directors had heard so much flack from their neighbors, that they voted it down, which was a bit of a shame," Evans continues, "because one more year would have benefited the Association. But it did accomplish its purpose. It made people stop and think about what they were doing."

"People still talk about elephant-sized cattle," he adds. "Those ads took the cattle industry by storm."

The series won a first place in the National Agri-Marketing Association's (NAMA) annual advertising competition in 1984, beginning a tradition of award-winning work by the Association.

Bob Snyder, who worked as associate director of public relations until 1968, credits Evans for the department's many advertising achievements.

"Keith had an excellent grasp of the need for quality in all we did, and it shows in the awards the Association has won," says Snyder, a retired Episcopal priest who now lives in Prairie Village, Kan. "He's highly motivated and a self starter. He has a broad view of the beef industry, of every area, but yet is good at focusing on the individual needs of members."

### Service to members

Evans' dedication to serving members is just as important as his emphasis on strong national advertising, observes Susan Waters, a public relations associate who works with Evans. Annually, the department produces and mails 40,000 news releases and just as many photographs—all touting members' achievements—to publications and newspapers across the country.

"His philosophy is that you do the things that people appreciate, and it'll work for you," she says. "According to Keith, PR is doing good and getting credit for it. In other words, sending news releases and photos of members to their hometown papers. We give our members a lot of credit, and I think they appreciate that. Keith has always been a big believer in that."

## A private moment with Keith Evans

Keith Evans will never forget one of the first times he and his young granddaughter set out for a walk in the woods behind his home.

"You know, there might be treasure out there," Lindsay O'Connor, then 4, said, peering through the trees.

The pair didn't find anything during their excursion, but Evans did pick up on the idea. The next day, he visited the Salvation Army thrift store in St. Joseph, purchased a small box, and filled it with jewelry and trinkets.

"I hid it down where we'd been walking," Evans remembers. "The next time we went out, she couldn't believe that she'd found treasure."



Since that

initial treasure hunt, Evans has filled and hidden other boxes in the woods. Each magical discovery is just as thrilling for 5-year-old Lindsay, who hasn't quite figured out how the treasure gets there. But she's working on a theory.

"You know what I think? When the sandman gets through putting sand in your eyes, then he goes and puts treasure out there;" the little girl says matter-of-factly. "He doesn't put any in my backyard because there's no trees. We just have a little lilac bush.

"Right now, I think there's a lot of treasure out there," Lindsay adds wisely.

Sounds like one little girl in St. Joseph, Mo., has found a treasure in her grandfather.



Evans also firmly believes in teaching Association members about marketing their cattle, a skill often overlooked in the breeding industry.

### Popular columnist

In 1984, Evans began writing a monthly "Merchandising" column, a popular *Angus Journal* feature that filled a definite niche.

"It was easy to see by looking at the *Angus Journal* and back on the *Drovers Journal* that an awful lot of people whose businesses depended on merchandising and marketing had very little background in the areas," he recalls. "From everything I'd seen and learned, people needed help. Most of them had grown up on farms and some had animal husbandry degrees, but few had knowledge of advertising.

"In the cattle industry, marketing is just as important to success as the breeding program. If no one knows you have something for sale, no one will buy it, no matter how good it is."

From the start, Evans' column was met with enthusiasm and kudos.

"I didn't know how long we could sustain a column, but I found a wealth of material," Evans says. "I never tried to make it complicated. I just stuck to the basics."

From his monthly columns, members have learned the basic ingredients of a good advertisement, how to plan a radio advertising package, how to cultivate customers, and how to write a news release. Blending personal anecdotes and observations with practical information, Evans conveys his advice in a down-to-earth, conversational style.

Debbie Kukuchka, an Association member in Belle Fourche, S.D., is one of Evans' many devoted readers who has learned what it takes to market an Angus business.

"I read his articles religiously," she says. "They're the first thing I turn to in the *Journal*. We have a small Angus herd here. When you're trying to build yourself up, mailing lists and customer relations are real important."

In 1985, 14 of Evans' columns were published as a reference booklet, entitled "How to Sell Angus Cattle." Five years later, the popular publication was revised and expanded to 55 columns. To meet demand, 10,000 more copies of the book were reprinted in 1997. In all, approximately 35,000 copies of the book have been distributed free of charge to Association members and sold to the public.

Since 1992, Evans has written a slightly different version of his "Merchandising" column for the *Quarter Horse Journal*. "The basics of marketing are the same whether you're in the Angus business, the

Quarter horse market or the grocery store on the corner," he says.

### College-level impact

Evans' emphasis on marketing education reaches beyond Association members. Cheryl Oxley, advertising/production manager of the *Angus Journal*, remembers the challenge Evans issued in his acceptance speech after receiving the Livestock Publications Council Hall of Fame award in 1992.

"He told us that we needed to be more influential at the college level," she says, "that we as publishers should be influencing the academic level."

Soon after Evans' address, Oxley and several other professionals in the field started a mentor program for college students majoring in agricultural journalism.

The program gives students a chance to benefit from the experiences and industry knowledge of their mentors, preparing the next generation of agricultural communicators.

