

A Performance Pioneer

A forward-thinking mindset and dedication to data earned Dave Nichols a seat among Angus Heritage Foundation inductees.

by Peyton Schmitt, American Angus Association

With gravel flying in the rearview mirror on a rural, southwest Iowa road, it'd be hard to miss him: a glossy Angus bull statue stands proudly positioned as a landmark.

Some may wonder how he made his way to this vast section of rolling cornfields and pasture. Others know just down the road, they'll arrive at Nichols Farms, an operation which began striving to lead pioneer efforts in the beef industry far before the large bull's arrival.

In his genes

Dave Nichols' desire to stay on the cutting edge of data collection and genetic innovation in the beef industry came naturally — by his own genetics, in fact. His father bought the farm where he grew up in 1939 with a \$3 down payment when most folks were simply trying to weather the depression.

"My dad was swimming upstream," Nichols says. "[He] was a very, very progressive guy."

His father's progressive mindset influenced his own decisions from an early age. Nichols recalls that while at this time, most people he knew owned Hereford cattle, he decided he was after something different.

"I remember when I was young, there was mostly Herefords," Nichols says. "At 9 years of age, I came home to my parents, and I said, 'I want to buy a purebred Angus heifer.'"

His parents agreed, and the heifer soon claimed the grand champion title at the Adair County Fair. Nichols continued to expand his small herd, influenced by his father's desire for continuous improvement and his mother's recordkeeping abilities.

"My dad tried new things — he had plans," he says. "And part of this, I'm sure, is due to my mom; she was a bookkeeper."

Nichols' interest in the influence of factors beyond visual evaluation in the cattle industry grew with his herd. In 1957 he won the National FFA Public Speaking contest.

His topic? The merit of performance-testing bulls.

From then on, there was no question his

passion for genetic advancement was fully ablaze.

Defying doubt

Just as he was pioneering in his speech topic, Nichols took an innovative approach to the beef industry. Nichols Farms submitted weaning weights the first year the American Angus Association accepted them.

Although his efforts later earned him praise as a forward-thinker, this emphasis on records originally made him an outlier. Nichols recalls the skepticism in the early days.

"It was really an easy thing to succeed in the '60s selling bulls, because our competition was laughing and making fun of us," Nichols says.

At the time, it was generally accepted that good cattle could be identified by how they looked, not profit or carcass merit.

Although others were doubtful of his practices, Nichols wasn't alone in his commitment to purposeful recordkeeping at Nichols Farms. In addition to his wife, Phyllis, his business partner and brother, Lee, and Lee's wife, Lillian, were all integral parts of the farm.

The family worked together to continue growing the operation. When the farm crisis of the '80s arrived, Nichols Farms was prepared

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to make it through. But a different type of grief soon struck the family.

“In 1980 the farm economy was in a dive. We were heavily leveraged, and things were fine until Lee had a bad case of the flu,” Nichols says.

In May, Lee was diagnosed with cancer. He died mid-August.

At the time, Nichols called a staff meeting. Following the devastating loss, he wasn’t sure how the operation would continue without Lee.

“I said I was calling the auctioneer, and we were going to have a dispersion.”

Filling the void

However, Lillian and Phyllis weren’t going to let Dave give up. Lillian decided to leave her position as a school librarian to assist full-time on the farm. Phyllis, then heavily involved in the school board and similar roles, shared Lillian’s mindset.

The women embraced their new responsibilities, filling the void of Lee’s absence and becoming even more involved parts of the farm.

Phyllis passed away in 2021 after dedicating decades to the success of Nichols Farms. From taxes and invoices to payroll and insurance — and even calving 150 to 200 first-calf heifers early in her married life — she was a vital figure in the operation. Nichols speaks of her devotion to the farm and their family with love and admiration.

“She never missed a day of work, always here to help wherever we needed,” he says. “If anyone had a problem, she would figure it out. She gave the best advice.”

Lillian remains a partner of the farm today. Over the years, her recordkeeping has transitioned from paper and a typewriter to online submissions through her computer. Today, the farm collects

more than 70 fields of data on each animal, contributing to a robust and detailed database. While their methods have changed, she chuckles as she says that Nichols’ charismatic personality has remained the same.

“You’re never bored when you’re working with Dave,” Lillian explains with a smile. “He always has new ideas.”

Influential advancements

Dave’s new ideas have driven the progress not only of Nichols Farms, but the entire industry over the last several decades. Dave was influential in the early formation of the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) and served on its first board of directors in 1967, then later served as BIF president. In addition to countless other awards and leadership positions, Dave has also taken part in numerous research projects focused on improving efficiency in the beef industry.

Through each advancement, Lillian says their goals have remained steady — to promote the breed and produce the best cattle they can.

Nichols Farms has grown under Dave’s leadership, from its humble beginnings to its current 5,500 acres and 1,500 head of breeding stock and a feedlot. The farm has placed 42 bulls in studs and exported cattle, semen and embryos to 30 countries to date. The iconic bull statue has served as a landmark to hundreds of student interns, judging teams, tour groups, cattlemen, international delegations and government officials visiting the operation through the years.

Even after all these years, Dave remains focused on improvements to supply the greatest genetics possible to his customers. The farm’s most recent endeavor has been the use of a




Lillian Nichols and Dave Nichols

C-Lock system, designed to measure animal feed intake and provide data to calculate feed efficiency in their herd. These records provide insight not only on real-time animal performance, but also on which animals are more genetically apt to convert feed efficiently.

From his leadership and accolades to his dedication to providing customers with a firm handshake and the best genetics possible, Dave’s investment in the breed and its success is evident in all he does.

“I think his legacy will be one that will last a long time,” Lillian says.

His identity as a forward-thinker and passionate cattleman led to Dave being recognized as a 2022 Angus Heritage Foundation inductee. Beyond that, it’s earned him the recognition of cattlemen around the world as a trailblazer and a leader for industry change. He can summarize the motivation behind his extensive legacy quite simply.

“You’ve got to love doing it,” Dave says. “You’ve got to want to do it for the right reasons; and if you get a lemon, make lemonade and surround yourself with good, smart people.” 

SCAN FOR MORE

to view the entire playlist of Heritage Award winners on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com).

