

RALLY FARMS

All signs point to a bright future for this historic Angus herd.

by Ann Gooding

Near Millbrook, N.Y., just a 1½-hour drive from New York City's Times Square, 3,000 acres are devoted to crops and Angus cattle. At least part of those acres have been owned by the same family and used for the same purpose (raising Angus cattle) for the last 53 years.

The acres lie in Dutchess County—an important center of Angus activities since the early part of this century—the one-time home of Oakleigh Thorne's Briarcliff Farms, Henry Jackson's and Dale Fletcher's Bethel Stock Farms, Myron Fuerst's Fuerst Stock Farms, Allan Ryan's and Lee and Les Leachman's Ankony.

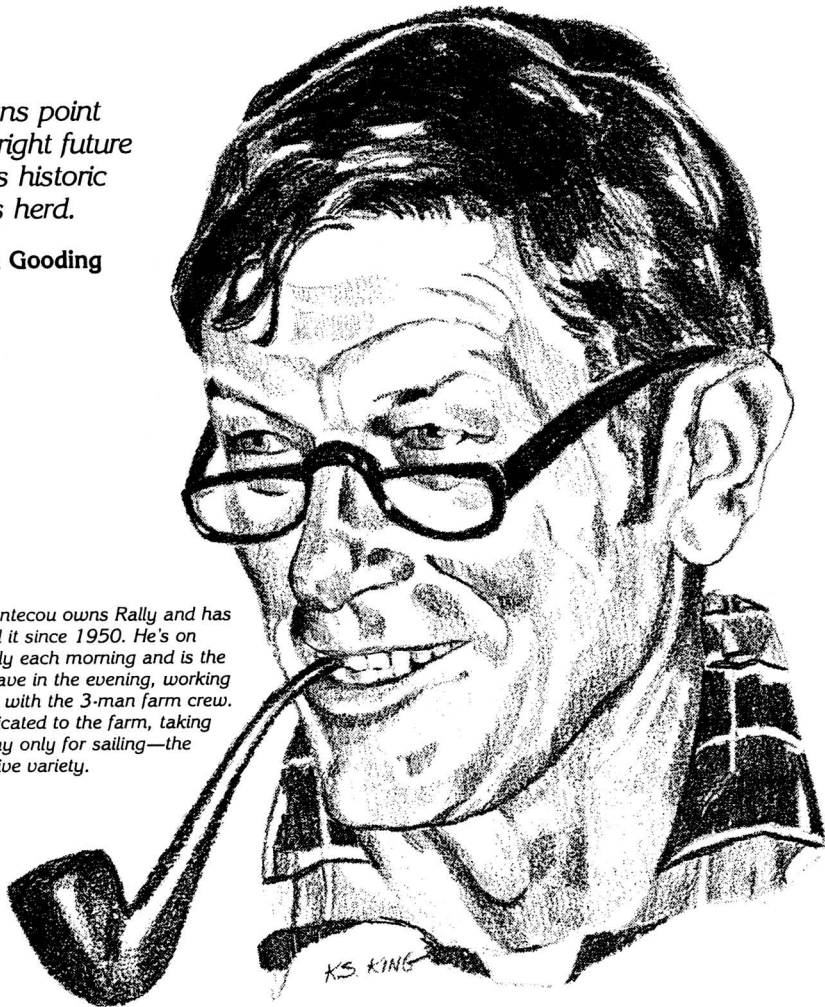
Without question, during the past 53 years those acres have seen a lot of cattle come and go. They've hosted a lot of visitors. And they've contributed their share to the annals of Angus history.

We're talking about Rally Farms, created by the late Sen. Fred Bontecou, now owned and managed by his son, Jesse M. Bontecou.

First Angus in 1929

In the 1920s New York state Sen. Bontecou took a liking to the Millbrook

Jesse Bontecou owns Rally and has managed it since 1950. He's on hand early each morning and is the last to leave in the evening, working primarily with the 3-man farm crew. He's dedicated to the farm, taking time away only for sailing—the competitive variety.



Gayle Bontecou takes an active interest in Rally's cattle and crop production; in fact, it is said she is a good hand with a tractor. She also raises and shows dogs and has a variety of pets ranging from a llama to Maxwell Smart, a steer who is getting on in years.



area; in 1927 he bought land there and two years later purchased his first Angus—20 heifers and one bull from nearby Briarcliff Farms.

During the ensuing years Rally became a familiar name in Angus circles. A glance at the farm's history shows the Senator buying two Chicago Show Window sale toppers: Envious Blackcap B9 (in 1938) and Wiltonian 2 (in 1949). He bought Eileenmere 1026 at the 1948 Tolan sale. Homeplace Eileenmere 305 was purchased in 1951 from the Penney & James herd. And two Ankony bulls, Ankonyan 3504 and Ankonyan 3537, were added in 1953 and 1954.

Rally Farms managers have included Obed Potter, who was in charge of the cattle from 1931 until 1950, and Dwight "Grubber" Miller, who stepped in then and stayed until his retirement in 1975. Marvin Chadwell (who is retired and living on the farm) was on the payroll more than 30 years as herdsman.

The Northern Classics

Rally Farms' history wouldn't be complete without mention of the Northern Classics—annual sales hosted by Rally, with guest consignors including the likes of Walbridge Farms, Sir William and Millarden Farms. They were fun sales, those who attended recall, and they were part of a big Angus fall weekend that also included the Meadow Lane and Ankony sales.



Fred Smalstig, in his sixth year at Rally, is credited with the herd's modernization. He introduced AHIR and has led Rally cattle to several championships. He produced and showed a number of International grand champion Shorthorns when that breed was in its heyday.

Of the 50,000 bales of hay put up each year, half are sold. And what's not used of the 200 acres of corn and 150 acres of oats also is sold. On top of that, Rally has been doing a brisk feeder calf business, especially since manager Fred Smalstig introduced crossbreeding, using a group of more conventional Angus cows.

It's the purebred Angus end of things, though, that's really beginning to shine. The Rally program could only be called progressive. A.I. has been used extensively to up-grade the cow herd; several groups of females have been purchased; there's a strong show program, a strong performance program. And above all, it's a practical operation.

The Cast

Jesse Bontecou has been managing the farm since 1950. He's on hand early each morning and is the last to leave in the evening, working primarily with the 3-man farm crew. He won't ask anybody to do something he wouldn't do himself—something that might account for Rally's ability to keep good help. (Bontecou does have one other love, sailing—the competitive variety at which he has been quite successful.)

Manager Fred Smalstig, in his sixth year at Rally, also oversees a 3-man crew that includes Earl Gottshall, who's been with Rally 15 years, Dave Richmond and Tim Bontecou, Jesse's son. Wives Gayle Bontecou and Barbara Smalstig also are involved in day-to-day operations as are the Smalstigs' youngsters, Jon and Jennifer, when they are home from college. (Jon was national junior Angus showmanship winner in 1977;

And they were successful. By 1969, 423 females had sold through Northern Classics to 134 buyers at a \$1,685 average.

They did, however, have their ups and downs. In 1949 Sen. Bontecou spent \$10,000 for Ellerslie Prince 25, a son of Prince G of Sunbeam. This bull's first four daughters sold in the 1951 Rally production sale to average \$6,362, with a top of \$12,500—impressive figures even now. Problem was, by 1954 the Sunbeam strain (tainted by dwarfism) had lost its charm. The average dropped to \$600 and, according to Jesse Bontecou, "We were lucky to have received that much but we had a very friendly butcher in the crowd."

Things went up from there, though, and in 1963 Rally bulls won the champion pen competition at the National Western.

Eyes to the Future

But that's history. And because Rally is not tied to the past, that's only part of the story. In fact, on this, the oldest continuous Angus breeding establishment in Dutchess County, the future is the main concern. And all indications are it will be bright.

Rally is a practical, soundly managed agricultural enterprise. Its 3,000 acres support 210 brood cows now and that number will be increased to 300. All feed (with exception of some protein purchased for show cattle and market cattle) is home-raised.



Barbara Smalstig, well versed in the cattle business and well acquainted with the Rally herd, is Fred's right hand. And she's an avid skier.

Jennifer is still active in Angus youth projects.)

Credit to the Smalstigs

Like many cattle operations dating back 20 years or more, Rally faced the late 1970s with old-fashioned cattle. The herd's changed, though, and the Bontecous credit the Smalstigs with the modernization.

Fred, a native of western Pennsylvania, grew up with Shorthorns—good ones. In a 10-year span, with never more than a 29-cow herd, Smalstig won five International grand championships and two reserve grand championships, not to mention the best six head competition three years running. That was in the Shorthorn breed's heyday.

Numbers, though, indicated the breed was losing its popularity. Besides that, the Smalstig family farm was on anything but the best land. So Fred and Barbara, with two youngsters to raise, decided to make a move. They ended up at Topp Hill Farm, Hillsdale, with long-time friend Bill Rishel.

When that herd sold, a fondness for skiing and a recent sizable investment in ski gear kept the Smalstigs in New England. And that led them to nearby Rally Farms. **Never Better**

That was in 1975. Since then, things have been booming. In fact, according to Bontecou, Rally, in all its 53-year history, never has been in better show and sale shape.

Fred introduced performance in the form of AHIR, and both he and Bontecou swear by it. More of their buyers are demanding performance information (especially breeding value ratios), they say; in fact, they feel the time is coming—and soon—when records will be a prerequisite to successful merchandising.

Records also are used within the herd. As Fred puts it: "It takes a lot of work, but I really believe in AHIR. Now we have six calf crops with records, and those records are more meaningful all the time. I would say almost without exception that we keep the first 15 heifers as ranked by AHIR breeding value ratios. . . I would say almost without exception they have been the best cattle not only performance-wise but eye-ball-wise."

And that visual appeal is extremely important, because show ring competition is taken very seriously at Rally. "There's only one way to find out how good they are," Fred says, "and that's to show them."

Historically, the beef cattle industry has been divided into two camps—show ring and performance. Bontecou recalls, for example, the days when a good show heifer would never have made a good brood cow. But he feels those days are over; judges are beginning to tie show ring appeal and performance together. With its emphasis on AHIR and the show ring, that suits Rally to a tee.

Consort and 10

The Bontecous and Smalstigs are particularly proud of the recent show ring suc-

cesses of two home-bred bulls, Rally Consort 618 and Rosebank Connection 69, "10."

Consort, a 1978 son of Sir Williams Marathon, is out of a daughter of Ankonian Dynamo with three years on the Pathfinder report to her credit. He took all major eastern championships and was a class winner at the 1979 North American.

The 10 bull, also out of a Dynamo-bred cow, is by Bon View Connection and was junior champion at last November's National Angus Show in Louisville and was reserve junior champion last January in Denver. His show career is hardly over; plans are for 10 to make two trips to Louisville this year—one in August for the American Angus Breeders' Futurity, the other in November for the North American.

Rosebank Connection 69's Denver show ring exposure, by the way, opened up a whole new field for Rally—semen sales.

Both 10 and Consort are being used in Rally's breeding program. But Bontecou and Smalstig don't believe in putting all their eggs in one basket. Sold as they are on their two bulls, they also will use outside sires, this year primarily PS Power Play and Sayre Patriot.



Open-Minded Sire Selection

Sire selection is something all four—Jesse, Gayle, Fred and Barbara—are involved in. They have made it a rule to be very open-minded. They have never tied themselves to one particular bloodline or one particular program. Nor do they hesitate to use a number of bulls. Last year, in fact, 22 names were on Rally's sire list. "People say that's stupid," Fred says, "but if you have one bad calf, maybe you didn't use enough bulls."

With the breeding program in good shape, attention must be turned to merchandising, a problem in the northeast, an area with virtually no commercial market.

Rally cattle sell mostly at private treaty, often in groups and primarily to the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states. (Up to now only about 20 of the best bull calves (backed by mothers with high breeding value ratios) are spared the knife each year. But with recent up-grading, that should change. There's a strong conviction that, in spite of location, quality will sell. It will take time to develop a market, Fred admits, but every year brings more visitors and more buyers—and better cattle.

In one respect Rally's location may be a plus. The farm is within 30 minutes' drive of several well-known Angus herds, including Fleetwood, Sir William Angus, Skarship, Ira Boggs Angus, Gallagher's Farm, Fairfield

Farms and Walbridge. This concentration at least entices people to the area.

With an eye to expanding their market, Rally participated in a test station for the first time this year and plans to send several bulls next year to the New York state test at Cornell, the tests at Pennsylvania State University and West Virginia State University.

If everything goes as planned, Rally will host a special auction in the fall of 1982. By then, Bontecou and Smalstig reckon they will have sufficient numbers to be able to part with 25 top females. The consignment will be completed with 25 top animals selected from among Rally's customers. This sale should establish an outlet both for Rally cattle and for those of their customers, many of them northeastern breeders with small herds for whom merchandising is a problem.

Although private treaty is the rule, Rally does participate regularly in three consignment sales—Cow Power, Yankee Neighbors and the New York State Sale. (This, by the way, is the oldest continuous sale of its kind in the U.S., and Rally has consigned every year—46 years—and in the May 1981 sale Rally cattle averaged \$3,580.)

Key Is Herd Improvement

The key to Rally's merchandising plans, whether they be private treaty or auction, is herd improvement. And A.I. and performance selection haven't been the only tools used to achieve that goal. Bontecou and Smalstig also have purchased groups of females to introduce desired blood in the herd. And by purchasing entire groups, they've found they not only get closely related animals, they also stand a good chance of getting the best a breeder has to offer.

The Topp Hill herd acquisition is a good example. Rally and Double HH Farms, Adair, Ill., bought the well-known well-bred herd from Rachel Breck (who had purchased it from Topp Hill Farm). Each took 58 head and Rally's only mistake, Smalstig says, was not taking all 116 cows.

A second important herd purchase was that of the American Herdsman Institute two years ago.

Sound Economic Base

And although they don't hesitate to buy good females, the folks at Rally Farms probably never will make the big spender list. "We just don't feel we can go out to these sales and spend \$25,000, \$50,000 or whatever for females," says Bontecou, "and we never have done it. We have built on what we think is a sound economic base and have gone along without going through a lot of money."

And that pretty well sums up things at Rally Farms. It is, above all, a practical operation. Not a lot of money is spent. Full advantage has been taken of open A.I. and AHIR and the show ring.

Judging by the cattle—the youngest are the best—the program is working. It looks as if, after 53 years in the business, Rally may be set to go another 53. 