

Great Cows make those Great Bulls

Some breeding programs sound like Topsy—they just “grewed.” The picture becomes a gnarly, misshapen family tree with little evidence of planning or foresight.

Others have been pruned, trained, and nurtured into something pleasing. This is not to say careful management and goal-setting guarantees a picture-perfect herd. The adage, “The best-laid plans” still applies. Disappointments and withered fruit are simply part of the process in building any dream. The trick seems to be avoiding the dead ends and detours while adding to what better be a sound foundation.

Iowa Angus breeder, Jim O’Neill can vouch for that, especially the importance of a solid base to undergird the layers that come later.

“I find... some of those things that happened so long ago are still so influential.”

Jim pays tribute to his father for “keeping us on track during those years. You know, when you’re 19-21, you kinda think you know all the answers.”

Jim admits the allure of the popular wave of the 1950s was tempting, and he would’ve jumped aboard had the elder Mr. O’Neill not prevailed.

“Dad was never a pedigree follower, but he had a great eye for cattle. When we picked our Earl Marshall cow, you couldn’t have written a better pedigree. We didn’t know that at the time, we just liked the cow.”

That “cow” became the

There seem fewer and fewer herds established and surviving in the present solely by their own efforts. Realities dictate there be other enterprises on the place or an outside, off-farm income to stabilize the rise and fall of the business. The O’Neill Angus Farm is one of that dwindling minority making its way from the breeding and selling of good Angus seed stock.

Some might envy their history and achievement, while others would just as soon rely on a few more eggs in a few more baskets. . . .

foundation of the celebrated O’Neill Delia family.

Jim remembers smarting a bit in his early years when competing against the trends of those days. “I wasn’t really a very good fitter,” he admits, “but when you lose, you’re not very impressed with it all. I was getting sick of standing last in class and I would have liked to change.”

Though Jim was champing at the bit, things didn’t go his way. He recalls going to a sale and yearning for a bull that was a show-type and pretty compact.

“We ended up buying a bull with a long, old face, tall, ugly rascal, but he was probably the turning point in our whole herd. That was lowana Bardolier 6. He wouldn’t be big today, but at that time he was. His sons left us tremendous daughters to build on and helped mark out our commercial market, really.”

Jim O’Neill is pretty sensitive to the commercial market; it’s been fundamental to the O’Neill program. Discuss commercial markets with Jim and the topic opens on fleshing ability—count on it. It’s his watchword and he’s a devoted disciple of the concept because commercial buyers have so stressed its importance.

“That’s what our whole story is about—performance combined with frame and fleshing ability. I believe fleshing ability is the key to the production of beef cattle of any breed.”

And it’s a little frustrating to him when the industry and academia seem to avoid the idea. He hopes the steer shows will become the vehicle for renewed interest and emphasis on fleshing.

“I’m surprised some of these college people haven’t got onto efficiency and fleshing ability. Why do people avoid this issue? Fleshing ability means everything. I throw this out in front of purebred



J.C. and Ardyce O'Neill



Bob Gibbs works with the show and sale cattle at O'Neill's.

"this angus life"

breeders and they just laugh, but when I talk to my commercial friends, that's one of their big concerns. Really, Angus cattle now have the most to offer in the industry if we put performance and frame with fleshing ability."

Jim mentions showing at Denver, the 1985 National Western, when several cattlemen approached wanting to visit about the O'Neill string.

"They'd ask, 'Your cattle are some of the most different cattle in the barn. Why do they look so

different?' Well, they had the frame but were thicker and had more fleshing."

It may appear Jim would be one of those taking issue with show ring selections and today's interest in frame size. After all, he has been through at least two or three eras and has watched the dramatic transitions bridging from one to the other. He respects the quest for size, in the main.

"I don't mean to say all our champions today are wrong, but I think everyone agrees the big ones are big enough." Remember, this, from a breeder who's produced some impressively framed cattle.

"We have bred cattle a little different than most. At times that's a little harder to do." It takes time in his opinion. One can make rapid, maybe even overnight, changes in phenotype, but building

consistency in that herd as a whole is his concern. Back in 1951, he and his father decided to breed for a type that offered more size. Today's results express 35 years of selection. "We brought them up through continual selection rather than try to change in one or two generations. We feel it's a bit more complicated process than simply using a couple of big, framey bulls on a bunch of little heifers."

The distinction that Jim tries to define is breeding *big* versus breeding *big and sound*. "There's a tremendous difference," he insists. "It takes more research to breed the biggest one that's also sound."

That research can take a variety of forms: trial and error, performance records, or a testing program. Measuring the value of structure, or the lack of it, can be



Meet Delia Dawn. She's the daughter of O'Neills Chaps 1900 and the Iowa champion female and reserve summer champion at the 1985 Iowa State Fair. She stood second in class at the 1985 National Junior Angus Show in Tulsa and second in a class of 21 at the World Angus Forum in Canada. She was also picked grand champion female at the 1985 Iowa Winter Beef Expo.

As stoutly bred as she is physically, she carries 72E breeding on both the sire's side and the dam side (1900's dam is a granddaughter of 72E) and represents a pinnacle of sorts for years of selection and planned matings.

Reference sires in the 1973 catalog from O'Neill's third annual Herd Bull Opportunity and Foundation Female sale included Ankonian Jingo 3, Bonnie Chance Bardonene 7A (also known as "Mr. Canada"), Ankonian President 23, and Marshall Pride 514.

Comments: "In this change that the cattle industry is going through, we must not forget what we are really breeding cattle for. I think there is some confusion about size. There are some big-framed cattle with big dimensions that don't weigh, and again there are some short, thick, early maturing cattle that weigh but have too much waste.

"We must concentrate those pounds in the right places. We must measure our cattle from many different aspects—structural soundness, adequate size and muscling, fertility, and ease of calving. The Angus breed has all these things. All we must do is select for them."—Jim O'Neill, February, 1973.



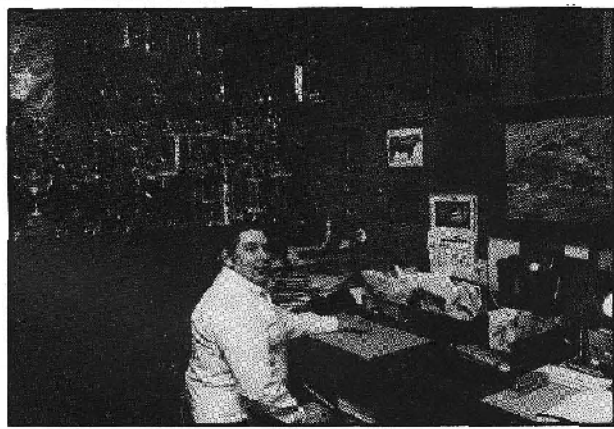
It may be a fact, an emerging truism, or maybe just bald suspicion, but Jim echoes what other breeders may have noticed . . .

"Unless we pay very careful attention to all the records we can find, we may not know how good a bull is until it's too late, until he's dead and gone."





Mrs. Jim O'Neill (Ardyce) is Beef Education chairman for the American Angus Auxiliary and has confronted the beef and consumer issue face-to-face in Omaha supermarkets, for one.



"The small breeder has as a rule been pretty much following the show ring, using whatever wins. And it used to be that the show ring was the place where structure was judged."

Says Ardyce of the trophies on display: "That first one was kind of like your first child."

elusive in this day of sire evaluation and central gain tests. One might muster a world of data, but can one analyze the rather subjective matter of structure in an objective way? Jim relies to some degree on his commercial customers and his inherited cattle sense. That may not be wholly scientific but instinct and feedback from clients can combine to complete the picture.

For example, he has not embraced the central bull test approach totally as his customers

demand a product that's not overly fat. Jim reports his buyers prefer a bull that can be turned out the day it's purchased. The upshot is that he's developed and fed a growth ration from weaning to yearling, believing it more influential than a high-energy regime which might produce more spectacular gains over a 140-day period.

"We have a lot of sons of our bulls that do well, in fact, top some test stations. We probably missed the boat by not putting a few in, but it's just against my judgment for producing commercial bulls. My people want a bull that's ready to be turned out."

Jim's loyalty and fiber is strongly allied toward what was meaningful in the early days of O'Neill Angus. Those impressions

"Today, our advertising has to be geared to the person that's doing the cooking. They've got to be educated that beef is a healthful product, it's versatile, and it's not that hard to cook." Though she's given numerous demonstrations in both stores and high school economics classes particularly, Ardyce points up a frustration she fears is common to anyone attempting to tell the story: "Often we find there are no funds in the school budgets to buy beef for home ec demonstrations.

"Some of us helped with a beef brisket promotion in one supermarket, I can recall, and later the manager told us that during the month of October, they sold 200 pounds of beef brisket. On that one day in November, they sold 500 pounds. It shows you the power of promotion. I like to use the word education rather than promotion, especially around Omaha because the first question is: 'What are you trying to sell me?'

"The one-on-one conversations are really interesting and maybe the most effective," she believes, citing the exchange she had with a young woman who was an avowed vegetarian and pregnant.

"It wasn't until we started talking about nutrients for her baby that we started to make headway. You could see the change in her eyes, like she was thinking, 'Maybe I should give this some thought.'

"But television is where we educate the young. When our grandson Matthew was just three years old, he knew all about squeezing the Charmin."

"this new life"

burned deep. The bull business, the basic hardcore and sometimes unglamorous chunk of the total market is still bread and butter there in western Iowa.

"We've always been in the bull business, and I've got to have a bull that sires really good bulls." This presents a challenge when one wants to add to his cow factory. It becomes a matter of testing those bloodlines and analyzing which produces bull power and which adds to the maternal foundation. He once had a bull that sired really good females yet was compromised in structure by a bad hind leg.

"I ended up going back through and culling every daughter to eliminate passing that on. Structure is not something that's very easy to correct."

Recipe for a seed stock herd

Ingredients... (1951)

- 1 10-year-old cow. Earl Marshall breeding (accept no substitutes), 1,400 pounds plus.
- 4 Open heifers. Earl Marshall and Bandolier bloodlines.

Marshall Pride 514

Happyvale Blackcap G 72E

Queen cows

Thomas Chaps

The Hulk

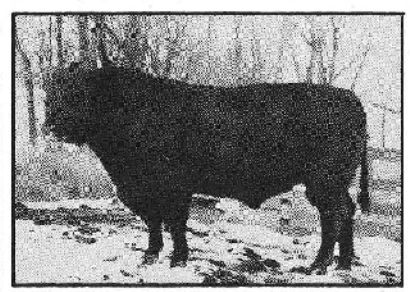
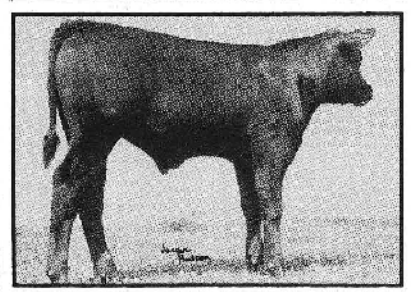
Gunston Tall Texan

Prospect Genetic Engineer 64N

Premier Independence KN

Extract "Delia" family from 10-year-old by allowing five daughters to **raise**; **reduce** volume to four for starter stock. **Save** for later. **Blend** four open heifers for future families: "Blackbird Elsie," "Eisa Erica," and "Eraline." **Reserve** "Eraline" for later production of bulls "Camelot," "Excalibur," and "Renovator." **Add** more cows. **Mix.** **Let set** until "Blackcap Lady," "Barbara Bell," "Bonnie Blackbird," and "Enchantress Erica," and "Annie" families **jell.** **Keep warm** during the 1950s and 1960s. **Slice off** and **sample**

to test registered breeders' interest, around 1965. **Let herd stand** until **firm.** **Keep covered.** **Remove** one bull and sire three grand champions at Iowa State Fair Junior Show—1969, 1970, 1971. **Add** and **blend** "Marshall Pride 514" bull from Erdmann Angus. **Sift** 1973 calf crop at Penosky Angus herd, Alberta. **Bring** "Happyvale Blackcap G 72E" to surface and **allow** to stand until 2,500 pounds, 60 inches tall. **Spoon off** cream and **drain** for a vigorous commercial bull business from "72E" sons. Wait until 1976 and **add** Queen family as foundation from Sitz herd in Nebraska. In 1979, **add** "Thomas Chaps" bull after seasoning on show circuit: **blend** with "72E" daughters; **skim off** "ONeills Camelot." **Let stand** until 38 months old and 2,800 pounds and 63¼ inches. When 1981, with LeRoy Erdmann, **add** "72E" son, "The Hulk," removed from "Rito 72" daughter and by way of the Morningside herd in South Dakota. **Add** "Gunston Tall Texan" for "Excalibur," "Prospect Genetic Engineer 64N" for a top son to send to Australia, and "Premier Independence KN" for blending with "72E" daughters and to produce "ONeills Renovator."



The bull Camelot as a youngster and in his working togs on a gloomy winter day.

Experience speaking, no doubt. The penalties are great for the seed stock producer failing to recognize a problem, failing to correct it. Part of the pruning process mentioned earlier, and woe to the reputation focusing on one trait to the neglect of another. As Jim points out in his struggle with presenting The Total Bull:

"I've castrated calves that weren't sound on feet and legs, and I guess that's the only thing we can't measure in AHIR or sire evaluation. The foreign visitors coming by this year want cattle that are really correct on feet and legs."

Jim thinks correctness is no less important to Midwest cow-calf

producers than it might be to Western rangemen. "The area around here can be as rugged a terrain as any. We've got badger holes, gopher mounds, ditches."

He feels comfortable keeping his operation close to the earth, close to the roots where O'Neill Angus began. Structure is important, fleshing ability is vital, and so too is making sure these celebrated bulls on the place know their function. Jim likes to run these A.I. bulls on the pasture, naturally serving a group of cows. In fact, Gunston Tall Texan reminds one a little of the Roman emperor, Cincinnatus who left his plow in the field to take command of the

Roman legions and save the empire.

"As far as I know, Tall Texan is one of the few bulls that bred 50 cows in the pasture and then went back to Denver to win his class at the 1983 National Centennial Angus Show in Denver." Jim likes that kind of style. It appeals to those who believe form follows function. Australian visitors respond well to a working approach wherever they find it and have reported they found more herd bulls at O'Neill's than what was seen at any other farm.

O'Neill's have made several sales "down under," including a full brother to O'Neill's Excalibur (by Tall Texan), a Tall Texan son out of a full sister to O'Neill's Camelot, and a son of Prospect Genetic Engineer 64N out of a daughter of Thomas Chaps. It's Jim's impression while Australian breeders may trail their U.S. counterparts in frame size, they are determined not to sacrifice structural correctness and fleshing ability. Traveling and conversion efficiency is so crucial to a grass-based beef industry.

O'Neill's own or are partners in a number of nationally known sires. These bulls are either at the home

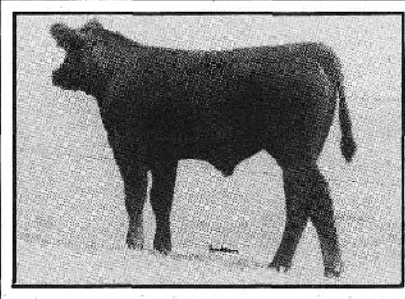
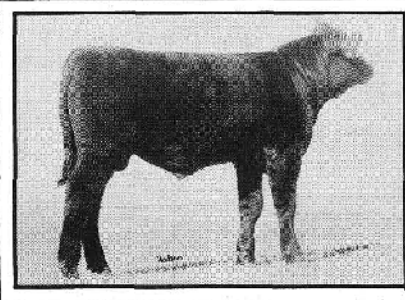
place, at stud, or in the tank and available through A.I.—Gunston Tall Texan, Premier Independence KN, Prospect Genetic Engineer 64N, and of course, the O'Neill series of Camelot, Excalibur, and Renovator. O'Neill's own The Hulk, a son of Happyvale Blackcap G 72E, and are co-owners of the Thomas Chaps sire with the Thomas Ranch at Baker, Or.

It's 72E that deserves special mention from the lineup. The Happyvale firm was developing a closed herd in Canada and basing its progress on roughage.

"They were easy fleshing and fertile," Jim describes the line's merits. He was the bull that really developed our commercial bull business. We never had a sterile bull, ever, from him. I did have to replace one bull but he was fertile when he left here. 72E was a super easy calver plus he was good on his feet and legs. He would put 250 pounds on a mature cow in one shot. I've never had a bull that would do that."

Jim said the 72E cows would be tall with lots of volume, "more, perhaps, than some people would like." He's particularly pleased with Premier Independence KN's impact when used on these 72E daughters. "He really works... Independence sires them very stylish and clean. Our 72E daughters have lots of substance and volume, so that cross has worked extremely well. What we're really doing is linebreeding the 72E bull."

O'Neill's like to reflect on and emphasize the basics and it would seem they find such more interesting than investing in the latest technology or some new wonder whether on four legs or from the lab. Linebreeding is an old technique and well-understood by new breeder and master alike. It's just that Jim can see such exciting progeny and future potential from using this proven germ plasm. 72E and the mother of the Delia line are not state-of-the-art Angus in the minds of some. They go back more than three decades in the case of the Delia cow; 72E is a 1973 model. Lineage and longevity, the impact of good decisions reverberating through time. In a nutshell, the

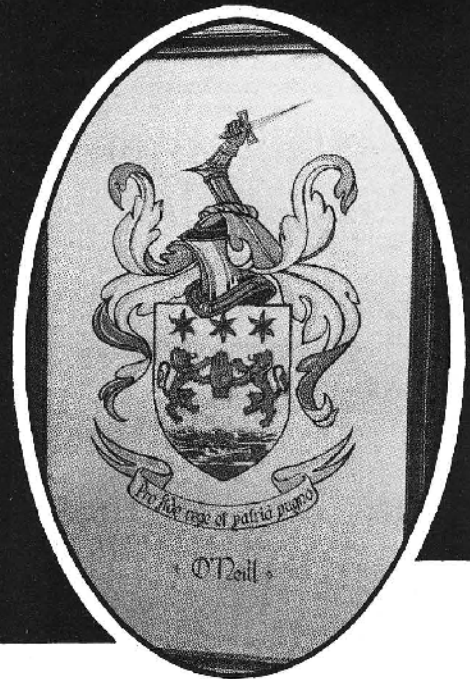


The knight and heraldry motif of the O'Neill bull batteries has some impressive foundation. Here is the family crest inscribed: "For the faith, the king, the fatherland, I fight." Researched from Irish history by Jim O'Neill's aunt.

Two sale toppers, both double-bred from "72E"

O'Neills Camero is a March 28, 1985 son of Camelot that topped the recent O'Neill sale on March 6, 1986 at \$5,000 for two-thirds interest.

O'Neills Concord is a March 18, 1985 son of Camelot that topped the November, 1985 sale at \$4,100 for two-thirds interest.



foundation Eraline cow was purchased in 1951 along with the foundation cow that Eraline 42 traces from. She ended up becoming the mother of Camelot, Renovator, and O'Neills Lady Eraline, a young female that weighed 1,640 pounds and stood 60 inches at 34 months of age.

Yet it's the longevity and undeniable genetic merit that keeps them competitive today. Jim questions if our emphasis on E.T. isn't clouding our appreciation of some of these great old cows with proven track records.

"I have always had a soft spot for older cows because of what the Delia mother did for us. Breeders today all seem to want very young

females. When a cow is seven or eight, they think she is old. Yet it is only then that you really know how great a female is.

"I have often thought what impact this cow has had upon our herd. If the gentleman we purchased her from had not let us pick out a top, proven, cow, how different our herd might be today."

"this angus life"