

# STEP BY STEP, ROW BY ROW

*(Or, how a career grows)*



Mary Ferguson

The building blocks of Mary Ferguson's career hook together like your kids' LEGO kit. One step supports the next and up it goes. From the 4-H club in Ohio, through the junior herdsman award, junior Angus showman, on to college and Kansas where the NJAA Bronze, Silver, and Gold awards begin to accumulate along with her winning the national junior showmanship contest in 1980 at the Kansas Coliseum in Wichita, the structure takes shape as if by design.

At Kansas State University, Manhattan, Mary's showing in the Little American Royal, winning herdsman awards and scholarships. And, as you might expect, it's committee work, Block and Bridle, and membership on the livestock judging, meats judging, and meat evaluation teams—even wool judging.

She manages, during this period of late 1970s—early Eighties, to keep her hand in the practical aspect of cattle by working on area ranches part-time. Another school job was supermarket cashier (there's a window on the consumer world!) and eventually she became a meat cutter, when classes would allow, at the KSU Meats Laboratory.

Of course, this dynamo also takes on a position at KSU the following summer at the purebred beef barn with heat detection, A.I., visitor hosting, facility upkeep, medication and herd health, and some E.T. among her responsibilities.

The next stepping stone was becoming assistant manager of the Meats Laboratory. Invaluable experience, that, for what was to come later in her career. Here she was not only involved in the slaughter and processing, sausage making and curing, but she also dealt with accounting, advertising, and consumer education.

A graduate teaching assistantship followed, then a position with the extension arm of KSU.

So, when the Certified Angus Beef program grew to where it needed a marketing specialist, Mary was in position to apply.

"Although, I was employed by KSU as an extension assistant—a job I thoroughly enjoyed—post-graduation became a time to move on. At that time, virtually all university systems were putting freezes on salaries and

promotions. K-State was no different.

"I'd studied the CAB product and marketing concept and—at the risk of sounding corny—I felt this was the job opportunity that would allow me to contribute most to the beef industry while gaining a wide range of experience in marketing our end product."

Mary shares she doesn't believe any classroom experience truly prepares a "person for the real world." Yet the judging experience at K-State plus helping manage the meats lab stirs her empathy with the industry.

In addition, her six years in the "beefy" state of Kansas, ranching in the Flint Hills, and studying the feeding and packing giants of the western part of the state adds perspective.

"When I started with CAB," she confides, "one thing I lacked—and still do—is any formal training in marketing, advertising, or promotion." So she became a student again, of sorts, this newly hired "Director of Marketing Concepts." She watched, borrowed, and copied from the agencies involved with CAB, applying all she could in a spirit of what she calls "resourcefulness."

**"At one point I toyed with the idea of studying veterinary medicine. My eldest brother is a veterinarian."**

"I was coming in very green in the marketing field and basically pleading my ignorance. These (marketing) people have been extremely helpful to me."

Mary found her naivete no handicap during this formative period. Those dealing with her appreciated the open-mindedness and lack of preconceived opinions. "By watching how things were done and being receptive to ideas," she explains it. "That's really an asset."

One of her persistent challenges was "this hick country girl walking into this city slicker environment." If she appeared out of her league, Mary apparently impressed those who listened with the sincerity and honesty of the entire concept and its spokeslady. She must confront those

By Jim Cotton, Editor

who are ignorant or even hostile to agriculture or, specifically, innovations. Even marketing colleagues fail to understand the CAB program is not just a "sell" but also a link in the seedstock business, one that's destined to make every Angus animal worth more and bring more profit to the producer. Still, there's the callous indifference of a skeptical and traditional industry.

"There's a part of me that dislikes that," she says of the intimidation," but then I tell myself that here's a neat opportunity to educate these people about agriculture, the Angus breed, and Certified Angus Beef."

Concern with quality and monitoring the product so it's sold, handled, and represented in the best possible manner is part of the service after the sale, so important to building loyalty to CAB. This attitude is her trump card.

**"My biggest fear was my lack of marketing knowledge."—Mary Ferguson, former Director of Marketing Concepts, Certified Angus Beef, and presently Assistant Director, CAB.**

"Most of my presentations are made at chef's association meetings and restaurant staff meetings. I try to inform these people about CAB and how it differs from other beef products on the market. Chefs are very eager to learn and improve upon their offering. They know CAB can solve a lot of their problems encountered with an inferior product. Waiters and waitresses, too, are anxious to learn more about the products they serve.

"Better tips!" she offers as the reason. "They realize being more professional and knowledgeable in the eyes of their customers can mean better gratuities."

Mary suspects her presentations have been well-received. "I hope so! It can become old hat to go to a restaurant and give a staff meeting. But, you pump yourself up, act excited (which you become during the presentation) and you get the inflection back in your voice. I hope my audiences see me as not being arrogant but straight-forward and sincere... I think they find that refreshing.

"Being female attracts attention," she says. "People will always remember your name and they will always listen. Some are listening for the awaited blunder. But if you're genuine and professional, you will eventually win their respect.

"Another advantage is there's hardly ever a line at the ladies' room!" she says of the male-dominated audience.

Sisters of sorts in the meats industry are Nancy Matheson-Burns, vice-president and general manager of Dole & Bailey Inc., and Jean Manchester, former economist with the National Live Stock and Meat Board and now chairman and CEO of Neesvig's Inc. Both firms are CAB food service distributors. "There may be more

## MARY FERGUSON

*Master of Science, Animal Science and Industry (Production and Management), Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas. August, 1985. Thesis Subject: Effect of GnRH, Breeding Weight, Frame, Condition, and Age on Pregnancy Rate in Estrus Synchronized Beef Heifers. Research entailed coordinated field studies with cooperating ranches throughout Kansas, utilizing estrus synchronization and artificial insemination programs involving approximately 600 beef heifers.*

such examples that I'm not aware of, but these two are certainly noteworthy."

Her advice to young people beginning their careers? "Be prepared to face the challenges." She thinks females need to work harder, however, to achieve and then maintain credibility. "Accept and welcome the challenge to succeed. Perhaps I've been extremely fortunate. However, I've not encountered as much resistance as you might expect. There's no doubt that the problem does exist, but perhaps it's more disbelief that discrimination—some people just tend to suspect incompetency from a 26-year-old, blonde female.

"Yes," she admits, "I've had nightmares about missing a plane or a meeting."

In the West Salem area, there's plenty of access to antiques, one of her interests. "I can't afford to collect those beautiful old pieces, but I pick up what most people would probably classify as junk.

"My major long-term goal is to someday own and operate that cattle ranch. The cattle will, without a doubt, be Angus. The ranch will be run as a commercial operation—no frills." Her preference for the breed is based on her devotion to CAB and the Angus ability to produce it. Plus a strong foundation to this young lady's career and future comes from her parents and background.

"I'm the youngest of six children raised on the family's farming and registered Angus cattle operation." Harold and Mary Ferguson reside near East Liverpool, Ohio.

There have been other influences as well in the molding and shaping of this notable career. Several members of the K-State faculty—Dr. Larry Corah, Dr. Miles McKee, Dr. Dell Allen, and Dr. Bill Able along with Galen Fink of the purebred segment of the university have been helpful.

"If I were to pick one individual who has been the most influential person in my life, though, it would have to be my sister, Jan Lyons. Jan and her husband Frank, and their two children, Debbie and Amy, operate a registered Angus cattle operation just south of Manhattan, Kan."

A test of good mortar is how well it binds. The Fergusons and all the other masons in this project laid the first and subsequent courses well, it would seem. **AJ**

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