

RACHEL BRECK — A TRAILBLAZER

BY JANET MAYER

When Rachel Breck was selected for induction into the Angus Heritage Foundation in 1990, the caption above her photo read, "First Lady of Angus Industry."

What better way to describe one of the trailblazers for women in the cattle industry. Her involvement and acceptance, both as a breeder and as a leader in numerous Angus associations, paved the way for countless others who work and hold leadership positions in the industry today.

Breck became a member of the American Angus Association in the early 1950s. She held offices in the Connecticut Angus Association, served as president of the New England Angus Association, and as a delegate to the Association annual meeting for nearly 25 years. During her years as a breeder, she was actively involved with the Eastern States Angus Association, Eastern National Livestock Show and the Eastern States Expo.

In 1980 Breck was the first woman to seek a position on the American Angus Association's Board of Directors. Although defeated, Breck thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

"I felt the Association just wasn't ready for a woman director at that point in time," Breck says. "But maybe I made it easier for other women to follow."

Carol Bloom is one person who's appreciative of Breck's leadership efforts. Bloom is current president of the American Angus Auxiliary and hopes to one day serve on the Association Board of Directors.

Doing public relations for the Angus breed has filled the void. She has served as an Angus ambassador while traveling to foreign countries doing goodwill tours and public relations for the Irish Export Commission. She has also given speeches for different organizations and groups.

"I've led an unusual life and I enjoy talking about it," Breck says. "I like people. Most of them find it vastly interesting that I have bred cattle. People who lived near my farm



used to call me 'that old cow lady.' I guess that is what I really am," she adds with a laugh.

In 1950 Breck was a rarity when she decided to start breeding Angus cattle at Hedgerows Farm in West Cornwall, Conn. Divorced and the mother of four children, Rachel singlehandedly managed the farm. And she did it well. Throughout the next three decades her herd produced a number of outstanding cattle that won numerous championships.

The two best remembered cows were Topp Hill Annie 4109 and Hedgerows Jestress 5209. Breck says Jestress was described by the American Angus Association as one of the best all-time cows. During her 17-year life span, this cow produced 145 calves (both natural and embryo transfer calves).

At the age of 75, Rachel decided to hang up her hat as a cattle breeder. "My children wanted me to retire when I was 70, but I wasn't ready then," she says. "By the time I was 75, the paper work was starting to be too much and the cost of breeding cattle was increasing. So I decided to sell the herd." The Hedgerows cattle were dispersed in 1983.

Today, at 84 years of age, Rachel attends as many Angus events as possible and is a familiar face at the annual Angus meeting in Louisville. She lives most of the year in a cottage in the village of Sharon, Conn., but each winter she spends a month in Sanibel, Fla.

Rachel attributes her love of cattle to her father, John Henry Hammond. She was born in New York City in 1908. The youngest of four sisters and one brother, she had a formal upbringing. She describes her parents as remarkable people and her childhood as happy. Her father was a banker-lawyer and board chairman of the Bangor and Aroostoch Railroad in Maine.

"My father was way ahead of his time," she says. "Back in the '20s, he persuaded potato growers in Maine to rotate their crops with soybeans to replenish the soil. He also believed in organically grown crops, which was unheard of at that time."

Rachel's father owned a farm in Mt. Kisco, about 35 miles from New York City, where he raised registered Guernsey cattle. The family would go to the farm on weekends. Horses were another passion of Rachel's. She became an accomplished equestrian and competed in many field trials as a young woman.

Rachel was later involved in raising Herefords in Arizona. During World War II, her husband served in the Army and left Rachel in charge of their ranch. She learned there was a big difference between dairy and beef cattle.

After the war and her marriage ended, Rachel returned to New York City. "One day my father suggested I look for a farm and try my hand at raising beef cattle," she recalls. "At that point in time, I can describe myself only as a tired, disillusioned divorcee. So my father and I went looking for a farm and found Hedgerows. It was 200 acres with 80 cleared for crops, and, oh, it was beautiful with its old three-story red barns and stone fences."

Rachel says she decided to buy Angus cattle instead of Herefords because it seemed the thing to do. "My brother-in-law, General Franklin, had the second oldest Hereford farm in the United States. He generously offered to give me 12 heifers and the breeding privilege to his bull. But I thanked him and declined. There was much more Angus activity near my farm."

This cattlemaster started in a modest way — buying four cows for \$250 apiece and later a bull. She had to work twice as hard because she was still learning Angus pedigrees. When it came time to hire a manager, Rachel looked for someone who knew less than she so she would be forced to learn everything on her own.

Mick Colvin, executive director, Certified Angus Beef Program, was one cattlemaster who Rachel relied on for advice. When Colvin worked as a herdsman at Moles Hill Farm near Sharon, Conn., during the '60s Rachel would often stop by to visit with him.

"Rachel was like a sponge — trying to learn everything she could about cattle," Colvin says. "She was always genuinely interested in all aspects of the Angus breed, but especially the people."

Soon after starting her herd, Rachel went looking for an Angus organization to join. She found the Connecticut Angus Association and the name of its president.

"I called him and told him I was an Angus breeder and I wanted to work with them," she says. "All of the members were men, but they were very nice to me. There was no opposition to my being a woman at all. I think they were amazed I was willing to work so hard."

Rachel moved through the state association offices, starting as assistant secretary, then assistant treasurer, and finally as vice president.

"Something happened to the president, and the next thing I knew, I was president," she says. She led the organization from 1956 through 1960. After that, she was elected president of the New England Angus Association, where she served for two years.

Throughout the years, Rachel's herd gained prominence both in show and breeding circles. In 1961 she married Manley Breck. "When I married him, he was in the insurance business," she says. "All my friends said that now he would get rid of all this crazy cattle business. But guess what? Instead of my

quitting, he began to love cattle, too. We were happy for the 10 years we were together. He died in 1972."

It was during the time that Rachel was married to Manley that they began to sponsor junior Angus association events. One project was a junior heifer show. After his death, the association named it the Manley Breck Memorial Heifer Show in his honor.

In addition to helping with junior shows, it was Rachel's practice to employ young people at the farm each summer. She also gave project animals to children of her employees.

In honor of her junior work, Breck was inducted into the National Junior Angus Association Honorary Foundation in July 1990.

"I don't think I've done anything unusual; I've always been interested in young people," says Breck. "Young people who have an interest in 4-H and the junior association are healthier for it — both mentally and physically — and it teaches them responsibility."

"All of my friends in the Angus world, both young and old, have meant so much to me. My years as a breeder were most rewarding. I think that is why I liked the Angus business so much. The people are so wonderful. The most important thing is, they accepted me not as a woman but as a breeder."

Andy Angus Creator

Originally created to promote the Connecticut Angus Sale, Rachel Breck is the seamstress behind Andy, the new Angus mascot.

Breck purchased the teddy bear (rather battered) for \$1 in a Salvation Army Store in New York City in 1955 or 1956. Upon returning home she found a slash in its belly containing two 50-cent pieces. A former owner had evidently used it as a bank. The bear was filled with straw, had short arms and legs and a huge head.

Reconstruction was necessary and meant lengthening all four limbs, making cloven hooves and changing the head to include large ears. She made nostrils and a different mouth and covered the entire creature with fake fur, purchased at a theatrical fabric shop off Broadway.

Her years of costuming for the Professional Children's School came in handy and her love of animals and knowledge of anatomy helped. The outfit, genuinely Scottish, was in her possession as far back as the 1930s, when her two young sons wore the kilts, jackets and Scotch caps as shown in the picture.

As Andy tended to be top heavy, a cane was provided by Ted Ryan, of Mole's Hill Farm, to prop him up. Rachel often took him to sales and shows, driving him about in the front seat of the car, to the amazement of strangers. After many years he was retired to her closet.

When Breck sold Hedgerows Farm in 1982, she tied him up, supplied another kilt, (the original one had succumbed to moths) and gave him to another Angus breeder, Patti Rae.

Breck feared Andy had disappeared and was overjoyed to learn he had been well cared for by Jeanette Thompson. Andy was the hit of the Angus Auxiliary 40th Anniversary party in Louisville and now resides at the American Angus Association office in St. Joseph, Mo.

Rachel says she was deeply touched to learn of his permanent resting place, and hopes he will remind her many friends in the Angus business that although 84 years old, she is still a child at heart and an everlasting believer in Angus cattle.