

A Cattleman's Greatest Contribution

KENTUCKY ANGUS BREEDER KENNETH HAINES SR. IS A SOFT-SPOKEN, STATELY MAN OF 77 WITH ROOTS RUNNING DEEP THROUGH THE ANGUS FAMILY TREE.

BY JULIE GRIMES ALBERTSON



Kenny and Mildred Haines have shared 56 years of marriage and a lifetime of Angus experiences

Van Wert, Ohio — It might just look like a dot on the map to most Angus producers, however, out of this small community grew pioneers of the Angus breed.

While he would never use the word pioneer to describe himself, Kenneth “Kenny” Haines is a forefather of the modern Angus cow and a native son of Van Wert, Ohio.

Haines matter-of-factly describes his early livestock judg-

ing experiences. As teenagers, Haines, along with Dale Runnion and Paul Good, were the three high individuals at the Van Wert County Fair. They won their state contest as a team and went on to place third at the Chicago International Livestock Show. Who could have guessed these young men would each have so much to contribute to one breed of cattle?

“Placing third at the International was the thing that inspired

me to go to college,” says Haines.

Mildred Haines, Kenny’s wife of 56 years, remembers it a little differently “Tell why you were inspired,” she adds with a smile. “The prize was a \$400 scholarship. That would impress kids today.”

While it may not sound like much now, in 1936 it was plenty, says Kenny. “That was the very thing that kept me in college. Each year I got a \$100 check. It

paid my tuition and I even had money left over.”

Ohio State was the university of choice for promising young agriculturalists from Van Wert. Haines joined his fellow judging teammates there, as well as two more future Angus movers and shakers, Les and Lee Leachman. In 1939 Kenny continued his successful judging career as his livestock team won the national title. The experiences and contacts Kenny made as a young collegian would shape his life.

In 1940 Haines married, graduated and took a job managing Meadow Lane Farm in Van Wert. Eight years and six children later, Mildred and Kenny moved the family to Kentucky at the suggestion of the Leachman brothers.

“Lee and Les told me that someone was needed to manage the Angus operation for C.V. Whitney at Lexington,” says Kenny.

So the Haines family moved to the Bluegrass State.

Life at the Whitney Farm was most certainly of another era. The 1,000-acre farm included Angus cattle as well as Thoroughbred horses. Thirty families lived and worked on the farm along with the Haines clan. There was a cattle crew, which Haines managed, a horse crew, mechanic, plumber, electricians, carpenters — all who lived and worked on the farm. It was completely self-contained.

Imagine being a kid, having the run of a farm like that. No busy streets, no big city and dozens of playmates. The Haines’ oldest son, Kenneth Jr., also known as Deacon, has a warm place in his heart for the Whitney Farm. “I remember the times we’d drive the cows in. Dad would pull the choke on the truck, and I’d stand on the seat

and drive until we'd get to the fence. I'd cut the key off, and we'd get the cows in the barnyard," recalls Deacon.

"Any kid who wanted to work got a job. And any kid who wanted to show was given two steers and the feed. "When we sold the steer, we gave Mr. Whitney half the money. He lost money, but he was just interested in giving us the opportunity," says Deacon.

After 12 years managing the Angus herd, Kenny spent the last three years at the Whitney Farm as the overall manager. He had the responsibility of taking care of the farm and families. "I had to keep up the houses, for instance, building screen doors for the ladies. I figured out real quick that if you buy the screen door for one, you'd better not have the carpenter make the next," says Kenny with a chuckle.

The Haines left Kentucky only after the Whitney Farm dispersed. The farm's Angus auction broke all records at that time. High-selling bull sold for \$150,000 for one-third interest and possession to J.C. Penney. Kenny says it was the end of the little, tightly-wound cattle.

Kenny was well prepared for the next challenge he would undertake as manager of Briarhill Farm in Union Springs, Ala. The stately 77-year-old Haines recounts his time at Briarhill with little fanfare. But truth be told, he made a great contribution to an industry-wide trend away from the short, muscle-bound cattle to what we would recognize today as modern Angus.

"I got an awful lot of criticism from other people in the industry who thought I'd gone crazy," says Kenny of his purchase of two bulls from the Wye Plantation. "These bulls at that time were monsters compared to the traditional cattle. Lee Leachman called me and told me I was nuts for buying these cattle."

Kenny's response was, "might be crazy, but at least we'll have beef to eat."

Kenny credits Briarhill owner, Dr. Jim Hicks, for being a little on the wild side, willing to do anything to get where he wanted to go, which was to the top of the industry. "He wanted to be the first to do everything." With his encouragement, Briarhill was the first to show big cattle.

"In 1969 we won champion Angus bull at the American Angus Futurity in Lexington with a bull out of Columbus of Wye, from the Wye Plantation herd. After that, it was pretty well accepted that we had the type of the future," says Kenny

Another important partner on the Briarhill Farm was Mildred, who having raised their six children, took over recordkeeping responsibilities for the herd. She was also famous for her cattle selection methods.

"Dr. Hicks let me pick a female out of a group they had just purchased," remembers Mildred. "I didn't know the breeding. Kenny wouldn't give me

any advice because he didn't know the breeding either. I went out and sat in the field one day and chose one because she walked like a lady."

Black Jill became the foundation female of the Haines herd, and her offspring now dominate the Haines cow herd.

Much can be learned from the manner in which Haines assembled the famed Briarhill herd. Rather than go out and buy a herd of cattle, he bred a herd of cattle so he could better predict how the cows would work.

"I suppose it was just my backwardness. If I would have gone to Canada or different places around the country and bought all the bigger cattle I could find, I'd have saved three or four years but wouldn't have known what I had.

"That's why we went to Wye Plantation. We looked those cattle over and came to the conclusion that the cattle were honest. The manager had a good enough

job and the owner had more money than he could count. So we figured they didn't have to do anything wrong to forward what they were doing. It turned out alright," Haines adds with his understated manner.

Another gutsy move was the purchase of Great Big Northern from Sir Williams. Kenny selected the bull as a four-month-old calf at its mother's side. Briarhill paid \$25,000 for half-interest.

Great Big Northern went on to sire what Haines believes was the strongest and most popular Briarhill breeding bull, General JJ Patton.

While Kenny was assembling the Briarhill herd in Alabama, son Deacon was applying the lessons learned by his father's side. The younger Haines was manager of Big Rock Valley Farms in Michigan, owned by Edward Lowe, the man who invented kitty litter.

"I started my own herd while

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at Big Rock Valley. Rather than pay me more money, he gave me calves," says Deacon.

Meanwhile, Kenny was also assembling his own set of 20 cows at Briarhill. So in 1979, the Haines decided to make it a family partnership, combining their herds and starting what would be called Haines Angus Farm.

Deciding which state to settle in was an easy decision. "I think because of the delightful time we had at the Whitney Farm, it made us feel like Kentuckians, without the accent," says Kenny.

Locating a farm was quite a different story, however. "Deacon looked at 62 different farms before finding one with two livable homes. We almost got desperate enough to try to live in one house," says Mildred.

The Haines maintain 75 head of Angus, all originating from the Briarhill and Big Rock Valley Farms. They continue to breed females rather than buy them.

Deacon says they work to sell 25 to 30 bulls off the farm each year. "Commercial herds in our area are small," he says. "Our customers need a bull that will calve to heifers as well as cows and still get to the market with a good-sized calf."

They haven't gone the way of low birth weight bulls, however. "Commercial producers have 900- to 1,000-pound cows in this area. It takes a bull out of a big, solid cow to go on their cows and not sire any short calves," Kenny adds. "My experience with low birth weight bulls has been that they don't grow up to have enough frame and consistency to go into those small herds and work."

The most notable bull to come from the Haines herd to date was Premier Regent who sold to Premier for \$100,000 in 1985. "We decided they could name him whatever they wanted after paying that much for the bull," says Mildred.

Still, their greatest success has simply been the close partnership formed between father and son. Kenny and Deacon have spent the past 16 years together, doing what

they both love, raising Angus cattle.

"It's been wonderful," says the elder Haines, softly, "But it's fortunate that Deacon enjoys poverty," he adds with a sparkle in his eye.