



FIRST TO FLIGHT

The town of Lanesboro, Minn., celebrates 150 years in 2019 and is home to perhaps the longest running Angus herd in Fillmore county. Sunnyslope Angus Farms also reached a milestone: 121 years of consecutive operation with The Business Breed.

by Lindsay King, assistant editor

Calves playfully spook on a sun-soaked hill as a horse with a buggy jogs by on the pavement. It's a typical scene in southeast Minnesota, which boasts a large Amish population. But what's important here is who those black Angus calves belong to and the legacy stretching beyond them with each blade of grass they pack into muscle.

This small Norwegian corner of Minnesota is home to one of the oldest names in Angus history: Abrahamson. Born and raised on the long-time Sunnyslope homestead, Philip Abrahamson, along with his wife Ruth and their daughter and son-in-law Julie and Keith Ekstrom, continues building on a dream born in 1898 by Peter Abrahamson.

EARLY ADOPTERS

Several accounts of Peter mention his extensive recordkeeping that resembled diary entries. This was how Philip and Ruth got to know the man who started it all.

"As I read those diaries, he really became a person for me," Ruth says. "His last entry was made shortly before he passed away in 1938. It was like a good

friend that I had spent many years with had died with that entry."

The adventurous, forward-thinking Peter loved both people and Angus cattle. He was known for quickly embracing new innovations and technology. The same holds true for Sunnyslope today.

"He was one of the first to have the telephone put in and he was one of the first to be on the mail route when it began," she adds. "He was a risk-taker, but also very involved in his community."

Peter's signature adorns the letter which got the Minnesota Angus Association started in 1915. An influential member of the community and state, Peter was active in the country school, his church and was on the first board for the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933.

Many of the problems of that era were recorded in Peter's entries.

"He wrote about the weather raining on downed hay and of drought years, those things have not changed around here," Ruth says. "It is hard for us to fully understand the lifestyle of the time where they used horse-drawn equipment, chopped wood to



keep the house warm in the winter and needed a lot of men to complete all the work on the farm.”

Large community gatherings for farm work have only become a thing of the past in the last 30 or so years. Some of Philip’s fondest memories of his childhood on the farm involve the days when the neighbors came to help his father thresh the fields.

“I always look back on those days,” Philip says with a fond smile. “The kids would be driving the little tractors with the bundle wagons, so we were all involved.”

FAST FORWARD

If Peter was forward thinking, then Philip may have been a tick ahead of his time when it came to innovative herd management. While studying animal husbandry at the University of Minnesota, Philip was given an assignment that led him in an all-too-familiar direction.

“I was given a project to improve cattle operations [as a whole],” Philip says. “I tried to come up with a system that analyzed each calf and gave them a score. It was basically a crude version of AHIR.”

Philip’s project was assigned in 1959. He didn’t come up with Angus Herd Improvement Records® (AHIR®) *per se*, but he did basically predict the future. The American Angus Association unveiled the program that same year.

“We jumped on it the very next year,” Philip says.

He remembers having open houses when the calves were weighed. Drove of people came to watch. Many saw their first computer modem on those warm afternoons at Sunnyslope.

“Interestingly enough, taking weaning and yearling weights was pretty controversial in the beginning,” Philip says.

When birth weight data came out, things changed dramatically for Angus producers and Philip.

“Our calving and planting seasons used to overlap,” Philip says. “I can remember being out planting when a heifer would go down and we’d have to stop everything to go help her.”

Usually it didn’t turn out well for the calf or the heifer. Using low-birthweight bulls turned all that around for Philip.

“I looked back over a five-year period I never saw

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The farm itself was established in 1863, but it wasn't until 1898 that the Angus herd was started. Technically, Sunnyslope is older than the nearby town of Lanesboro.

a heifer calf in three of those years,” Philip says. “It just shows you what the program can do. If you aren’t convinced after that, then nothing will.”

EAT BEEF

In 1976, beef carcass standards were lowered. Now a Choice steak was considered Prime, Good was now Choice, and so on. This proved detrimental to the palatability of beef.

“There is a saying that I have always liked — ‘some people eat to live and some people live to eat,’” Philip says. With a laugh he pleads guilty to being both. “A good-tasting meal is one of the great delights in life.”

Philip was easily one of the biggest supporters of the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand.

“I felt like we were going in the right direction finally,” Philip says. “I have always tried to put a lot of emphasis on high-quality carcasses.”

Philip actually credits the CAB movement with ultimately pushing the business breed to improve at a time when it needed it most.

“A lot of people talk about the Angus cow and yes, she is very important; but I think the CAB program is what moved Angus forward,” Philip says.

THE TRIFECTA

The three qualities Philip values most in his bulls are calving ease, carcass quality and efficient growth. Making the three work in tandem is no small feat, yet Philip continues to hit the mark year after year.

“We try to get animals that cover all the bases,” Philip says. “As Angus comes out with new traits to watch, we try to get as many of those traits into our cattle as possible.”

New dollar value indexes (\$Values) were introduced on a Friday and Sunnyslope’s sale was that following Monday. Despite the lack of familiarity with the new \$Values, the buyer of bull lot #1 calculated combined value (\$C).

“He calculated that the bull is in the top 1/10th of the top 1%,” Philip adds. “That just shows you that if you try to pay attention to these traits and do the best you can, you can have some good outcomes. That is basically what we have tried to do.”

Keith says that is the direction Philip has maintained for as long as he can remember.

“Phil was focused on carcass long before other people were,” Keith says. “There is something to be said about a calf that hits the ground, gets up running and then grows. But even if it grows, if it isn’t worth eating then we missed something we are trying to accomplish.”

GENERATION SIX

Keith and Julie will be the fifth generation on the homestead and their kids are already showing interest in being the sixth. The family-driven operation is one thing that hasn't changed in the last 121 years.

"The generations have always worked together," Julie says. "The family has been a constant and so have the Angus cattle."

Julie, the self-appointed family historian, wrote an entire book about the Abrahamson legacy at Sunnyslope and southern Minnesota. She also makes up the entire marketing and public relations department.

Growing up, Ruth never really saw herself living the rest of her life on a farm. It's funny how life shakes out sometimes.

"I was the middle child of five and we were always out helping on the farm in the summer," Ruth says. "I don't appreciate the heat of summer. I wanted to get away from that life as soon as possible."

Ruth studied in Saint Paul at what is now called Crown College to fulfill her passion for music, psychology and theology. Forever a student, Ruth is still deeply immersed in all three subjects today.

"I was an independent woman for a number of years and then I was introduced to Philip by some mutual friends," Ruth says. The year was 1969 and only six months — and six official dates — later, the couple was married.

The newlyweds returned to Sunnyslope to continue the Abrahamson legacy.

FORWARD THINKING

As Keith and Julie take on more responsibility on the operation, they have some plans of their own for what Sunnyslope will dabble in next.

"We are primarily focused on continuing what we are doing because, plain and simple, it works," Keith says. "Folks want calves that grow and we are fulfilling that need."

With a background in the dairy industry, Keith is taking after Peter as he ventures into uncharted territory for the farm.

"From a marketing standpoint, we are wanting to sell more semen," Keith says. "We have some bulls that would fit well with Holsteins as dairies are using some of their cows to make cattle for beef."



Customer retention isn't something Sunnyslope needs to be concerned about as they move forward though. At the 2019 sale, one purchaser was a direct descendant of a 1904 private treaty buyer.

"We are in an era of transition," Julie says. "We have been working on transitioning from one generation to another in the last decade. Keith and I are dedicated to honoring the past accomplishments and visions of the generations that came before, but also want to put our own mark on the business as we raise our children."

Pushing through the tough years proved Philip and Ruth were tenacious and dedicated. Keith and Julie only continue to echo these traits as they ring in the new era for Sunnyslope. Perhaps Peter didn't realize his farm would still be operating 121 years later, and maybe that's exactly why it is. **AJ**

