

Resilience and Adaptability

The life and wisdom of Oklahoma cattleman Albert Rutledge.

by Elizabeth Rosson, editorial intern

Anybody who lived in Oklahoma in the 1930s remembers one prevailing thought: the Dust Bowl.

It was one of the most catastrophic events that ravaged the agricultural heartland of the United States. The Dust Bowl had a profound effect on the once-productive Oklahoma land, where Albert Rutledge grew up on a typical family farm of the time.

“I remember they called it ‘Black Sunday’; it must have been 1935. The dust storm didn’t blow in. It rolled in real quiet,” he recounts.

Rutledge’s father urgently instructed him to help their mother cover the windows with sheets. By 11 o’clock, the chickens were in the chicken house. An hour later, the family was gathered around a table illuminated only by a kerosene lamp.

“It was so dark,” Rutledge remembers. “I couldn’t tell who was sitting on the other side of the table.”

Loss of fertile soil and the relentless onslaught of dust storms presented an unprecedented challenge for farmers and ranchers. Rutledge says his dad believed the Dust Bowl era hit America even harder than the Great Depression.

For Rutledge, this period didn’t deter him from the agriculture industry, but instead fueled his commitment. Today, Rutledge and



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his wife, Betty, live in Stillwater, Okla., and keep a few cows.

“Albert lives and breathes cattle,” Betty says. “That’s all he thinks about.”

He’s spent his whole life raising cattle and mentoring young producers. Throughout his career he was the herdsman at Angus Valley Farms and the Oklahoma A&M [now Oklahoma State University (OSU)] Beef Cattle Center, showing the Champion Steer in Fort Worth in 1955, and raising many top-tier heifers and bulls.

Albert served as president of a local

county cattlemen’s association, board member of the Northeast Oklahoma Angus Association and an active member of the American Angus Association.

He’s not one to list off achievements, but instead simply considers himself part of the business he’s always known. Albert is witty and humble, well-known within the region for his contributions.

Following his tenure as a herdsman, Albert was assigned to the Live Animal Evaluation Center, where he played a role in gathering crucial measurements from live

animals for numerous experiments. He retired from his position at OSU in 1990; but to this day has cattle on his home property.

“I never saw Angus cattle till I went to college,” Albert says. “At first, I thought they were terrible.”

In the dim arena, he initially found them lackluster compared to the Shorthorns and Herefords he knew well. Little did he know, the rest of his life would revolve around the black-coated cattle.

Rustic beginnings

Albert experienced an upbringing shaped by hard work and the challenges of surviving in a tough environment. Being the oldest among his 10 brothers, he learned the value of pitching in to help his family. Their livelihood depended on dual-purpose cattle.

Albert fondly recalls his early days on the farm, attending a rural school a mile and a half from the homestead where transportation was not as easy as hopping on a bus. He and his siblings relied on a gentle horse to carry them to school.

Life was a different pace. Unlike today, when information is instantly accessible, it took time for news and innovations to reach different parts of the country.

“We relied on the *Kansas City Star* newspaper as our primary source of news, and despite our lack of funds, the salesman accepted two plump hens in exchange for our subscription,” Albert says. “I still remember going out and catching those chickens with my brother.”

Weathering storms

The cattle industry has weathered its fair share of storms, both literal and metaphorical, throughout Rutledge’s lifetime — with the Dust

Bowl as just the beginning.

Screwworms were prevalent across the southern United States the ’30s and ’40s, infesting flesh wounds, making it difficult to dehorn or castrate cattle. The parasite required daily intervention from vets to eradicate, and Albert says that contributed to the popularity of Angus due to their polled nature.

The 1950s brought a widespread battle against dwarfism as demand for a smaller, stouter build known as “belt buckle cattle” emerged. Rutledge recalls the difficulties associated with this genetic condition, which resulted in the stunted growth and abnormal proportions. While some full siblings appeared normal, many carriers of the dwarfism gene exhibited an in-between stature, he explains. This made it challenging to identify affected animals solely based on their physical appearance.

The presence of the genetic defect diminished the economic value of affected cattle. To eliminate the defect from herds, breeders focused on avoiding entire lines of cattle that had produced dwarfed offspring. This adjustment resulted in a decline of dwarfism over time.

A few decades later, oversupply, rising costs and a decline in demand led to the 1980s cattle market crash. The farm crisis posed a severe threat to the viability of many operations, forcing producers to make tough decisions to stay afloat. Albert, like many others, had to navigate the challenges of this turbulent period, adjusting production strategies and managing costs to survive the downturn.

Lessons from the herd

The couple has lived in Oklahoma their whole lives, where they raised

their two daughters and a son; aside from a two-year stint in southern Illinois.

While employed at OSU, he traveled with the college cattle, riding boxcars to showcase them at prominent cattle shows in Denver, Chicago, Fort Worth and Kansas City.

“Sometimes we would miss a meal on the boxcar, but I remember stopping to get a bowl of oatmeal for 30 cents,” he remembers. “It was a great big bowl. Expenses were less than two dollars a day back then.”

His life revolved around the cattle — at shows, they’d even sleep in the barns. As Albert traveled across the country, he observed the importance of genetics, market trends and consumer demands.

The ability to adapt to industry trends and consumer preferences became a crucial aspect of success. Staying abreast of industry developments was essential for Rutledge’s breeding decisions.

“We just followed the industry,” he says. “We looked at what was in the *Angus Journal*, and then we raised something that would sell.”

Embracing innovation

In the quest for progress, Rutledge was eager to try new approaches, even if they didn’t always yield success. To address dental issues in cattle, an experiment was conducted with false teeth.

Veterinarians at OSU, recognizing the rapid wear-down of teeth in the Sandhills of Nebraska, attempted to use stainless steel caps as replacements. However, despite the initial trial, Rutledge fondly recalls the use of false teeth in cattle turned out to be short-lived and ultimately ineffective.

Continued on page 70

Amid the dwarfism issue that plagued the cattle industry during Rutledge's tenure at Angus Valley, an opportunist sought to capitalize on the situation. A scammer concocted a nutrition-based remedy, asserting adding dried milk to the cattle's diet would miraculously resolve the problem. However, Rutledge recounts this solution turned out to be nothing more than a misguided attempt, as the promised benefits failed to materialize.

Reflecting on these experiences, Rutledge acknowledges that not all ideas or beliefs within the industry were accurate.

"A lot of things we taught those poor people really weren't true. Such as hair being valuable on a calf and things like that," he says with a laugh.

Despite some unsuccessful ventures, Rutledge's openness to innovation and willingness to challenge prevailing beliefs contributed to the ongoing evolution of cattle management practices. One of the most notable transformations for the better was the introduction

of advanced breeding techniques, which lead to enhanced weight gain and feed efficiency.

Guiding future generations


With 90 years of experience, Rutledge's advice to younger producers is simple.

"Listen to everybody, because somewhere in that crowd, there's somebody who knows a little bit more than the rest," he says.

By being receptive and open-minded, younger producers can gather insight that will help them navigate the challenges and opportunities in the cattle industry. Rutledge encourages the next generation to absorb information, as even seemingly insignificant details can become relevant and valuable down the line.

Today, instantaneous access to information allows for quick

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decision-making, but he encourages cattlemen to consider the long-term implications. Anybody who has lived through the Dust Bowl might say the same thing. 

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