

Dutchess County New York

by Janet Mayer

Dutchess County is an area in New York state as rich in history as it is in beauty. Located in the eastern part of the state north of New York City, it is bordered by the Hudson River and Connecticut. This region is probably best known for breeding quality Angus cattle and for the Dutchess County Fair held at Rhinebeck.

In June the Eastern Regional Junior Angus Heifer Show was held at this famous fairgrounds. For any first-time visitors to the area, the visit would not have been complete without hearing Dutchess County's history.

The Dutchess County Fair has hosted Angus cattle competition for almost three-quarters of a century. In addition to producing many champions that have gone on to win in national competition, it has been said that the debut of the show also marked the beginning of Angus dominance in the eastern United States.

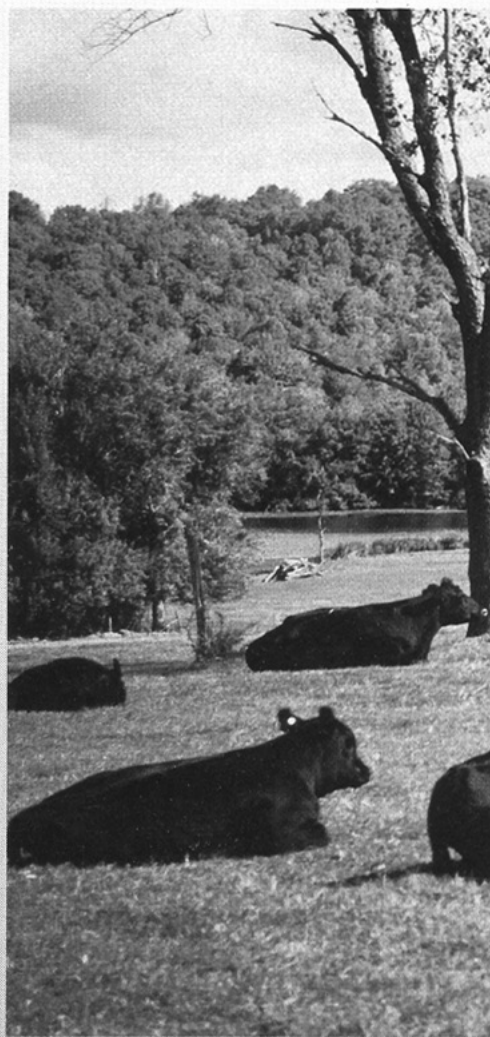
Dutchess County was known for many years as the seedstock capital of the country. This reputation was gained both nationally and internationally, with Dutchess County herds producing outstanding stock that was used as the foundation of hundreds of new herds.

Myron Fuerst, 85-year-old Angus breeder and Angus historian from Rhinebeck, says the county has enjoyed this reputation as far back as the 1920s. He recalls that is when breeders started referring to the county as the seedstock capital; but the reputation for outstanding cattle goes back much further.

"Although most people don't realize it, beef cattle were a product of many areas of New York state into the last century," he explains. "In the mid 1800s, New York City was an important center of the beef export trade. Cattle, mostly bullocks, were fattened on an abundance of superior grass that grew in Dutchess County and other parts of the state. When the cattle were ready for market, drovers herded them down the trails to New York City, where they were shipped live to England and other parts of Europe and slaughtered. Many of the cattle were also driven to the cattle market at Brighton, Mass. This was the earliest major stockyard in the country."

Fuerst says he would have to cite the Thorne family cattle operation as being one of the most influential in the state, and also for being the first registered Angus breeder in the county. In 1850 the family established a purebred herd of Shorthorn cattle at Thorndale Farms in Millbrook. Over the years the family continued to operate the farm.

In the 1920s, Oakleigh Thorne, the third generation to own the operation, took an early retirement from his financial interests and turned his attention to the beef cattle industry. He bought a 4,000-acre former dairy farm at Pine Plains, which he named Briarcliff Farms. Being a practical man, Thorne concentrated his efforts on the production of quality beef for the Eastern market by feeding Shorthorn, Hereford and Angus steers, plus a variety of crossbreds. He quickly realized that the



Angus produced the best carcass with the earliest maturity. In 1924 he bought 130 Angus cows and four young bulls from operations in North Dakota and Canada. He hired Alan McGregor to manage the cattle; later William H. Pew managed the operation.

At the pinnacle of Briarcliff's production, the herd numbered more than 800 registered Angus cows that were to become the fountainhead of almost all of the Angus herds in the county as well as many outstanding herds throughout the country.

Some early herds that were started in the county from Briarcliff foundation stock include Blackbriar, started by John Baker, a long-time president of the Audubon Society; Bethel Farms, started by Henry Jackson and Dale Fletcher; and Fuerst Stock Farms, started by Myron Fuerst.



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Ankony Farm would be another Dutchess County operation that helped the county become a leading influence in the cattle industry. The farm was started in 1937 by Allan Ryan, then chairman of the board of the Royal Typewriter Company. The operation started in a small way with the purchase of five open and five bred Angus heifers from Fuerst Stock Farm.

In the late 1940s, Lee Leachman joined the operation, initiating a partnership that produced a herd of Angus cattle that were sought after, not only nationwide, but worldwide. This was achieved by purchasing Briarcliff heifers and, later, several entire herds, along with some outstanding herd bulls. Lee's brother Lester Leachman joined the operation.

"Ankony was actually responsible for changing the whole picture of the Angus breed," Fuerst says. "The emphasis of Angus cattle up until that time had been pri-

marily on females. In showing the best 10 head at the International Livestock Show in Chicago, the lineup would usually consist of heifers and one or two bulls. When Ankony exhibited in the show, however, the lineup consisted mainly of bulls. I feel this is when people in the Angus business started to realize that bulls are what is most important in a breed."

In 1970 Ankony reported that in the previous 16-year period, they had exhibited the best 10 head group at the International, 12 times, all with bulls. This is a record never accomplished by any other exhibitor. Although the Ankony name is still in existence, not one of the original owners has been associated with it since 1971.

Rally Farms, started by Senator Fred-eric H. Bontecou, is another example of outstanding Angus operations that started in Dutchess County in the 1920s. In 1929 the senator bought a selected group

of 20 high quality Angus from Briarcliff Farms to put on his 365-acre farm at Millbrook. By 1950, the farm had increased to 3,000 acres with a herd of 200 cows. In 1959 the senator died, and his son, Jesse, in partnership with his mother, took over the operation. In 1975 Fred Smalstig joined the operation as manager. At that time, the herd had grown to 300 head and the operation had 14 employees.

Throughout the years, Rally Farms held many successful production sales and proved tough competition in the showing ring. Today, although the herd has been scaled back to 100 head, there are now five full-time employees.

"Today the county has a lot of Thoroughbred horse farms and not very many Angus operations left," Smalstig says. "Urban development has been a factor in cutting down on the size and number of farms in the county. When I came to Dutchess County, there were 14 herds of outstanding Angus cattle within a 30-mile radius of Rally Farm. I remember Tom Burke making a statement at that time about seeing more good cattle in three or four days in Dutchess County than if he had traveled the whole United States."

Other noteworthy events pertaining to Dutchess County's cattle history would have to include recognition of the achievement of its Angus breeders by the Angus Heritage Foundation. Inducted into the Foundation are five breeders: Oakleigh Thorne, Allan Ryan, Dale Fletcher, Lee Leachman, Lester Leachman and Myron Fuerst.

Still another milestone in the cattle history of the county was the formation of the first 4-H Beef Club in New York state. In 1926 the Dutchess County Aberdeen Angus Club was organized under the leadership of Hayden Tozier Jr. During the 38 years Tozier was in charge of the club, 950 4-H members participated.

In 1976 the 50th anniversary of the first Angus Show at the Dutchess County Fair was observed by holding the Eastern Regional Junior Angus Heifer Show at the fairgrounds in Rhinebeck. In 1993 the third eastern Regional Junior Angus Heifer Show was held there, carrying on an Angus tradition of young people showing Angus cattle in a county where the challenge of breeding better livestock continues.

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