

# Beef Logic

by R.A. "Bob" Long



## Angus families

Major credit for the success of the Angus breed in America belongs to the farm families who have devoted efforts to the improvement of a registered Angus cow herd. These breeders have contributed not only to the genetic improvement of their chosen breed, but they have promoted their beloved Angus to friends, neighbors and everyone encountered. Many have gone the "extra mile" by contributing time and money to local, state and national breed associations.

The cattle themselves have contributed "family" inputs. Historically, the breed's founders, such as Hugh Watson, William McCombie and G. MacPherson-Grant, identified and named certain families in the breed they believed to be superior. These early breeders would select a favorite female and assign a name like Erica, Blackcap, Pride, Petunia, Bemindful Maid or Edwina.

Each of the female descendants of these special cows was given the foundation cow's family name. The pedigree of the sires of these females was disregarded in the naming process, and it was not uncommon for a great-great-granddaughter of a cow to carry the foundation cow's name but less than 1% of her genetic makeup.

As the breed multiplied and more breeders established Angus herds throughout Scotland and England, the "families" grew so large that breeders called them a "tribe" and broke the tribe into

many new families. For example, the original Erica family was separated into new families, such as Enchantress Trojan Erica, Eisa and Evergreen Erica.

Breeders of other British breeds also established families. Shorthorn breeders followed only the female line of descent, as was the Angus custom, and many families were established, such as Duchess, Rose and Rothes Queen. However, Hereford breeders followed only male lines of descent, such as Anxiety 4th.

**When the British breeds were imported** to this country, the family names came with them. Some of these family names became very popular, and their use for evaluating females simply became a fad.

During the 1940s and '50s, Angus breeders became so enthusiastic for certain families that exorbitant prices were paid for females of questionable individuality and performance solely because the bottom side of the pedigree carried a particular family name for six or eight generations.

This author recalls attending an annual banquet of the Oklahoma Angus Breeders' Association in the late 1940s. During the height of the meeting, a gunshot rang out in an adjoining room, after which several breeders came through the room carrying a stretcher upon which was the body of the association's secretary.

This was followed by the master of ceremonies' saying, "I regret to inform you

that our secretary has completed a study of Angus association records for the past 10 years and has discovered that during that period not a single Blackcap Bessie cow has produced a bull calf. Rather than reveal that fact to this group, he has shot himself."

You see, many breeders thought of the family-name fad as a joke.

**So far I have ridiculed** the use of family formation as a breeder's tool, but if used properly, it can be effectively used as a herd and breed improver. If a truly superior cow or bull is identified through the use of complete and accurate performance measures of reproductive efficiency, growth rate and carcass characteristics, that individual should be used as a foundation for a family or strain of breeding stock. However, success depends upon two major factors.

First, complete performance records must be available, heavy selection pressure must be applied, and any descendant that does not measure up must be culled. In other words, independent levels of culling must be established and enforced for all performance traits. Cattle found lacking strong performance traits should be culled and not receive the family or herd name.

Second, outcrossing should be kept to an absolute minimum. This means inbreeding or linebreeding in this case. True, a successful linebreeding program requires time, attention to detail and a willingness to take heavy culling losses. However, it is the breeder's most powerful means of family formation.

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## We welcome your input

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