

# Addicted to Excellence

2002 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence is bestowed on former Angus executive.

Story and photos by *Steve Suther*

**T**he beef industry has its giants, those who control thousands of cows, even hundreds of thousands of cattle on feed, with little time for the average producer. Fortunately, the industry also has C.K. Allen, whose contributions to genetic selection for commercial, family-scale Angus producers would make him a giant, even without his 6-foot-6 frame.

Allen has held a doctoral degree for more than 30 years, but never let go of the practical producers' perspective that began on the southwest Virginia farm where he was raised. That's true of his career as a seedstock supplier as well as his service to breed associations and academia.

For a lifetime of focusing on what's important to quality-minded cattle producers, Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) named Allen its 2002 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winner. He accepted that honor, along with a special Pioneer Award (see page 181) at the CAB Annual Conference in Asheville, N.C., Aug. 24.

## Virginia roots

Growing up on a Hereford farm in the 1950s, Allen's beef education began before he was 10. "I was addicted to it from the start," he remembers, despite hard lessons about the fickle showring and the fact that there were other breeds besides Hereford.

His family moved off the farm in 1960, but Allen kept a heifer at his uncle's farm and began to work part-time for a veterinarian. That included training in the new artificial insemination (AI) technique. He worked for six months as an AI technician after high school before joining the Air Force in 1962 and enrolling in animal science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (VPI) in 1965.

The Angus light had not yet dawned on Allen, and he supplemented his college livestock and meats judging experience with a six-month break to work on a leading Hereford show string and to manage a commercial cow herd. Perhaps not surprisingly, upon graduation he was offered a job as southeastern fieldman for the American Hereford Association.

"I was looking forward to that when my advisor called me into his office," Allen says. Gary Minish of VPI and Bob Vantrease, an

Angus Journal representative at the time, changed Allen's life by persuading him to go to Michigan State University (MSU) for postgraduate studies.

Those years molded Allen's career. Starting in 1969, he worked with performance records for the Michigan Beef Cattle Improvement Association, a near polar opposite of the showring at the time. That summer, field research took him to the prominent Argentine Angus ranch of Hijos de Jose Firpo. He returned to new duties of shopping the nation's Hereford herds to buy females for the MSU herd. As manager of the 600-head MSU research feedlot, Allen collected carcass data for two years before receiving his master's degree, then his doctoral degree in ruminant nutrition in 1972.

Richer from the experience and much more data-driven and performance-oriented, Allen signed on as director of education and research for the American Polled Hereford Association (APHA) in Kansas City, Mo. He was in Missouri to stay, and soon started his own seedstock farm along Woodland Avenue, north of the city.

## First Angus

Keenly aware of the American Angus Association's parallel work in developing structured sire evaluation, Allen kept an eye on the competition. By 1976 he had added some registered Angus cattle to his farm:



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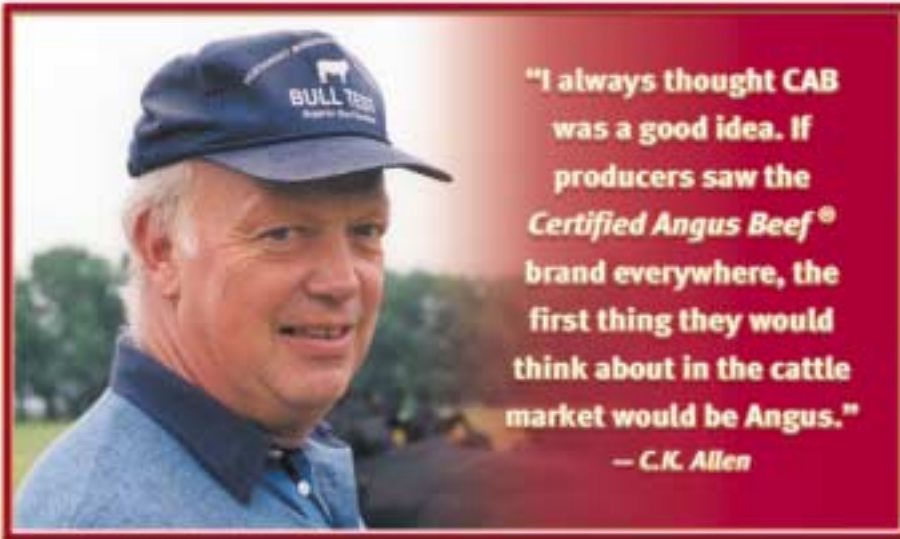
Wye-influence heifers from Staley Farms and heifers and a bull from Nichols Farms. He also dabbled in Simmentals, but only for a couple of years in the 1970s.

After five years with APHA, Allen served notice that he planned to resign "official" life. "My longtime interest had always been to have a seedstock herd of my own," he says.

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► In concert with plans to retire from Northwest Missouri State University, Allen was stepping up activities on the Woodland Alliance, buying bulls, progeny testing, providing calf buy-back options, feeding and exploring the world of Angus composites.



“But then I noticed the Angus association’s search for an executive.” The last to be interviewed by the Association’s screening committee, Allen was hired and started as executive vice president in spring 1978, “a big change, a great opportunity and a major challenge.” He sold three semi-trailer loads of Polled Hereford cows, but retained the Angus.

Registrations were down, but the Association did have an exciting new branded beef program in the works.

“I always thought CAB was a good idea,” Allen recalls. “If producers saw the *Certified Angus Beef*® brand everywhere, the first thing they would think about in the cattle market would be Angus.”

His vision helped make the idea blossom into reality before he left office in 1981 to resume those interrupted plans.

The farm economy went through a lot of stress over the next few years, directly and indirectly affecting the Allen family. He started Professional Cattle Advisory Services in 1981 to supplement income while Woodland Farms grew. “The consulting business went well,” he recalls. “But it was a bad time to be buying land and expanding a cattle operation.”

### **Academia and alliance**

His professional reputation persisted. Northwest Missouri State University (NMSU), Maryville, contacted Allen in 1983, after his first Woodland Farms production sale, and offered him a combination teaching and research position. Although already very busy, he accepted, partly because it meant starting the Northwest Missouri Bull Test.

Woodland Farms production sales in 1983 and 1984 gave way to a dispersal in

1986, due to 20% interest, depreciating land values and other stresses. Though Allen had moved up to department head at NMSU, he gave that up and regrouped.

Allen concentrated on the bull test, which had held a successful auction its first year, and on rebuilding his Angus herd, from which he had saved embryos and arranged to buy back into some Woodland heifers. It was a 10-year climb before he could again hold a production sale, but this time he had allies.

The consulting business remained as a networking tool, as did many contacts and friends in the seedstock business. “The Woodland Alliance started as an effort to help purebred breeders who were buying seedstock and semen from us,” Allen says. He worked with many of them through the bull test, and invited some to offer their bulls for sale as guests at his open house sales. By 1996 the group held its first bull sale. The Alliance will sell at least 175 bulls at next year’s sale.

“It’s an informal group, and members are invited based on the merits of their cow herds and breeding programs, the compatibility of their program with ours, and their unquestioned integrity,” Allen states. Alliance activities have expanded to joint retained ownership of progeny on feed, developing a Web site, adding females to the annual sale and offering bulls at private treaty, he reports. The target customer has always been the commercial cow-calf producer, and the Alliance has a list of 3,500 current and interested customers.

### **Bold retirement**

While the Northwest Missouri Bull Test was successful in measuring gain and feed efficiency on 100 bulls annually, and while it ran at capacity for 15 years, Allen says it

closed in 2000 for three reasons. “One, the concept of taking bulls out of their contemporary groups to feed at a central test was obsolete,” he says. “Two, our equipment was getting old; and three, I was planning retirement.”

In concert with those plans, Allen was stepping up Woodland Alliance activities in buying bulls, progeny testing, providing calf buy-back options, feeding and exploring the world of Angus composites. Secure in the network he had built, Allen bought top-selling bulls at the Jolly Roger and Bon-View dispersals, initially for cleanup service. “Bon-View New Design 878 has been too valuable to leave the stud, however,” he says.

NMSU had a registered Charolais herd that Allen managed, and he saw a lot of Gelbvieh bulls in the central test, so it’s no surprise Woodland tried its hand at those breeds. But in 1999 Allen started buying back progeny to feed at CAB-licensed partner Gregory Feedlots, Tabor, Iowa (see story on page 191). He began to appreciate Angus as never before. Maybe it’s because all of his Angus cows have positive carcass traits on both sides of the pedigree, but he saw a big breed difference in ability to grade between the best Continentals and his Angus.

Uniformity was also a problem with customers who were attempting to follow traditional crossbreeding plans, Allen says. “Half Continental, half Angus has been promoted as optimal,” he observes. “But I think half Angus is the minimum and three-quarter works better. Even if you select Continentals for marbling, the average difference in tenderness gives a half-pound shear-force advantage to the British breeds.”

One customer was using a balanced Angus bull on unknown Angus-Gelbvieh cows, but the progeny didn’t work in the feedlot or on the rail. “I broke them down for every weight, every grade and every cutability and said, ‘I just can’t buy your calves again.’” They’re still customers today because they took action to add everything else to that weaning growth, Allen reports.

To simplify breeding plans for some customers, Woodland now offers Angus-based composites, working toward 75% Angus and the other 25% split between Charolais and Gelbvieh genetics drawn from registered breed leaders in marbling.

Allen has forged relationships with cooperating test herds from Missouri to Nebraska, including this year’s CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award recipient Johnnie Hubach, of nearby Rea, Mo. (see story on page 185). He buys

progeny at weaning and feeds them at Gregory's. This past summer, the first dozen progeny of Woodland Pursuit 8102 turned in an on-target record of 100% Choice or better, 75% CAB and 75% Yield Grades (YG) 1 and 2 with no discounts.

### Still on target

In fact, most of Allen's cattle hit the target, but he's concerned with the various means of assessing carcass potential in the age of ultrasound. "Although the correlation is high, ultrasound and carcass data do not always agree," Allen says. There are many advantages to using ultrasound-derived expected progeny differences (EPDs), he allows. "The disadvantage is the data are collected on cattle that are at a different end point — weight, age, condition — than slaughter cattle, and therefore do not reflect what cattle will be like when slaughtered."

If the industry ignores progeny testing, Allen worries that it will be more difficult to find truly proven sires for reference in the continuing Woodland testing program. "I want the one that transmits the trait," he says.

"Woodland Farms feeds a pen or more of cattle each year and sells them on a value-based grid," he explains. "The premiums and discounts are on carcass traits not on ultrasound estimates." A few sires do well on one of these measures (ultrasound or actual carcass) but not on the other, Allen adds. "We want our cattle to do well on both, but we insist that they do well on actual carcass data because that is the end product of our industry."

Allen is "retiring" next year after 20 years at NMSU, but he will probably never meet the other definition of the word, which is "shy" or "reserved." When he talks about cattle, he tells it like he sees it.

Though he will be busier than ever with the Woodland Alliance, retirement will leave more time for the family. Daughter Kristin and her husband, Montana rancher Paul McColly have Allen's only grandchild, and 21-month-old John had better get ready for his first Angus heifer, Grandpa C.K. says.

Allen's son, Clint, is an Association member, though he doesn't have cattle yet. He will earn an engineering degree from South Dakota Tech in Rapid City, S.D., next spring. That's after a college basketball career made possible in part by his father's gifts of height, tenacity and ability to hit targets.



► C.K. Allen (right) has forged relationships with cooperating test herds from Missouri to Nebraska, including this year's CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award recipient, Johnnie Hubach of nearby Rea, Mo.

### Allen honored with CAB Pioneer Award

While C.K. Allen was deliberating whether to put off his own herd plans in Missouri to lead the American Angus Association, a man in Ohio was wrestling with a similar decision. Just a couple of months before Allen's hiring, Mick Colvin had agreed to lead the new Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program.

Colvin and original CAB committeeman Fred Johnson remember the choice of Allen as the new Association executive vice president with great appreciation. "We didn't have to sell him on the idea (of CAB)," Johnson says.

"C.K. was a true visionary," Colvin says, "quick to recognize the potential of what a successful CAB program could mean to Angus breeders. To borrow from a country song, he was a strong CAB supporter when being a CAB supporter wasn't cool."

The support went much deeper than Allen's being there with Colvin, Ohio Gov. James Rhodes and all the rest for that photo of the first pound of CAB product sold in Renzetti's Supermarket. Just how deep became clear when suspicious Agriculture Department official Carol Tucker Foreman cancelled the program a couple of weeks later.

Allen promptly wrote a six-page letter to Agriculture Secretary Bob Bergland, Foreman and key members of the House and Senate, protesting that the problem was "serious, unnecessary and nonproductive." The first goal was to convince Bergland that the Association represented a group "trying to improve the marketing process by bringing producers and consumers together." He pointed out that producers had little incentive to meet consumer demand as long as all beef was considered the same.

In the course of that letter, Allen skillfully navigated the maze of U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) bureaucracy, pointing out where Department officials had been unaware of their own programs and requirements. He documented his case in the manner of a doctoral thesis, citing numerous sources, and closed with an off-hand apology "for the length of this letter," adding, "but I have been astounded by the length of the deliberations."

"Fred [Johnson] and C.K. both have the tenacity of a bulldog in battle when they believe in what they are doing — what a great pair to draw to when we were going head to head with Carol Tucker Foreman," Colvin says. "When we would have a meeting with USDA in Washington, I never had to worry about our plan of attack. C.K. was always completely prepared and carried most of the load in our discussions."

As Johnson recalls, "C.K. wrote a lot of letters. He was kind of scrappy — positive about things, but aggressive. He took all the actions that were required to accomplish our goals."

Allen claims little credit, saying, "In time, they would have come around anyway." But just to make sure, "we had people talking to everybody. Anybody we thought had influence with their senator or congressman, we got them to write."

During his tenure with the Association, Allen also presided over the purchase of the *Angus Journal*, and the expansion of junior programs. But Johnson says, "The fight with the USDA was the biggest thing in those years. C.K. got the job done because he was firm and fair."

Allen accepted the Pioneer Award Aug. 24 at the CAB Annual Conference in Asheville, N.C. He is only the fifth person to be honored with the award by the brand.

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