



PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE VELDMAN

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From Involvement to Leadership

Incoming NCBA President Jan Lyons has roots in the Angus business.

by Troy Smith



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To hear her talk about it, you would never guess that Jan Lyons has not lived all of her life in the Flint Hills country. She may have been raised elsewhere, but Jan clearly is at home in Kansas. Actually, she and her husband, Frank, have called Kansas home for more than 30 years. They are as firmly rooted in the prairie sod as the native bluestem and Indian grass.

Jan scoffs at the popular misconception of flat-as-a-pancake Kansas and its endless fields of wheat. “Most people have no idea what this state is really like. They’ve never seen these rolling hills and tall prairie grasses. This is cattle country,” she says.

Several miles south of Manhattan, along the meandering Kansas River, Jan and Frank raised their family and built a successful family business — Lyons Ranch. Two grown daughters and their families live nearby and have strong ties to the ranch and Angus

cattle. Sharing an affection for land and livestock with her family is gratifying for Jan. She wants her grandchildren to have opportunities to continue to ranch and experience the way of life she enjoys. For that to happen, there must be opportunities for profitability.

A passion for protecting the future of the beef industry makes Jan willing to take some time away from her beloved Flint Hills. During the past couple decades, she has become increasingly active in industry affairs. This month, she takes the reins of the country's largest beef industry organization as president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA).

Roots in Angus

According to Jan, she did not search for leadership roles, but she has not shied away from involvement. She credits her father, Harold Ferguson, for fostering an interest in all facets of the family's Ohio stock farm.

"Dad was always very proud of his Angus cattle, and that was ingrained in all of us. We took it seriously," Jan says, grinning. "I have two brothers that raise Angus cattle, as well as my sister and her husband. Dad is still involved, too."

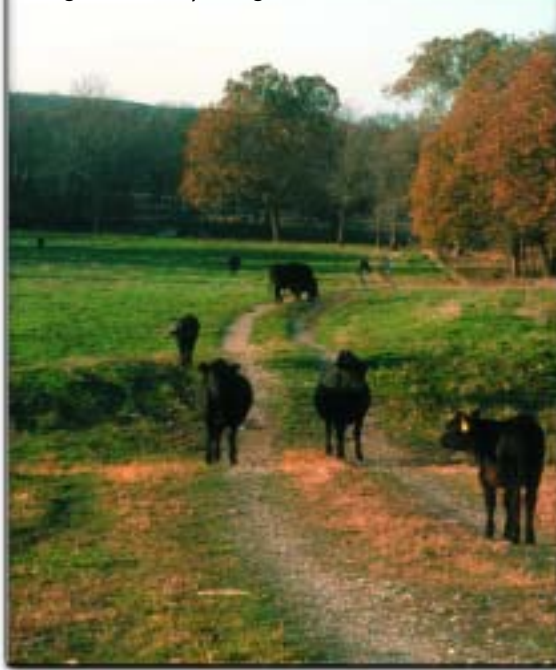
Jan married Frank Lyons who, while serving in the U.S. Army, was stationed at Fort Riley, Kan. By the time of his discharge, the couple had decided to stay in Kansas. Frank, a physician, set up a practice in Manhattan. Sharing an agricultural background, he supported Jan's desire to establish a cow herd. They started small and kept building the herd and their ranch, with Jan as the hands-on manager.

"It's always been a family operation, but Frank's first obligation was to his practice," Jan explains. "So I took on the day-to-day management of the ranch."

Daughters Debbie and Amy became involved in the operation, as well as 4-H and Angus activities. Both earned scholarships awarded by the American Angus Association, and Amy is a former Miss American Angus. Both Lyons' daughters attended Kansas State University (K-State) and majored in agriculture-related fields. Today, each lives within a 35-minute drive from the home place.

Debbie, husband Duane Blythe, and their five children (Meghan, Allison, Trenton, Tyler and Eric) live on a ranch near White City. Their own 200-cow herd is managed similarly to the Lyons Ranch herd. Cattle are merchandised collectively under a marketing partnership. Jan says Debbie is the outfit's computer guru, in charge of advertising, sale

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catalogs and the Lyons Ranch Web site.

Amy, husband Karl Langvardt, and their two sons (Tanner and Trey) manage the "south ranch" near Alta Vista. There, they take responsibility for calving about 300 mature cows, which are split into spring- and fall-calving groups. Artificial insemination (AI) of mature cows and embryo transfer (ET) work take place at the south ranch.

"We calve the heifers at the headquarters ranch. I like to do that to help them get a good start as mommas. We also handle heifer and bull development at the headquarters," Jan adds. "But whenever there is a big job to do at any of the ranches, we're all there to get it done. We all work together."

Herd philosophy

The emphasis at Lyons Ranch is on efficient utilization of its primary resource — grass. Planned grazing of native range and brome pastures means cows are on grass throughout most of the year. Cows receive supplemental protein during the winter, but are fed as little hay as possible. Sale bulls are developed on brome pastures plus a high-roughage ration.

AI is used extensively, and ET has become a valuable tool. Jan says last year close to 300 embryos were transferred to recipient cows at home and in various cooperator herds. In addition to better-managed genetic selection, AI and ET have allowed for a tighter calving season. Having animals in a narrow age range has been used to their advantage, whether marketing seedstock or feeder cattle.

The primary seedstock-marketing vehicle is the annual Lyons Ranch production sale in March. The offering generally consists of about 150 bulls and 50 replacement heifers.

Additionally, bulls are sold through contractual arrangements, calling for genetics that meet buyer specifications. For example, a potload of bulls goes to Harris Ranch in California each year.

"It's important to know what you're producing, so you have the ability to serve different marketing outlets," Jan says. "That's why, in 1990, we began progeny testing our herd bulls for carcass merit."

Lyons Ranch also sponsors special feeder-calf sales in conjunction with the Junction City auction market operated by son-in-law Karl Langvardt's family. Customers are encouraged to consign calves sired by Lyons Ranch bulls.

"Through our affiliation with various alliances and feedyards, we can draw buyers to bid on the preconditioned and weaned calves. We

can provide data that helps generate premiums," Jan explains. "It's an effort to assist our customers with marketing. It's been good for everybody. Acceptance of customer cattle has been very good, and we're building some brand equity in our program."

The ability to produce a premium product won't be sustainable without good stewardship. Lyons Ranch applies range and pasture management that emphasizes the long-term sustainability of the operation through optimum, rather than maximum, production.

The effects of stocking rates are carefully monitored. Prescribed burning of pastures is used to control brush and help maintain a desirable forage mix. Planned, rotational grazing has been aided through crossfencing of large pastures.

New stock-watering sites have utilized natural springs and runoff ponds instead of wells that require energy to pump water. Gravity-flow systems have been used successfully to pipe water from fenced reservoirs to remote watering sites.

Getting involved

Concern for the land and livelihoods of Lyons Ranch and neighboring operations spurred Jan's involvement as an industry advocate. Ironically, the entity responsible for the Lyons family's presence in Kansas posed a threat to area ranchers during the mid-1980s. Intending to extend the boundaries of Fort Riley, the Army planned to exert the power of

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eminent domain to acquire additional acreage to be used for troop training exercises. Farmers and ranchers operating within the proposed acquisition area would be forced to sell their land.

"I joined the effort to stand up for private property rights. We managed to get congressional support for a GAO (General Accounting Office) study to be conducted before any acquisition of land," Jan explains.

As a result of the study, the Army's expansion plan was scrapped. Jan says the experience showed that people working in concert can be effective, even against powerful adversaries. She became more interested in the efforts of organizations like the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA), and particularly their defense of private property rights.

From involvement at the county level, Jan went on to address other issues affecting cattlemen statewide through service on KLA committees. The Lyons family had been active in the Kansas Angus Association, too, with Jan serving as its president in 1981. It was an easy step to a leadership role when KLA formed its Purebred Council to address concerns of seedstock producers. Eventually, KLA members brought Jan through the chairs of leadership, electing her as president in 1994, the association's centennial year.

Duty as a state officer meant representing Kansas cattlemen on NCBA committees. Even after her term as president, Jan answered KLA's call to represent Kansans' interests on various NCBA initiatives. Befitting her growing interest in beef promotion, she was nominated for appointment to the Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB), which administers the dollar-a-head beef checkoff. She served as CBB chairman in 1996.

Having proven herself a savvy leader and an articulate spokesperson for the beef industry, Jan was asked to ready herself for the presidency of NCBA. A member of the officer corps for the last two years, first as vice president and then as president-elect, Jan has already put a considerable amount of time and travel toward addressing industry issues.

"There are frequent telephone conference

calls and quite a few meetings. It has taken more time than I expected to stay current with the issues," Jan admits. "I'll be on the road more during the next year, but that goes with the job. As NCBA president, I'll be visiting other states, listening to the concerns of cattlemen and talking about a multitude of issues."

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Dominant discussion topics

At every stop, certain topics are likely to dominate discussions. Jan says the key issues currently include country-of-origin labeling (also referred to as COOL or COL), bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and the future of the beef checkoff.

With regard to country-of-origin labeling, Jan says the majority of NCBA members believe the benefits to producers must outweigh the costs of implementing a food-labeling law. She questions whether the economic incentives that country-of-origin labeling should provide to producers actually exist.

"Our membership supports a voluntary effort, rather than mandatory labeling," Jan says. "In theory, mandatory COOL sounds good, but I'm afraid there will be unintentional consequences and mandatory costs for producers."

After the finding of BSE in Canada and the closing of the U.S. border to imports of Canadian beef and cattle, NCBA provided science-based information to explain that the threat to human health should not be exaggerated. Jan says the effort helped dull the impact on U.S. markets for beef and cattle.

"The media picked up on the facts rather than supposition — the realities rather than

rumors about the safety of beef in the U.S. It helped maintain the confidence of consumers," Jan states. "Of course there are differences of opinion about reopening the border, so it's still an issue. We have to participate in the global trade environment, so the border cannot remain closed indefinitely."

Differing opinions regarding the constitutionality of the beef checkoff have resulted in litigation that will be heard by the U.S. Supreme Court. Jan says NCBA will follow that situation closely. She believes there is ample evidence of a positive return on checkoff investment in beef promotion.

"NCBA is committed to defending the checkoff," Jan insists. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't look at the [act and order] to see if changes are needed to carry it into the future."

NCBA's new president says her priorities for the coming year will include promotion of a more unified beef industry. Unfortunately, Jan says, debate of some of the aforementioned issues and others has spawned divisiveness that the industry cannot afford.

"We are such independent people that we forget that there are different ways to look at things and different philosophies for solving problems. There is much we can accomplish together. We have to speak loudly with one voice for the benefit of the industry," Jan says. "We all share the desire to protect our businesses and a way of life that is unexcelled."

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Editor's Note: The NCBA is one of five organizations hosting the annual Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show. For more information about Lyons, the NCBA or this year's convention, visit www.4cattlemen.com. This Web site, made possible through sponsorship by Boehringer Ingelheim Vetmedica, Inc., provides real-time coverage of the event. The coverage is presented by the Web Marketing and Editorial departments of Angus Productions Inc. (API), publisher of the Angus Journal and the Angus Beef Bulletin.