

Southern Persistence

Faith, desire and effort earned Leroy Baldwin the respect of the Florida cattle industry, opened doors to establish Angus genetics in Florida herds and garnered Baldwin the presidency of the American Angus Association.

Story and photos by *Shauna Rose Hermel*

Leroy Baldwin's eyes are twinkling as he settles in behind the desk of his home office at Baldwin Angus Ranch, just north of Ocala, Fla. He's ready with as many questions as I am. It's obvious that before we start talking about his term as president of the American Angus Association, he wants to hear a few tales about our trip to see Angus cattle in south Florida.

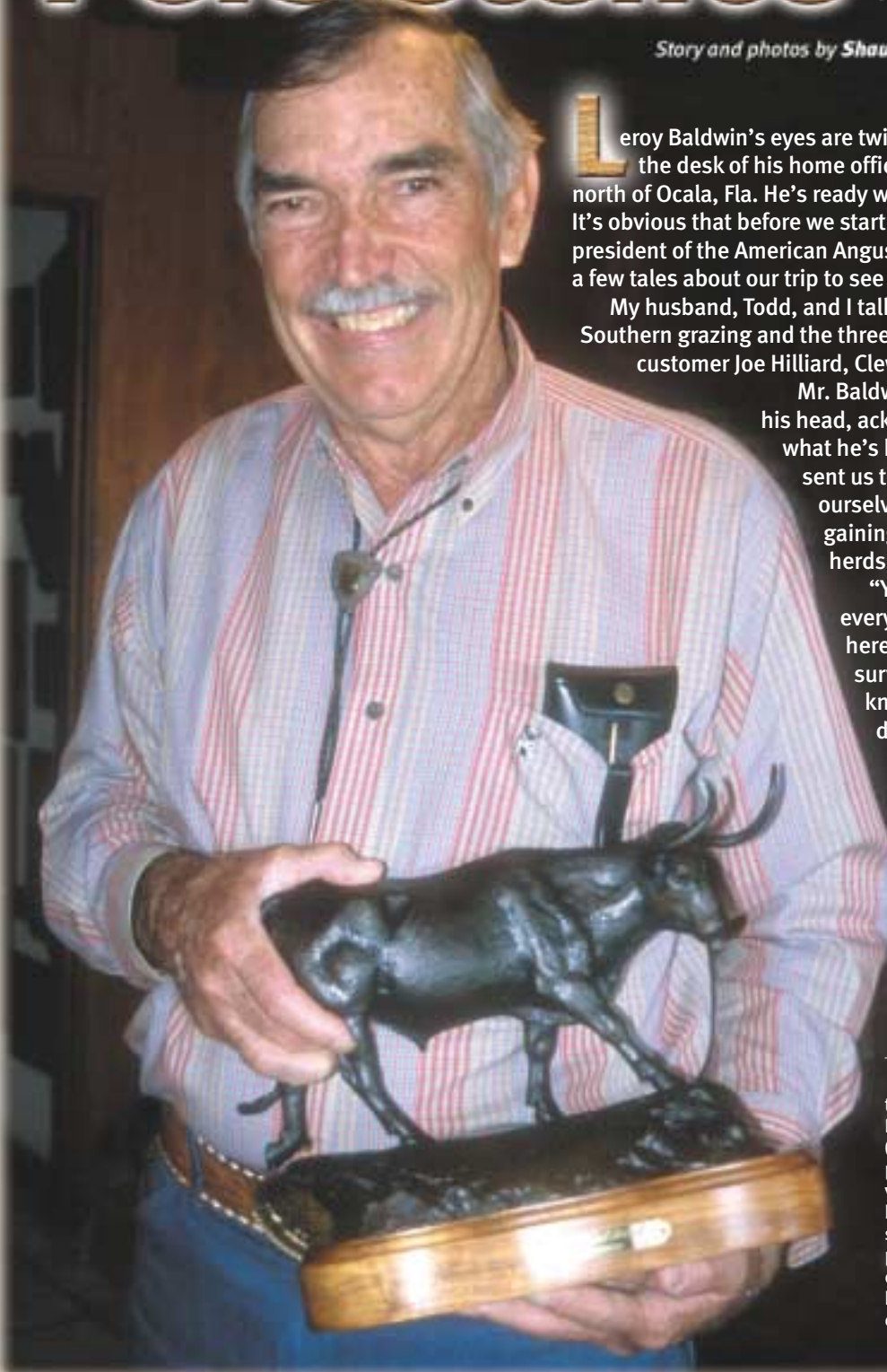
My husband, Todd, and I talk about alligators and feral pigs, Southern grazing and the three-quarter-Angus heifers that his customer Joe Hilliard, Clewiston, is rightfully so proud of.

Mr. Baldwin raises an eyebrow and nods his head, acknowledging that we discovered what he's known all along — and what he sent us to south Florida to see for ourselves — Angus genetics are fast gaining a foothold in the commercial herds of Florida.

"You know, 35 years ago everybody in the cow business down here thought that an Angus couldn't survive in this heat and didn't know why anybody, especially as dumb a kid as I was, would even think I could make 'em survive," Mr. Baldwin says.

For 35 years, this Southern gentleman has quietly, persistently and confidently educated commercial producers in Florida and abroad about the benefits of "the best breed of cattle in the world."

► **Left:** Not afraid to grab the bull by the horns, Leroy Baldwin received the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) 1987 Award for Innovative Application of New Technology. The University of Florida nominated him for (1) being one of the first in the country to start weighing and grading calves on a production performance program, (2) developing an ammoniation system for haylage, and (3) developing Flame, a drought-resistant red clover.



“Sometimes persistence will pay off when it looks like everything else fails.”

— Leroy Baldwin

Self-made cattleman

Mr. Baldwin wasn't born into the business. “But I did dream pretty regularly that someday the good Lord was going to make it possible for me to have some Angus cattle and have some green pastures,” he says. “I just always felt like that was going to happen.”

He got his start with a Hereford steer that he purchased in 1946. “Between pinkeye and his being a Hereford, I lost money on him,” he says.

The next year he bought an Angus steer from Walter Williams of Lakeland, Fla., who was the first cattleman to bring Angus into the state. “I made money on him,” Mr. Baldwin says of that first Angus steer. “By the time I sold him, I decided there wasn't any other breed of cattle alive except Angus.”

He purchased his first registered Angus heifer as a senior in high school. “I've still got the registration paper on that original registered heifer. She was born in 1949,” Mr. Baldwin says, adding that he paid \$500 for her. “She was a good brood cow. She acclimated to this Florida heat, and her calves were just as slick as apples.”

Mr. Baldwin made a deal with Williams to work two summers in trade for two registered heifer calves. His Angus herd was growing. Still, raising cattle and selling seedstock are two entirely different things.

“A lot of the old-timers in Florida told me, ‘You know, it's great that you want to be a cowman, but nobody is ever going to buy a registered bull to put on cow herds in Florida. We never have. Besides that, if you do want to spend enough money to get something registered, a Brahman is the only thing that will survive down here.’

“I was hardheaded enough, I didn't believe them,” Mr. Baldwin recalls.



► Leroy Baldwin—shown here with wife Sharon and grandchildren (from left) Colt, Taylor and Asa—says he thought he could best serve the ranch to preserve it for the next generations by assuming leadership roles. With many days on the road, he relies on his family to take care of the herd. Sons Tony, Alan and Mike and daughter Joy all contribute to the ranch and its international marketing efforts. “Sharon's spent her whole life since we've been married trying to make me do a better job of whatever I set out to do,” says Mr. Baldwin, adding that she takes the lead in organizing and communicating the activities of the Florida International Agriculture Trade Council. “She's my No. 1 helper in everything.”

His dedication and effort earned him the respect of his vocational agriculture instructor, Marion Roche, and his county agent, Dave Baillie. They helped his parents tend to his small herd when Uncle Sam called him into service in 1951 as a radio operator during the Korean War.

He spent 13½ months in Korea. While enduring what was the second coldest winter on record, “I told the good Lord that if I ever got back to Florida, I'd sure know to be here in the winter time,” Mr. Baldwin says.

He saved his Army pay, buying a bond every month. When he came home, he went to work as a carpenter and started looking for some land.

Planting roots

His father had given his sister and brother each an acre of land, but he had a different offer for

closed the range and made people fence cattle in in Florida,” the master storyteller recalls, quick to point out that Florida was the first state to have cattle. Ponce de Leon brought a small herd of Andalusian cattle to Florida on his second journey, in 1521.

“What we had in the early 1940s was just the inbred, malnourished remnants of those cattle,” Mr. Baldwin says. “They were all wild as deer and, because nobody planted any grass or took care of cattle, all they had to eat during the winter was palmettos and wire grass. A full-grown Florida scrub cow didn't weigh over 550 pounds, and a bunch of that was head and horns.”

Mr. Baldwin fenced his 40 acres in 1955 and set out to raise quality cattle that would help Florida's cattle industry. At the time, he says, he could fit every cow he owned on a 22-foot (ft.) flatbed trailer.

Cutting edge

Marvin Koger, an animal geneticist at the University of Florida, talked Mr. Baldwin into keeping performance records in 1960. “We weighed and graded those calves every year. We have more things going for us today, but if you really used those records, you could improve a set of cows by looking at the weaning weights and the indexes every year.”

John Crouch, southeastern regional manager for the American Angus Association in the mid- and late 1970s, recalls his first visit to Baldwin Angus Ranch in 1974. “Being a new regional manager with very limited knowledge of the Florida cattle industry, I was thoroughly impressed with the breeding program at Baldwin Angus Ranch. The cows were medium in size, slick-haired, nursing big lusty calves. It was obvious that a

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► With careful attention to performance records, Leroy Baldwin has established a herd of cows weighing about 1,200 lb. in good flesh that will wean calves weighing 50% of their body weight. “If you keep on picking those cows that are milking a little better and do it long enough, you don’t need any big cows,” he says.



► Leroy Baldwin has always been quick to jump at opportunities to work with the University of Florida to help evaluate new technology or production practices. He’s currently participating in a trial for fire ant control. “We always offer this place to test anything. It’s worked real well for both of us,” he explains.

concentrated effort had been made by Mr. Baldwin to measure and select on performance.”

Through the Marion County Cattlemen’s Association, Mr. Baldwin was instrumental in starting the first all-breed graded bull sale 46 years ago. The good Brahman bulls in the sale brought \$1,800-\$2,000 each, he recalls. His seven Angus bulls did better than anybody expected, bringing an average of \$585.

“It wasn’t as bad as it first sounds,” he says. “It bought and paid for my second 40 acres of land in full, and I had \$1,200 left in the bank.” He says he’s sure some folks bought his bulls just to help keep him in groceries, but those Angus bulls bred some cows and started changing some opinions.

“They began to decide that you could breed an Angus bull to a Brahman cow, and that heifer made the best commercial cow they’d ever seen in Florida,” Mr. Baldwin says, grinning ear to ear. “A lot of those old Brahman cows were weaning 550- to 575-pound half-Angus calves, and they had never done that before.”

By the sale’s 25th anniversary, attitudes had changed. The sale averaged about \$1,400, and Mr. Baldwin’s Angus bulls averaged about \$1,900. Now, top-quality Angus bulls will bring \$3,000, he says, adding, “We don’t ever have enough good Angus bulls for the demand.”

Adding perspective, Mr. Baldwin asks, “How many truckloads of Angus bulls would it take now to buy 40 acres?” Land that used to sell for \$50 per acre now brings \$10,000 per acre.

“We might in the next 10 years lose our agricultural exemption on property tax. If that time comes, I don’t know how any of us can stay in agriculture,” Mr. Baldwin observes. The ag exemption reduces property taxes in the area by about 75%. If approval is granted to build a race track just north of his ranch, “even with the agricultural exemption, I don’t know if we’ll be able to hang onto it.”

Innovator

Baldwin Angus Ranch currently encompasses 600 acres. “We can run 300 brood cows, and in a normal year we can feed them year-round and the yearlings, too. We’ve come up with two or three things that have sure helped us tremendously,” he says, referring to improved pastures of fertilized Coastal Bermuda grass, a system to ammoniate haylage and the development of Flame, a drought-resistant red clover.

For his role in the latter two and for being one of the first cattlemen in the country to start weighing and grading calves on a performance program, the University of Florida nominated Mr. Baldwin for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) 1987 Award for Innovative Application of New Technology. The bronze statue he won assumes a place of honor among the many laurels that adorn shelves and walls in the home he built. Each plaque, trophy or photo album is deserving of a story in its own right, proven by the stack of magazines by his desk that feature his achievements.

One the most notable honors occurred in 1995 when Mr. Baldwin became the youngest man ever inducted into the Florida Agricultural Hall of Fame. *Progressive Farmer* named him Man of the Year in 1993. That same year he was also named the Lancaster/Sunbelt Expo Southeastern Farmer of the Year, which awarded the Baldwins \$11,000. With that money, Mr. Baldwin and his wife, Sharon, endowed a scholarship available to meat science students at the University of Florida.

One of the magazine covers sports a picture of Don Shula, former head coach of the Miami Dolphins, with an Angus bull. Mr. Baldwin hauled one of his bulls to Miami to help “Coach” promote the opening of a *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®)-licensed restaurant. “He had over 100 Dolphin players and former

players there. We must have eaten 1,000 pounds of *Certified Angus Beef* that afternoon," he says, adding that Coach Shula owns 15 or 16 CAB restaurants now.

Raising high-quality beef

A huge proponent of high-quality beef, Mr. Baldwin started building his herd around a proven carcass sire long before the creation of the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program. Murray Corbin, Connerville, Okla., and Eugene Schear, Clayton, Ohio, tested the sire through Performance Registry International (PRI), putting 100 of his progeny on an official feed test. Harvested at an average fat thickness of 0.32 inch (in.), 97 of the 100 steers graded Choice or better, earning Emulous Pride 135 the distinction of being a 100% Golden Certified Meat Sire.

Mr. Baldwin points out that the evaluation was done in 1972, four years before the USDA grading standards were lowered. Those 97 steers would have met the marbling requirement for the CAB brand today.

"We've still got a little semen left on Emulous Pride 135. We've linebred that old bull for over 30 years," says Mr. Baldwin, who banked 4,500 ampules of semen on the bull before he died. "Everything on the place will go back to him two or three times on a four- or five-generation pedigree."

The Baldwin cow herd will average about 1,200 pounds (lb.) in good flesh. Bull calves average 615 lb. at weaning and are developed to go to work under the harsh environment of the Florida range. In the past, that's meant supplementing them with 5 lb. of rolled oats a day to gain a pound a day in preparation to sell as 2-year-olds.

"John [Crouch] kept telling me I ought to feed them better to get a 2-pound-a-day gain, and that it would give my marbling scores a chance to read like what they've really got," Mr. Baldwin



PHOTO BY SHELLA STANNARD

► Leroy Baldwin's family joined him in Louisville last November as he was elected president of the American Angus Association. Pictured are (back row, from left: son Mike, granddaughter Christine, former county agent Dave Baillie, granddaughter Erin, son Alan, granddaughter Gina, vo ag teacher Marian Roche, Pat Roche, son Toby, (front row, from left) daughter Joy Papy, granddaughter Taylor, Leroy, wife Sharon, grandsons Colt and Asa, and daughter-in-law Cindy.

says. "I worked them up to 10 pounds apiece this year after we weaned them. We had a son of Emulous Pride 135 that had a marbling score of 8.88 with $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch of cover. That extra feed sure gave him a chance to show his marbling."

Mr. Baldwin markets about 100 bulls each year, mostly to commercial herds in Florida. Some years, as many as half will go for export. Mr. Baldwin has developed a substantial international market, selling cattle into 27 foreign countries through his work with the Florida International Agriculture Trade Council (FIATC), which is another story in itself.

Avid promoter

Mr. Baldwin served six years as president of the Florida Angus Association in the 1970s. "I decided to have a meeting a night for six nights, from Pensacola to Miami, and invite everybody who had a registered Angus animal," he says, recalling efforts to revitalize a sagging membership. "It really worked. We went from less than 30 members to 176

members in six nights."

It was a tough time to market cattle. In 1973 the bottom fell out of the beef market. Consumer demonstrations urged people to quit buying beef because it was priced too high, he recalls. President Nixon put a freeze on price increases, which affected the price for fed cattle.

In 1977, when the nominating committee asked Mr. Baldwin to serve another year as president and to manage the association's annual sale, he said he'd do so only if he could make some changes to the sale. The stipulations included (1) producers would agree up front that sale expenses would be \$150-\$200 per head and (2) the cattle would be inspected and screened to ensure the quality of the sale offering.

Mr. Baldwin enlisted the help of John Crouch, who was then a regional manager. "We covered lots of miles. And John inspected most of the out-of-state cattle in the sale."

He also enlisted the help of a couple of well-known personalities who happened to be

Angus breeders — Johnny Unitas, quarterback for the Baltimore Colts, and Larry Csonka, running back for the Miami Dolphins — to help promote the sale. Unitas owned the Sheraton Jet Port Inn across the street from the Orlando airport. Mr. Baldwin offered to hold the "futuristic show and sale" on the hotel's lawn if Unitas would speak at the Florida Junior Angus Association banquet.

Mr. Baldwin says he got a little nervous when the Southeastern Futurity Show and Sale, typically the biggest sale in the Southeast, averaged only \$580 two weeks prior to the Florida state sale.

"I said, 'John, you reckon we're going to salvage it?' John's always optimistic, and he said, 'Sure, just keep on plugging,'" Mr. Baldwin recalls. The sale averaged more than \$1,290 on about 60 lots. "It turned out to be the highest average Angus association sale in the United States that year."

Mr. Baldwin got his first trip to the headquarters of the American Angus Association

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because of it. He was invited to be on the program for the 1978 Angus Hoofbeaters Conference in Saint Joseph, Mo., to explain how they could have such a tremendous sale for the times.

Broader concerns

During the 1980s Mr. Baldwin devoted his time and resources to the Florida Cattlemen's Association (FCA), joining the Executive Committee in 1982 and serving through 1991. He recognized "beef bashers" and "environmentalists" as threats to agriculture, and focused his efforts toward helping pass the beef checkoff and a statewide voluntary environmental checkoff.

"I figured that was the best way I could help the ranch. We saw two beef checkoff efforts fail before we got that \$1 a head passed," says Mr. Baldwin, who served as co-chairman of Florida's "Get Out to Vote" campaign for the beef checkoff. "Sometimes persistence will pay off when it looks like everything else fails."

The Beef Promotion and Research Act of 1985 was passed as part of the 1985 Farm Bill, and beef checkoff assessments were collected beginning Oct. 1, 1986. Twenty-two months later, the referendum required to continue the checkoff indicated 79% of producers favored the assessment nationwide. Florida cattlemen gave it a 94% approval rating, the highest of any state.

"I just felt that was the key to changing the outlook of the general public on how good beef is for their diet," he says.

As Mr. Baldwin was working his way up through the ranks of the FCA Executive Committee, environmental groups were exerting pressure on the state government to institute environmental regulations. Even before he was elected FCA president in 1991, he initiated a membership drive.

"We really needed a stronger voice from agriculture, and especially from the cattlemen's

association," Mr. Baldwin says, adding that the organization had only 3,800 members. "My goal was to get 5,000 members by the end of the year. We got them, with a few to spare."

During the process, he came up with the idea for an environmental checkoff to create a fund to financially assist ranchers with legal matters.

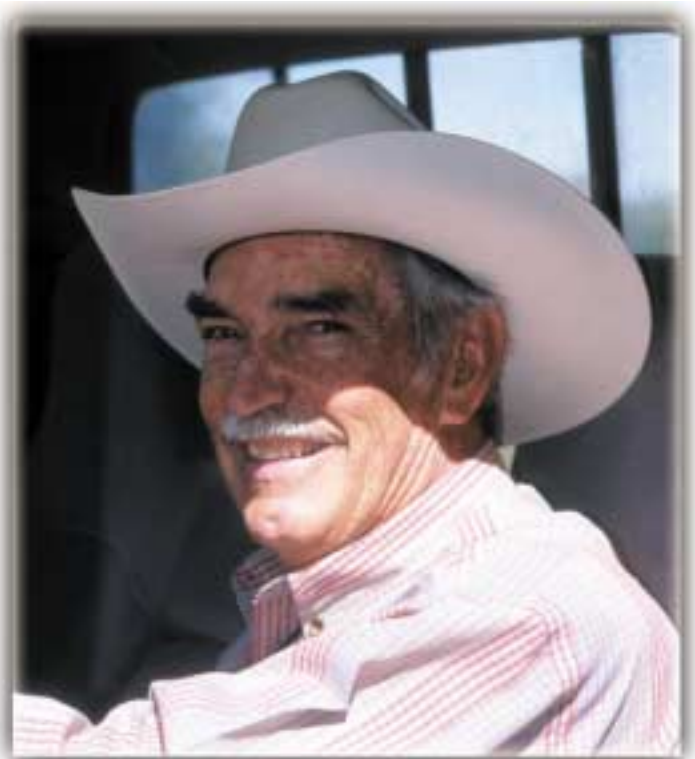
"We set it up as a voluntary deal and asked everybody to donate at least 50¢ per head sold. It's worked well for us. We've used \$10,000 to \$15,000 out of it a couple times to help a landowner," he continues, adding that he believes the industry is making some headway in educating the radical groups. "Somewhere along the line, we've got to decide that agriculture has to be treated fairly. We're not going to be the cheapest-fed nation on earth forever if you put agriculture out of business."

His second year on the FCA Executive Committee, Mr. Baldwin helped start a statewide carcass contest with the help of Roger West and Fred Leak at the University of Florida. At first, Leake and his graduate students collected data in packinghouses. As that became less feasible, Mr. Baldwin encouraged West to evaluate ultrasound technology. As a result, the Florida Beef Cattle Improvement Association purchased an ultrasound machine and West became certified as a technician. He now collects the ultrasound data at junior shows across the state.

In addition to the recognition given to the junior exhibitors of the top steers in the state, Mr. Baldwin says the producers of the state champion and reserve champion steers are recognized and presented free registration to the annual FCA meeting. The changes to the carcass show have encouraged interest and participation in the statewide contest, he adds.

Running for the Board

While working with him on



► Leroy Baldwin has always been quick to support youth activities. He was instrumental in starting the Florida Junior Angus Association and has been a staunch advocate of the National Junior Angus Association during his eight-year tenure on the Board of the American Angus Association. "We're raising a bunch of bright young kids who are full of enthusiasm, and hopefully they can do a better job than we have," he says.

cattlemen's association business, the late Dave Pingrey, Pickens, Miss., recognized Mr. Baldwin's vision and leadership skills and asked him to run for the American Angus Association Board of Directors. Mr. Baldwin turned him down at first, thinking he already had his platter full. Pingrey persisted and finally convinced Mr. Baldwin to run.

He ran for the Board in 1994, the first year the Association conducted a candidate-delegate forum, which allowed candidates to introduce themselves and then answer questions from the delegates. Steve Brooks, currently Association vice president, recalls being a North Dakota delegate that year.

Brooks says he hadn't heard of Leroy Baldwin before he ran for the Board, and none of the North Dakota delegates were planning to vote for him before going to Louisville.

"But I listened to him, and he just made a lot of sense," Brooks says. When he and the rest of the delegates got together after the

candidate-delegate forum, all were in agreement that the Florida cowman should be on the Board.

"We all voted for him, and I'm sure glad we did," Brooks says, adding that Mr. Baldwin has a way of sitting back and analyzing a controversial situation, then coming up with a solution that makes a whole lot of sense. "Sometimes Leroy would sit in the meetings and we wouldn't hear a word out of him. Then all of a sudden, he'd summarize in 20 seconds what we'd been debating for two days, and it would be clear to everybody which way we should vote."

"What makes Leroy so successful is quite simple," says Florida Angus Association President Don Bailey. "He is an honest and fair Christian family man who believes in our great American way of life. All he does — whether raising Angus cattle, lobbying for agriculture or working with young people — reflects a genuine appreciation of the opportunities of this great country." 