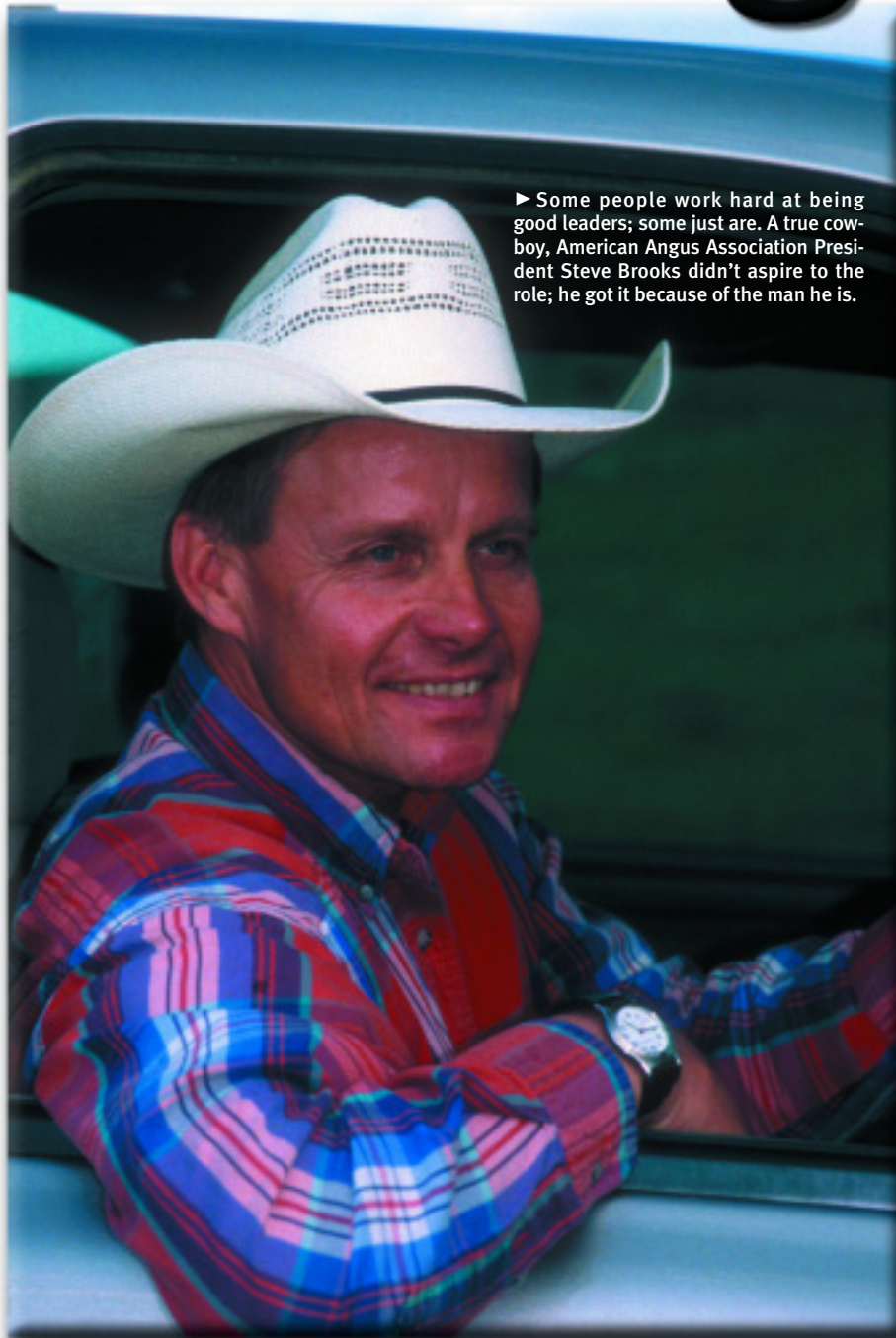


Leading ...



► Some people work hard at being good leaders; some just are. A true cowboy, American Angus Association President Steve Brooks didn't aspire to the role; he got it because of the man he is.

Retiring President Steve Brooks led the American Angus Association with conviction, humor and determination.

Story & photos by Shauna Rose Hermel

Many who own cattle have dreamed of being the central character of a Louis L'Amour novel or a John Wayne movie, but few have the grit to actually live the lifestyle. American Angus Association President Steve Brooks is one of the few.

"Steve is a true, real-life cowboy of yesteryear — a person true to his convictions, loyal to a cause, honest, fair; a real thinker who is also full of vinegar and fun," says Minnie Lou Bradley of Bradley 3 Ranch Ltd. (B3R), Memphis, Texas. Bradley has served six years with Brooks on the Association Board of Directors.

The Bowman, N.D., cattleman and his wife, April, own and operate Brooks' Chalky Butte Ranch in partnership with his brother, Ryan, and Ryan's wife, Becky. While Ryan tends to the ranch's 3,200 acres of small grains; Steve prefers to ride herd on its 300 registered and 200 commercial Angus cows.

It's challenging country in which to make a living, requiring about 20 acres to maintain a cow year-round and a good bit of cow savvy to keep her and her calf alive.

Storms like the blizzard in late spring 1997 can wreak havoc on commercial operations, let alone on a seedstock program. That one storm claimed 25% of the calf crop in Bowman County.

"We weaned 140 calves less than we had bred cows," Steve recalls of the storm that also claimed its share of cows and udders (see "The Winter of all Winters," June/July 1997 *Angus Journal*, page 411). "We

the Cowboy Way

PHOTO BY CARA BIEROTH



► Cows winter in the glacier-formed gulch behind these pairs. “There’s a spring that runs about 6 gallons a minute year-round into a tank, and then at the other end we have a well and two hay yards,” Steve explains. “If we get a blizzard and can’t get up here for a couple days, they’ve got the best shelter possible — way better than a shed.”

couldn’t register a lot of the calves because they froze their ears and lost their tags, and nothing was mothered up right.”

Steve estimates it takes a herd of about 300 cows to sustain a family in this area. At 20 acres to the cow, it doesn’t take long to figure a cowboy’s got to cover a lot of ground to make a living. Many have opted to sell out or to put land in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

“We’re running out of people,” Steve says of the migration of people out of the state. The high school in Bowman — where daughters Calli, 18, and Cassi, 16, have attended — has 100 fewer students today than when Steve attended the same school. Before his youngest daughter, Skeeter, 12, graduates high school, he expects students from Scranton and Rahme to join her in class.

The glacier that formed the countryside could not demolish the chalk-colored butte from which the ranch draws its name. Likewise, blizzards, drought, snakes, cattle markets and the early death of his father could not budge Steve from the land that has been home to Brooks’ Angus for three generations.

His roots are planted deep in the alkali soil. The love and appreciation he has for this rugged country are obvious

in the stories he tells of the land, the cattle and the people.

A destiny with Angus

In 1908, Steve’s great-grandfather homesteaded six miles south of where Steve and April now live. Steve’s granddad bought the base of the commercial Angus herd in 1941. The cows were registered at the time, but somewhere along the way, they let the papers go. The herd has always been bred straight-Angus, Steve says proudly, and his family has always emphasized quality. Freeze-branding, sire identification (ID), artificial insemination (AI), progeny testing, and selling bulls and replacement heifers have been standard procedure since the 1960s.

“I went to bull sales with Dad since I was a fourth-grader,” he says. “He let me skip school and go with him to Montana or wherever, and I loved it. I really studied pedigrees and catalogs and performance.

“When I got out of college, my dad and my uncle said I could run 10 cows,” says Steve, who spent two years at North Dakota State University (NDSU). “I thought I might as well have registered ones.”

When Steve took on the responsibility of doing the paperwork,

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► Below: Steve uses an aggressive embryo transfer program, using the ranch’s 200 commercial cows as recipients. His goal is to completely replace the commercial cows with registered stock within three years.



PHOTO BY CARA BIEROTH

► Steve holds his annual bull sale at the Bowman Auction Market, a sale ring he and other ranchers have worked eight years to build in an effort to secure a local cattle market. Steve invites some of his customers to sell commercial replacement heifers and horses at his bull sale, giving them an opportunity for extra profit potential.



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his dad and uncle decided they might as well have registered cows, too.

Steve admits to initially falling into the trap of AIing his registered cows to showing winners. "I couldn't come close to making them as good as Dad's commercial cows. I finally changed my philosophy and decided we weren't going to show them, we were going to go to this other type," he says. "It was just a common cow-sense deal."

Steve immersed himself in the registered business, enrolling in Angus Herd

Improvement Records (AHIR) as soon as the program was available. During the last 25 years, Steve has built an Angus herd noted for calving ease, carcass quality (see "Cooperation Helps Hit the Target," July 2003 *Angus Journal*, page 87) and dedicated service to commercial customers.

"Steve Brooks is a cattleman's president," says Board Member Abbie Nelson, of Five Star Land & Livestock, Wilton, Calif. "He lives the life and shares the dreams of all of us as cattle breeders on a day-to-day basis."



► In 1908, Steve's great-grandfather homesteaded six miles south of where Steve (right) and his wife, April, now live. Since then, each generation has been able to add a ranch to the operation.

Taking the initiative

While living out the dream has never been an easy task on the Dakota plains, Steve had some strong role models to show him the initiative it would take to survive. He recounts the winter his granddad hunted rabbits on the way to town to earn enough money to buy groceries, and how his granddad traded a 100-year easement on some land for a job.

"It was the dirty 30s," Steve explains, "and everyone was broke."

As people enrolled land in CRP, elevators in the area began to struggle. Faced with the possibility of losing their grain market, about 10 families, including Steve's dad and uncle, joined forces to buy the elevator and keep it functioning. They made a success of it, and the cooperative later bought out two additional elevators in Bowman.

"It was all to keep the service here so we had a place to sell grain," Steve says, adding that Ryan is currently on the elevator's board of directors.

His turn to lead

Steve has worked just as diligently to secure a cattle market in the area by taking a leadership role in building the Bowman Auction Market.

"It's amazing what it cost to build," he says of the \$1.5 million dollar effort that started eight years ago. "We were out selling shares for \$500 a share, trying to get enough equity to get the loans. I went to a meeting every Monday night for 2 years until we got it built."

Organizers garnered about 230 investors, including many from Main Street who didn't own any cattle. The merchants recognized the additional business they did when there was a viable sale ring in town, Steve explains.

"They haven't sent us any dividend checks yet," Steve says of his and other area ranchers' involvement with local co-ops, "but at least it has kept the community healthy."

Steve says the auction market is still struggling. Finding managers for the long term and competing with some top-notch order buyers who are buying cattle in the country are two hurdles to its success.

Having individuals willing to take on these types of roles is critical to the ranching communities in North Dakota, says Grand Forks producer Frank Matejcek. "It's just like the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program; it's taking care of your own destiny. You've got to do something to promote your own products."

To that end, Steve has taken on numerous leadership roles in organizations such as the North Dakota Angus Association (NDAA), the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF), the North Dakota Beef Commission and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) (see "Introducing Your Candidates," October 1998 *Angus Journal*, page 246).

"From our time together on the North Dakota Angus Association board to our time spent on the American Angus Association Board, I saw Steve put the interests of others and the association way ahead of his own," says Saint Anthony, N.D., rancher Richard "Dick" Tokach. A prime example is his effort to begin the North Dakota Bull Test.

Steve says his goal for wanting to start the test was to give producers who didn't have a large enough operation to host a production sale an outlet to market quality genetics. The first few years of the test were a struggle, as smaller herds fought the requirement of being enrolled in AHIR.

Herds already having production sales, as well as a few progressive smaller herds, stepped up to the plate to get the bull test off the ground. As some of the progressive smaller herds realized success in the test, others started to participate.

"I think we put 27 North Dakota herds on AHIR because of the bull test," Steve says. "And once we finally got them on AHIR, they started selecting cattle differently." The



► Herdsman Bruce McLaughlin keeps the cows fed and assists customers while Steve is on the road serving as president of the American Angus Association. Some extra trips for committee meetings, world events and long-range planning, in addition to the traditional duties of the president, added up to about 150 days away from home this past year, Steve says.

end result has been more market access for smaller-scale producers, more involvement in the state association and better genetics in North Dakota.

Makings of a leader

Steve credits Matejcek for talking him into being a state delegate to the Annual Meeting and then into running for the Board. "Frank was going to Louisville (Ky.), and he was trying to get somebody to go with him every year," Brooks explains. "We

were only having two delegates go, when a lot of times we could have had six or seven."

Running someone for the Board was Matejcek's next goal, and he offered to be Steve's campaign manager if Steve would run. "He started planning three years before I agreed to run." Steve chuckles and adds, "He told me it would be 12 days a year. Well, it's going to be damn near 150 this year." Several years have required 50 days of his time, but Steve is quick to point out that not

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► Steve says the ranch normally retains about 150-200 heifers each year, preferring to turn the cow herd pretty fast. By making it standard procedure to sell cows at about 7-9 years of age, he's developed a demand for them as seedstock. "In another two or three years, they'd have been \$450 cows," he says.



all Board members are required to devote that much time. By luck of the draw — or more likely a testament to his character — he's been on some very active committees and boards, including the CAB Board of Directors and the Breed Improvement Committee.

"Here is a guy from Bowman, N.D., who would like nothing better than to stay home and run the ranch. Instead, Steve spent six years on the Board, then went on to become president of the largest cattle association in the world," Tokach says. "Others had far bigger plans and goals for Steve than what he ever dreamed."

Matejcek says he saw in Steve someone who helped mend problems within the state association. Because of his leadership, North Dakota producers regained interest in belonging to the state association, and the state association became more active on the national level.

"Steve's the kind of guy who doesn't blow his own horn — you have to drag it out of him," Matejcek says. "And yet he's willing to try new ideas, he takes responsibility if it fails, and he'll credit the people around him for successes."

"He's one of those types of leaders who proves himself over and over again," he continues, adding that common sense and trustworthiness come to mind as two of Steve's greatest assets. "He doesn't take himself too seriously, and he has a sense of humor, which comes in handy when you're dealing with diverse viewpoints."

Calling him a visionary for the future of the beef business, fellow Board member Mark Gardiner, Ashland, Kan., says Steve has been one the best presidents in Association history for several reasons.

"He's open-minded to change, cognizant of the fact that we are a membership-driven association, a good listener and communicator, and a team player who has a good understanding of the total beef business," Gardiner says. "He willingly committed the time and resources needed to do the job. And while he is tenacious in defending his view, he possesses the ability to compromise for the betterment of the Association and the breed."

The *Angus Journal* asked Steve to share his vision of the American Angus Association and the beef industry. See "President's Perspective Q&A" on page 177.



Peer review

During their time together as directors of the American Angus Association, Board members get to know each other on a different level than most producers. Here's what Steve Brooks' fellow Board members had to say about him and his role as a leader of the Association.

"Steve Brooks' leadership style reminds me of Dick Spader. Both men led with a steady hand. Both possessed the ability to stay levelheaded and to avoid being reactive. In our business, that goes a long way."

— Brian McCulloh, Viroqua, Wis.

"Integrity, intelligence, savvy and great work ethic are qualities that all good leaders have. Steve Brooks has these qualities in abundance."

— Joe Elliott, Adams, Tenn.

"With his disarming grin and a couple of Western-flavored anecdotes, Steve can bring most anyone around to his way of thinking."

— Ben Eggers, Mexico, Mo.

"Steve dealt with issues with a straightforward, commonsense approach, which included sticking to the facts. He treated everyone fairly and with respect, taking time to hear their opinions."

— Paul Hill, Bidwell, Ohio

"Steve is a friendly, easy-to-get-to-know person, and he is very willing to share his experiences in the Angus business and other things that life has brought his way. Steve can make a long bus ride seem shorter with his storytelling ability. While he is not known for his love of neckties, he is a very talented individual. Our Association is very fortunate to have him as our president."

— Dave Smith, Greensburg, Ind.

"Steve has the ability to stand before people and to speak. He took the time to do a great job leading the American Angus Association, including traveling to all parts of the world."

— Bob Schlutz, Columbus Junction, Iowa

"The thing that has made Steve such a good president is his ability to relate to almost everybody in the Angus Association; I don't care if they are the people who build fence, work on the ranch and never get to town, or whether they are the absentee owners who make a lot of their living in another business."

"He's also been extremely good — extremely good — at keeping the good of the Angus breed foremost in his mind. He definitely has not had an agenda. One of the underlying reasons I ran for the Board when I did was because I wanted to be on it while he was there."

— Bill Davis, Sidney, Mont.

"Since first meeting Steve, my admiration for him has grown immensely. He is an honest, successful cowboy who has given eight relentless years to the American Angus Association. He always has time for you, whether you are a customer, fellow Angus breeder or member of the Association Board of Directors. Steve stands tall among his peers, and you always know his position on the issues. I consider Steve Brooks a great president and, more importantly, a good friend."

— Jay King, Rock Falls, Ill.