

Change COMES QUICKLY

by Julie Mais, editor

American Angus Association President John Pfeiffer Jr. reflects on changes in his home state, Angus herd and the Association.

What can you get with \$10 and a shotgun? Not much today, but the story goes in the days that followed Land Run on April 22, 1889, it was enough for John Christian Pfeiffer to claim a quarter of land in Logan County Oklahoma.

A familiar smile stretches across John Christian's great-grandson's face as he sits with iced tea in hand in a dining room with a

large picture window facing the rolling hills to the south of his property. Red dirt peeks out where the grass is void. John Henry Pfeiffer, Jr., starts from the beginning.

John Christian brought his first Angus bull to the farm in 1907, the same year Oklahoma gained statehood. It was the 46th state to enter the Union



followed only behind New Mexico, Arizona, Alaska and Hawaii.

“Look at all the things that have changed, and how quickly they’ve changed,” he says considering the young state he’s always called home. The same sentiment could describe his Angus herd and the nine years spent serving on the American Angus Association Board of Directors.

Red dirt and black cattle

From the purchase of one Angus bull after the turn of the century, John Christian and his son, John Frederick, grew their herd to host 32 continuous Pfeiffer Angus Farms production sales, except for two years during a drought in 1936-37.

John Henry, Jr. recently came across a production sale book from 1949. “It’s hard to believe that their production sale that year would’ve had 43 lots,” he says. “They sold four bulls and 39 heifers. I thought that was pretty amazing. You just don’t hardly see anybody that has production sales like that anymore.”

John, the oldest of six children, joined the American Angus Association at just 6 months old. His granddad purchased lifetime memberships for all his grandchildren. John received his first pair of Angus heifers at age 9, also a gift from his granddad.

“He gave me two heifers to show, and when I was finished showing, he put them into production,” he says. With a chuckle he tells the rest of the story. “Then, he’d just give me the check for what their offspring brought. There were no expenses. I kind of thought that’s the way the cattle business was run. I thought that was a good deal.”

His granddad also had a feedyard, where he would feed out any male calves not kept for bulls. The fed steers would then be driven to Orlando, Okla., and shipped by rail to the Kansas City Stockyards. In later years when a closer stockyard

opened in Oklahoma City, calves would be sold there in small groups of eight.

“We knew that they always topped the market, but we really didn’t ever know why until later on and come to find out, it was because he shipped them in those small groups,” he says. “The commission companies down there knew when those steers were coming in, and they paid the premium for them because they knew how good they were going to eat.”

The Pfeiffer calves would then be slaughtered and sold locally because of their better beef.

“I always said that my granddad knew what the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand was before there was the CAB brand because the people knew those rural black cattle weighing at about 900 to 1,000

pounds (lb.) graded very well and ate very good.”

John Frederick walked about a quarter mile a day to feed those calves ground corn and cottonseed meal by hand.

“So as a kid growing up, I knew what we were going to be doing every Saturday morning from fall through spring when we got done weaning in October,” John says. “He would have 80 or 90 steers on feed. We had to

grind every Saturday to make sure he had enough feed for the next week.”

When John Frederick’s health declined in the early 1970s, along with the Nixon price freeze, the family closed the feedyard.

“My dad (John Henry) took over from my granddad and we continued to run our Angus cows.”

An education and educating

John’s small herd continued to grow, and any decision he has made ensured raising Angus cattle would be in his future. Even in his initial choice for a college degree — dentistry.

“I started out to be a dentist, because I thought, ‘You know what? I can be a dentist and then I’d have lots of money to run cows,’” he says. “But in the

“I always said that my granddad knew what the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand was before there was the CAB brand because the people knew those rural black cattle weighing at about 900 to a 1,000 pounds (lb.) graded very well and ate very good.”
— John Pfeiffer Jr.

Continued on page 28

process, I forgot the step in between. I had to study.”

After two and a half years at Oklahoma State University (OSU), John switched his major to animal science. He graduated in December 1975 and worked for Kingfisher County Extension for six months and 12 days before making yet another career shift.

“It was a good job, but it just wasn’t what I wanted to do, because I wanted time to work with the cows and be back with the farm,” he says.

John went back to school to earn a teaching certificate. “I didn’t want to teach Ag, but I didn’t lack many hours to be able to teach science,” he says. “And so I got my science teacher’s certificate, student taught in Guthrie and was hired before I

was finished student teaching.”

John helped start a lab-based science program in Guthrie, where he taught for 12 years.

During this time in 1980, John met Gaye Burgin at an Oklahoma Youth Expo (OYE) event. They married in 1981. Gaye is also an educator and has spent her life teaching science, working with youth and farming with John.

John then went to work as the sole science teacher for the Orlando, Okla., high school. He was in the classroom for 18 years, minus the two years he served as principal, and earned his master’s degree.

After 30 years in education, in 2008, it was time for John to retire and to spend his full efforts on his first passion — Angus cattle.

A herd of his own

While in college John purchased the farm he lives on, just five miles from his family’s original homestead.

“When this property came up for auction I was thinking about coming back to farm,” John says. He figured he could buy the small house, barn and 160 acres for about \$60,000. He had a plan to afford the place, but the bidding started at \$65,000.

“I didn’t ever bid,” he says. “There’s no way I could pay them. Well, then, I finally looked, and the guy that had the bid at that time was the neighbor and I knew he was broke as he could be and didn’t ever pay his bills. I thought, ‘Well, if he thinks he can pay for this, then I ought to be able to pay for it too.’”

John bid one time — \$85,000. “That was all I bid, and the auctioneer said, ‘Sold!’” John and Gaye have continued to make improvements on the place ever since, including a new home in the 1990s.

In the late 1970s, John and his brothers began to take over the family farm from their father, implementing new technologies. “We introduced artificial insemination (AI) and started submitting data through the Angus Herd Improvement Records® (AHIR) program in the late 70s as well,” he says. “I probably didn’t know enough to know what I was doing with it, but I had started collecting the data and knew it was important.”

John says his granddad would have been



John and Gaye Pfeiffer's sons are the family's fifth generation to farm and raise livestock in Logan County Oklahoma. Pictured (from left) are Sierra and John Christopher; Gaye, John Henry Jr. and Andy Pfeiffer.

approached by extension agents who urged him to start collecting weights. “My granddad looked at it and he said, “‘This weighing stuff’s not ever going to last.’ He said, ‘This is just another passing fancy,’ and, ‘I don’t think we need to do it.’”

John took this as a chance to learn from those missed opportunities.

“Based on that and how far behind it put us, I’ve always tried to be, if I could afford it, an early adopter, because I think it’s important to stay up to date,” he says. “I just didn’t ever want to be left out again. I’ve always tried to make sure that it’s not me saying, ‘Oh, that’ll never last.’”

John and Gaye began to change their strategy. “[In the early 1980s] CAB was having their brand building workshops,” he says. “I didn’t think we needed to go, but Gaye was bound and determined that we were going to go. So finally I just asked if she could get the reservations.”

Gaye made the reservations and the pair drove to Wooster, Ohio. “That meeting probably had the most impact on anything that we’ve ever done,” he says. “Because after that meeting we totally changed the kind of cattle that we began to breed.”

Making changes

The Pfeiffers began to breed performance-based cattle. “Our cattle had been kind of show-based, and we looked at whatever bull won Denver — that’s what we’d been using,” he says. “After going to that meeting, our goal became to sell truckloads of calves that would meet the CAB brand standards. We’re not quite there yet, but we are getting closer.”

So in 2008, and with some “downtime” in retirement, John and Gaye decided to grow their

operation. Until 2001, when John’s parents dispersed, the Pfeiffers managed about 50 Angus cows. They began to add cows and ground to their farm.

In 2010 when John was elected to the American Angus Association Board of Directors, their herd numbered 100 and the farm 1,000 acres. In the past 10 years, that cow herd number grew by 200 more, and the land operated now stretches to 3,000 acres.

Today the Pfeiffers make breeding decisions on growth first, while keeping calving ease in check.

“I spend as much time looking at yearly-weight growth as I do weaning-weight growth because we actually feed a few of these steers ourselves,” he says.

With the end product in mind, the Pfeiffers also consider carcass traits.

“We want to make sure that there’s marbling,” he says. “I actually look at marbling before I look at carcass weight because I think marbling’s more important than carcass weight.”

Phenotype is also important to John and Gaye. “I don’t breed cattle totally by numbers,” he says. “They have to look good too. They’ve got to have a good foot and leg structure and they’ve got to have some eye appeal to them.”

John says they raised a cow a few years ago they didn’t register because she lacked eye appeal. “When we weaned the calves, her calf was so much heavier than anything else’s,” he says. “We decided we can live with a little less eye appeal because when the calf was a hundred pounds heavier than anything else then maybe we didn’t need quite as much eye appeal if we were getting that much extra growth.”

Pfeiffer Angus Farms uses AI on every female in the herd and then turns out bulls. They AI according to natural heat and calve in the spring and fall.

Lessons in leadership

In 1983, John Henry Pfeiffer, Jr. was selected to the first class of the Oklahoma Ag Leadership program. He cites this as one of the most influential leadership experiences for him as it changed the way he viewed the world and his own herd of Angus cattle.

“I began to see things that were a lot different outside the gates of this place,” he says.

In addition to leadership training, the class gained real-world experience traveling to Washington, D.C., and meeting with their congressmen. The group also traveled to China on a trade mission.

“It opened up my eyes, and I began to see things a lot differently than what I did before,” he says.

This allows them to utilize rotational grazing, minimizing the need for feeding hay in the winter.

Since 2004, the Pfeiffers have marketed their registered cattle in the Blackjack Farms and Guests annual female production sale each October.

Up until about three years ago, the Pfeiffer herd was solely managed by John and Gaye, and their two sons, John Christopher and Andy. John Christopher is a state representative and Andy lives at home and helps on the farm.

With their growing cow numbers and John's commitment to the Board soon extending to the executive committee and then president and chairman in 2018-19, John and Gaye knew they would be needing some additional help.

They had been hiring OSU students part-time, but they decided to hire one of those students, Colton Blehm, full-time. Colton helps with every aspect of Pfeiffer Angus Farms and assists Andy with his 25-sow show pig operation located on the farm.

When John retires from the Board of Directors

in November, he looks forward to spending more time focusing on his growing operation. However, he says, "You can't let the cows own you. We spend a lot of time looking after our Angus cattle, but we do expect them to take care of themselves."

"Kids used to make fun of me in school because we had black cattle and everybody else had Hereford. We were the only ones who had those little black cattle. Nowadays everyone around us has them and this whole countryside is changed. It's all black now."

— John Pfeiffer Jr.

Though he never found out exactly why his great-granddad purchased that first Angus bull more than 100 years ago, he does know John Christian had a fondness for feeding corn and carcass quality. Looking back now, he was ahead of his time, even when it wasn't popular.

"When he brought them home, they would've been the only Angus cattle in this part of the country," he says. "If

ever a black cow got out anywhere in Logan County, they'd call my granddad because we were the only ones with black cows. I mean, kids used to make fun of me in school because we had black cattle and everybody else had Hereford. We were the only ones who had those little black cattle. Nowadays everyone around us has them and this whole countryside is changed. It's all black now." 

