

Long Time

Animal scientist spends much of the last century making a difference in the field.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

The Long family's farm near Jackson, Ohio, was a couple hundred acres, with some dairy cows, pigs, sheep and chickens — pretty typical for a Midwestern spread in the 1920s and 1930s.

Grandpa Long had a pair of Angus cows, before the time of tattoos, and when he died they were sold as commercial cows.

But for Robert Long, the only son of Max and Helen Long, the purchase of his very own Angus heifer changed everything.

His involvement in 4-H got him interested in judging and The Ohio State University (The OSU).

A few years later, he was off to college with \$300 and a work ethic that said he'd succeed. At the time, the farm boy didn't think anything of it — climbing out of the Great Depression to get a degree, finishing college after the draft took him overseas for 38 months. That's just what young men his age did.

Long had no premonitions he would go on to leave a lasting mark on the animal science community.

"I didn't really think of myself as

making a big impact at that time," he says humbly.

Now, at 101 years old, Long has a view of the industry few have as an active participant in agriculture for much of the last century.



At 101, Robert Long recalls a century of involvement in the cattle business.

Early on

Dale Runnion, one-time managing editor of the *Angus Journal*, pulled together stories of Long's early years as part of the collection, *"Ten Depression Age Kids Who Made a Difference."*

Runnion tells of Long's beginnings on The OSU campus.

He went to the beef barn to get a job, but the likes of Les Leachman, Herman Purdy and Don Good already filled all the slots. Though he'd later become friends with each of those icons, his college self had to venture across the street to see if he could find employment at the meat lab. He met Larry Kunkle and the rest is history.

"That very day he gave me a white coat, a stepladder and a wire brush, with instructions to get the rust off the rails in the slaughter room," Long recalls.

That position helped pay his way

through college and set the course for his career, which would focus on carcass composition for more than 50 years.

When Long was drafted overseas, his then fiancé Beth decided she'd help the war effort stateside and enlisted as a Navy WAVES storekeeper. That brought her to California, where Long would meet her after his tour.

If a woman married while enlisted, she could get a discharge.

"So instead of waiting to get home, we got married in San Diego," Long recalls. As luck would have it, he had a sister and brother-in-law there and Long's sister lined up the whole thing. "We got married after church on a Sunday."

Then it was back to Ohio for a memorable senior year, which included a judging team win in Chicago.

"That was a big deal for me," Long says.

Head west

As Long neared graduation, the department head summoned him.

"Most people didn't get called to the office until they did something bad," he jokes.

D.J. Kays, who Long describes as his most influential professor, said he'd like the soon-to-be graduate to continue his studies at Oklahoma State University (OSU) and take an assistantship there.

He and Beth, pregnant with their first child, left for Oklahoma. They'd never been to the state.

It was a good move. That position led to a stint as judging team coach at the University of Kentucky before a stop as department head at the University of Georgia.

Teaching all cattlemen

All the while, his favorite subject to teach was marbling deposition and red meat yield. He coached students, trained packer buyers and related end-product merit back to producers.

Students in one of his beef production classes helped Long prepare for a national presentation by gathering material for slides. They harvested a light-muscled fat steer and a heavier muscled lean one, removed the fat and took pictures during the process to show the fat deposits versus the muscle. That gave a clear picture of the under-the-hide differences.

"That stuck with them better than anything, and I think they all remembered it well," Long says. "I wish I could have taken every animal science student and gone through a deal like that with them."

He paused his academic career for a stint as director of performance programs for Ankony Angus and later vice president and chief operating officer. He helped broker the purchase of Murray Corbin's entire Tail N herd, which resulted in matings that created legendary bulls like Ankonian Dynamo.

"That was actually the first big infusion of performance-bred cattle that Ankony ever bought," says John Crouch, former CEO of the American Angus Association, who has known Long for much of his career.

At Ankony, Long created a scoring system that served as a precursor to expected progeny differences (EPDs).

"This was before performance selection methods. It was a system

of scoring cattle based on the way they looked. He wrote a book on it and published it throughout the world," Crouch

says. "We didn't have anything to work with until after 1974 and we started getting data, but you couldn't in your wildest imagination imagine the resistance that people had toward applying data to the selection process."

After Ankony, Long went back to academia, eventually as the department head at Texas Tech University. A respected animal scientist and a sought-after cattle judge, Long spoke across the globe, including time spent in Australia, New Zealand, Brazil and Chile.

He authored papers and did research, taught notable students who have gone on to their own great accomplishments. Still, perhaps his greatest achievement was working toward the advancement of using data and live animal appraisal in tandem to improve animals.

"He was kind of a visionary who looked to the future to see where it was going," Crouch says, noting he was a supporter of learning from data and applying it to the real-world. "He was kind of a renegade. There were a lot of people who were critical of his stance relative to composition of the carcass and end production merit."

The two men still discuss recent stories in the *Angus Journal* or reminisce when they talk on the

phone once a month or so.

"In general, we have improved the marbling, and still, the cattle are a little bit too fat. But some breeders insist that they have to have some

females that can survive in range country, and so I guess part of that is necessary," Long says. They still worry about trends taken to extremes, but are


pleased to see that overall cattle have gotten better. "We have made a great deal of improvements."

Long's dad sold the original 320 acres while he was overseas in the service, so having his own herd was never meant to be. Yet, he says it probably worked out just right.

"I guess I liked what I had best of all. I could do a little research and teaching, and speak to people that were actually producing in the field at the same time," Long says.

Academia requires a professional to stay breed-neutral, but is it possible he had a soft spot for a particular breed?

"Always in my heart, yes, I was an Angus fan," he says. "It's hard to work with Angus cattle and not grow fond of them, I think. They do a lot of things right."

Just like that young Ohio boy who first took a liking to them. 

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— John Crouch