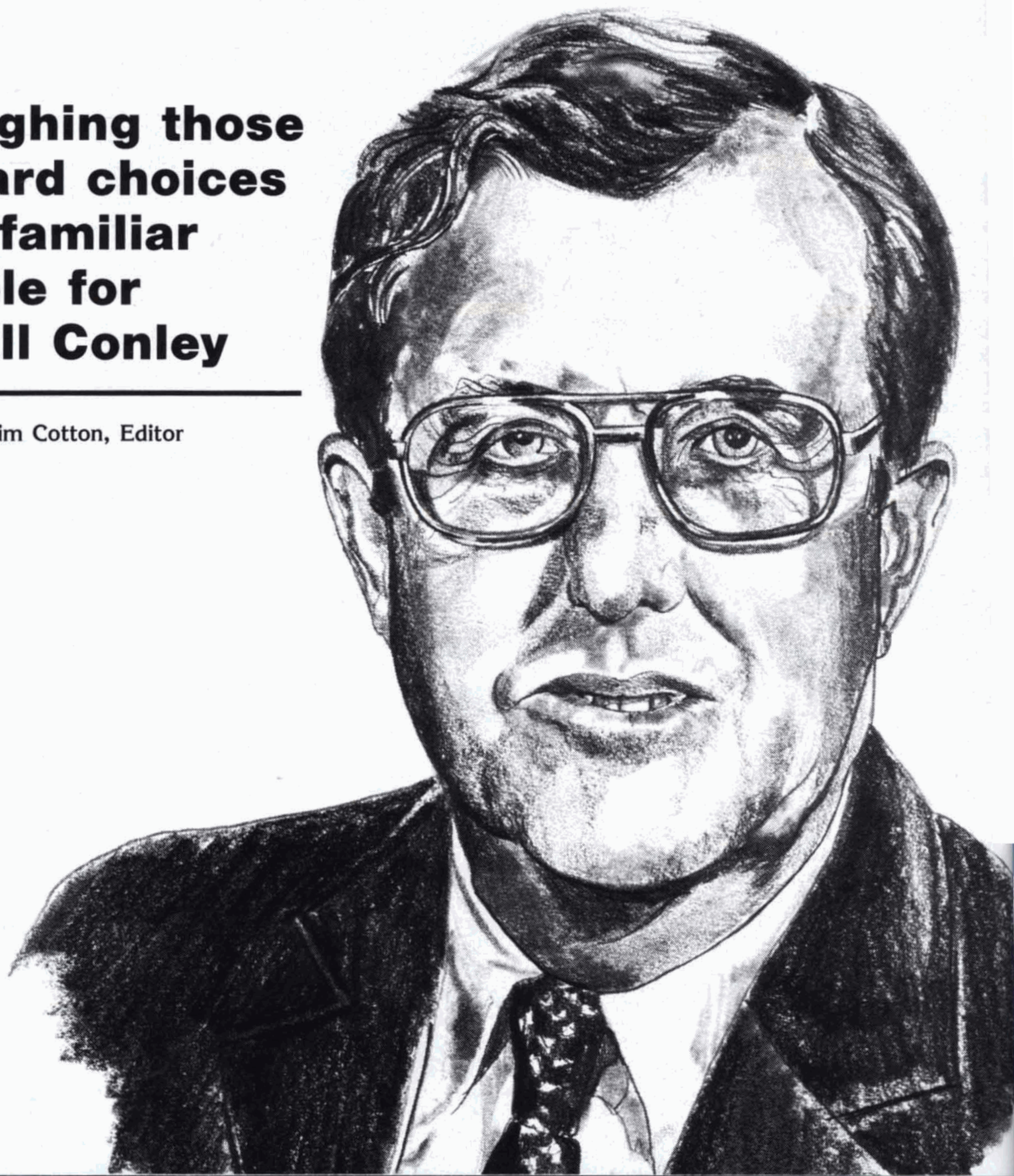


W eighing those hard choices a familiar role for Bill Conley

by Jim Cotton, Editor



Bill Conley says this:

"A funny thing happened to me on my way to graduate school. What started as a one- or two-year stopover turned into a 35-year challenge."

That "challenge" came in the form of a job, nothing to be sneered at, even in 1950.

At the outset, he was only mildly interested. Bill had been accepted at Washington State University where he would continue his animal science studies. On a second thought, he took a break from academia to help a

fledging farm of 190 acres and 30 Angus cows come into being. Thirty-five years later, that modest beginning flourishes as a 1,200-acre operation encompassing 200 cows, apple orchards, row crops, and a forestry management program.

The farm is known as Gibbet Hill near Groton, Mass., and one suspects the question becomes: who's challenging who—the farm the man or the man the farm? Perhaps it's been a seesaw relationship all along with each rising to the other's occasion.

Bill describes it as "never a static sort of job, but always a challenge, always growth."

Another deduction. Building a thriving, widely diverse farm of such mixed enterprise was a crucible for one ascending to the presidency of the American Angus Assn., likely more appropriate than even a decade's worth of graduate schools.

Bill Conley has responded to the changes he observed, weathered and helped institute over the years on the board of directors. Changes come

faster, he notes, both in Association affairs and breeder attitudes.

"When I first got involved in the business, breeders seemed to have long-term programs and goals. Now, you see people shifting from short-term approaches to what appears almost complete abandonment. Also, we've gone in the industry from no A.I. to five A.I. service bulls per herd to unlimited embryo transfer. A.I. really came on after the anti-trust suit, and we've all witnessed the widening gap between the hard-line performance disciples and those breeding for the show ring."

Survival, in Bill's view, was the mother of change. Gibbet Hill adopted AHIR in 1960 as an important component of its program. Bill started

whether as a board member or as president, that arguments for one side or the other of a controversial issue can go on and on.

"Most decisions are made based on doing the greatest good for the greatest number of members. A thick hide was essential on that one," he says of the decision to employ regional managers as Angus Journal representatives. Getting the Angus Productions Inc., on its feet financially and personnel-wise was a minefield pockmarked by criticism of those seeing the new publication as a competitor.

Membership expulsions were emotionally draining, Bill recalls, particularly if families and children were involved.

Bill praises publicizing genetic de-

wrestled annually over its continuance or elimination, especially when the investment reached \$250,000." Bill recalls the "clobbering" CAB took from the USDA and consumer advocates who all but labelled it an outright bogus con scheme.

As an officer and president, Bill has followed a board pattern to be available with a receptive ear to the complaints, criticism, and lo, a bit of applause.

"The latter, by the way," he says not without humor, "is ranked third because one can expect so little."

Bill credits his six years on the API board and service on the Breed Improvement, Activities, Rules, Finance and Executive Committees as equipping him with the background to of-



Bill (left), goes over some family operation planning with son Bill.

The Clarksdale, Mo. farm is managed by sons Bill (left), and Tim. Pictured from left, are Bill, wife Tina, and their children Kyle and Kori. At right, are Jenny and Tim.



"Two roads diverged in a wood and I took the one less traveled by. And that has made all the difference."

—The Road Not Taken, by Robert Frost

with a somewhat native herd not unlike modern breed types.

"Our original herd was not at all like its contemporaries in the 1950s. They were taller, plain-headed, milky, flatter muscled—and, hard to sell! It was a good thing, though," he says, "we didn't clean them all out. We changed bull types, bought a few females, and continued along with the fads until 1967. Then, we switched back to the controversial bull types of the day—Erdmann, Wye, Canadian—before the rush of the 1970s started."

This year, Bill used 12 bulls in his A.I. program, a record, he claims, for him. In years past, at least 25 daughters of each bull were retained for herd production based on performance. Bill describes performance as "defined by AHIR standards is hard to sell in the Northeast because of the absence of a viable commercial cattle industry."

Agonizing decisions are the lot of most any seed stock producer prominent in his business, but if that breeder also accepts the mantle of leadership, there are a host of new expectations resting upon him or her. Membership, not just customers, must be satisfied. It's been Bill's experience,

facts as the Association rising courageously to stem the spread. "Often," he says, "other breeds preferred to clear their throats and look the other way on that one."

The one instance of hiking fees brewed a storm of protest.

"It's always difficult because you are aware that while revenues increase, resentment from members also produces a loss of activity. This Association has always provided member services as a priority—that's its byword, in fact—and some of those services were never very cost effective. Now, the membership is going to have to face up to paying more for it.

"The loss of activity is always greatest in the 10-cow category. We need to attract those herds back to active status. We don't hear much about the board catering to the 'big breeders' anymore. I defy critics to count for me more than 20 so-called 'big breeders.' This is an Association of small herds."

It seems that Bill Conley has "midwived" any number of new and struggling programs. Take Certified Angus Beef.

"It was funded the first year I was on the board. That seed sprouted and it took a lot of watering. The board

fer the frank answers members expect.

"The questions seem harder than they used to be," he admits. "But I find the board today in tune with the times. It's young, vigorous in debate, businesslike in approach. It has vision.

"I had hoped the slide in registrations would reverse during my term, but unfortunately that was beyond the scope of my office. All in all, this has been a signal honor for me to have been chosen to serve these eight years and as president. The majority of board members derive their sole support from Angus cattle and farming, and, whether it's their livelihood or not, Angus breeders everywhere are held together by a common fabric woven of black cattle and devotion to the land."

The detours of life can create powerful consequences. Bill Conley surely has wondered what might have been had he not stopped off at that modest little farm on Gibbet Hill enroute to Washington State University.

We might suggest WSU process Bill's application now; most any university can stand one more illustrious graduate.

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