

Rooted, grounded, and firm in his faith toward the breed and its people.



Joe Neely, president, American Angus Association, 1986-87

BORN TO THE TASK

By Jim Cotton
Editor

Joe Neely comes from those roots where it was simply understood he would never leave the farm. After all, he was born on the place.

He describes his forebears as "a very deep-rooted, hard-working farm family." The land, the Neely land, embodies all the emotional attachments owning a good piece of earth inspires. . . especially when those roots Joe mentioned extend clear back to the year 1810.

There have been Neelys on this part of Simpson County since then and near the town of Franklin, population 7,788. They've witnessed a multitude of changes, one can imagine, but there are those few things that stay close to eternally the same: good earth and good husbandry lend a sense of permanence, a healthy dose of wise perspective.

Both Joe and his brother Ben raise their families in the shadow of what was built, planted, laid down, nurtured, and the legacy continues. Fewer and fewer families can claim such heritage.

Still, the history doesn't seem a source of pride. In harmony with the humbleness of this man, Joe says: "I guess I have always felt more like a custodian of the land rather than an owner.

"My parents instilled not only a desire but also a sense of duty to improve the land, contribute to the community and leave things better than I found them."

Small wonder, then, that he's found his term as president of the American Angus Assn. so satisfying. He's a builder, respective of the good foundation he inherited while adding his solid contribution.

"My work and involvement with the farm operation began at a very early age," Joe recalls. He began his 4-H experience at the age of nine with his first two years' projects devoted to tobacco and showing Angus steers. "It didn't take long for my interest to develop more toward cattle than tobacco."

His father advised Joe he should expand toward a cow-calf project as a basis for building. Joe continued with Angus because of the carcass quality, mothering ability, and "mainly because it was polled." He recalls his father helping him select a cow and heifer calf from the herd of Granville Chapman, Woodburn, Ky.

"Thus the Meadowbrook herd was founded." The cow proved herself a worthy investment as she contributed four more heifer calves to Joe's growing herd. "This was my

introduction to a lifetime venture of breeding registered Angus cattle. For this fatherly advice, I'll always be grateful."

His father joined him in the Angus business, a partnership that continued until Mr. Neely's retirement in the early 1960s. Brother Ben came home from college at that time, and the partnership evolved into the Neely Brothers. And, as the brothers began building homes and families, the pressure to expand beyond the farm's 300 acres grew. Adjoining farms were rented where cash grain could be raised.

Reciting the familiar formula, Joe says: "More land meant more machinery. More machinery required more land." Today, the operation is surprised of 430 acres owned and 1,400 acres rented. Joe estimates the brothers spend about half their time row-cropping. And, he's candid to confide he would have preferred a different tack. The farm economy, location, and a dozen factors can exert harsh reality.

Nevertheless, one hears hint of a stockman at heart when Joe contrasts the two enterprises:

"There is much more satisfaction in seeing a newborn calf nurse than seeing a piece of machinery setting in the shed depreciating every day. It takes a tremendous capital investment to fund an extensive cropping program."

Those very early days with Angus wove the fiber of this cowman. Tobacco apparently left a distaste.

"When that newborn calf exceeds your expectations as the result of a planned mating, it can be downright exciting," he says of his first love.

Joe's never wavered, it would appear, from his early decision to breed Angus. "Regardless of a person's goals or ambitions, he should never be totally satisfied. But it is gratifying to know you belong to a breed that has the most of the best, a breed that has met every challenge for more than a hundred years, and today is used in more crossbred combinations than any other breed. Then to be able to see an improvement within your own individual herd each year is especially rewarding."

Joe Neely describes serving as president of the Association as a "tremendous honor for an ol' country boy." He moved into the president's chair with a grave sense of responsibility. And from his vantage point, Joe says he gained a new appreciation of the leadership provided

by former officers and directors. He describes their course as "wise, prudent."

Joe lists as one of his "parting concerns" that the breeders never forget the attributes that made the breed so acceptable in the marketplace and with the ultimate customer, the commercial producer. "We should never shortchange ourselves by trying to pattern after other breeds," he cautions. "During the past 20 years, we have seen our breed type go from one extreme to

people across the nation has made this a high-paying job for me. I'll be forever grateful."

Joe's gratitude extends to the folks in Kentucky who have invested him with delegate responsibilities, then to a board candidacy. He credits his family as great support "for taking up the slack when I wasn't there. I look forward now to spending more time supporting them in their endeavors."

His wife, Deanna, has been a helpmate at side since October 13, 1961. The oldest of their sons, Dave,

"One of the greatest amenities of country living is to drive out in the pasture early in the morning just as the sun is coming up, when all is quiet and peaceful, and see a bunch of black cattle grazing around you."

the other. Change was necessary and will always be necessary, but we shouldn't have to go to such extremes."

He values the diversity in the breed ranks, saying the Association represents a very "diversified membership with different climatic conditions and different marketing demands, big and small, part-time and full-time. We need them all."

But avoid one-segment dictation to the Angus industry and the course of the breed, he would urge. "Single trait selection does not require a Master Breeder, neither does it require an expert judge to line them up according to height. I hasten to say a judge cannot put up the right kind if the right kind isn't there. Moderation is a must and change is inevitable. Let us all pursue that which is best for our breed."

Again from his years in the business and particularly from his perspective as the president of the nation's largest beef registry, Joe can see the advantage, yes, the absolute necessity of promoting the end product. "Another vital concern," he says, "is that we pass our research and promotion check-off when the referendum is held next spring. We have lagged far behind in promoting our product. Let's not permit complacency to whip us again."

One of the opportunities from the office he's held this past year is meeting with all walks in the Angus life. "There's a place in this Association for every type of breeder regardless of size. The acquaintanceship of so many fine

23, is a graduate of Western Kentucky university and is now engaged full-time in the family farm operation. Polly, 21, has completed three years at WKU and is presently taking a break from school to travel with the New Life Drama Team, a ministerial group giving skits at schools and churches across the nation. John is 16 and a junior at Franklin Senior High School.

Release from his duties as president of the American Angus Assn. doesn't mean more time for other pursuits or neglected hobbies/intrests Joe points out. "Angus activities have been my hunting, fishing, and golf. That probably won't change much." He does anticipate spending more time with the boards of the Warren Rural Electric Co-op and the Simpson County Bank—where he has a long tenure—and with his church.

Shake hands With Joe Neely and you grip something solid. Says something about the timber he's carved from and the roots from which he grew. His devotions are strong and straight forward, and it's been a good year for both the Association and Joe Neely. Both can look back with satisfaction.

One senses he takes things in stride, and though the externals and internals of the year past have been agreeable, it's predictable Joe would have guided the breed and breeders through troubled times just as surely. He knows good cattle will cover a lot of ills or shortcomings; he's seen it over the years. One knows it's so when Joe says: "In spite of all we have done, the Angus cow reigns supreme." 