

FROM PINEYWOODS TO PUREBREDS

by Janet Mayer

In 50 years, the Georgia Angus Association has grown from a handful of breeders and businessmen, into a progressive breeder's organization with more than 200 members. The association was formally organized in Atlanta in January 1942.

Actually, according to Robert C. Roebing, who in 1961 wrote an account of the early days of the association, the roots go back even further, to about 1935. Roebing bought Skidaway Island off the coast of Savannah in the late 1930s. He later bred one of the area's early registered Angus herds at Modena Plantation on the island.

Roebing said that the first Georgia Angus Association was an informal assemblage with meetings usually held on the bark at stock shows. Extension specialists, packing house executives and railroad agricultural representatives joined cattle breeders in making up the membership. C.H. Blalock held the office of president, with W.R. Howard serving as vice president. It was doubtful if the association kept minutes. If there were dues they were probably spent on the spot for soft drinks; so there was no need for a secretary or treasurer.

While recorded statistics on the early history are scant, one fact is apparent: Angus cattle did not become a major breed in the state until after 1935.

In fact, the major cattle population in Georgia at that time was not purebreds at all, but a type known as "Pineywoods" cattle. These cattle, along with razorback hogs, exist-

ed on sparse grass in the semi-cleared turpentine forests and on the grassed shoulders along state highways.

Cotton was the major crop in Georgia, and with sharecroppers growing cotton in unfenced fields, cattle could stray for miles. Once a year, owners would attempt a roundup, identifying their stock by brands. This was done at the height of the grass season when the cattle were well fleshed.

Under these harsh conditions, only a "Pineywoods" bull could be expected to live more than 12 months. The idea of improving the woods-born cattle with purebred stock was out of the question. Why pay for a purebred bull that could wander off and probably benefit the neighbors more than an owner.

In the late 1930s Milton P. Jarnagin, professor of animal husbandry at the University of Georgia, began expounding on the theme: "fence the worn-out cotton fields, put them in Bermudagrass, stock them with "Pineywoods" cows and purebred bulls."

Jarnagin's idea really germinated when the railroads got into the picture. The railroad executives knew that the native woods cattle could thrive anywhere and that Midwest corn feeders were looking to buy thin cattle. There was no better buy than a crossbred "Pineywoods" steer transported by rail to the feedlots. This gave Georgia purebred breeders their first big opportunity.

Another opportunity for the breeders came in 1935. At that time, Angus trailed Herefords and Shorthorns in popu-



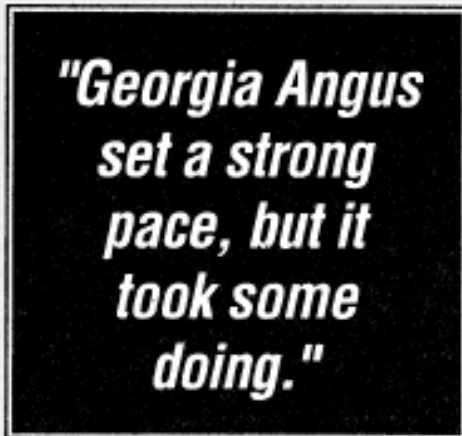
Georgia Angus Association's board of directors are (seated from left): Ed Minix (deceased), Hoschton; Dewey Johnson, Jefferson, vice-president; Carolyn Gazda, Athens, and Wally Cloud, Canton. Other directors are (standing from left): Harvey Lemmon, Woodbury; Tony Brown, Williamson; John Miller, Valdosta; Wynder Smith, Wadley; Jim Gresham, Hampton; John Reavis, Ball Ground; Ralph Bridges, Lexington; and Marion Burnett, Washington. (Photo by American Angus Association).

larity, but, according to Roebing's historic account, this changed when the "foxhunting crowd from Wall Street" began buying up horse breeding estates in Maryland and Virginia. Eager northern Angus breeders hastened to sell cattle to the new estate owners to stock their lush pastures. The new Angus breeders were sports and tried to outdo each other by having the best cattle. Price was no object. Show cattle were in great demand and prices soared.

In 1937, Modena Plantation in Savannah bought a load of fancy Angus cattle, including the American Royal grand champion bull. The trend quickly spread throughout the state. At this time the Georgia Angus Association became more formalized to take advantage of the expanding market for quality Angus cattle. Blalock and Howard continued as president and vice president, respectively, and Roebing was treasurer.

Roebing says even though the Georgia Association was nationally known in 1941, it apparently was not so well known at home. In December of that year, a group of new, enthusiastic breeders sent a circular to most of the Angus breeders in Georgia urging that an association be formed in January. The problem of combining the old association and the purposed new association was resolved at the meeting in January 1942. With the formal organization of the Georgia Angus Association came the beginning of its modern history. The Honorable James W. Davis was elected to succeed Roebing as secretary-treasurer; in 1943 he became president of the association.

Since that time the Georgia Angus Association has continued to grow along with the popularity of the breed. The association has ample membership, and, according to secretary Carolyn Gazda, the group is currently conducting a membership drive by sending letters to breeders in the state who are members of the national association. So far membership has increased by 25 percent.



To sustain interest in the association, Gazda says, a field day is held each summer, and an annual meeting is held in conjunction with the Great Southland Futurity Show and Sale each January. Both events provide an opportunity for members to gain education in the ever-changing cattle industry and also to visit with fellow breeders. The association co-sponsors the Georgia Spring Showcase Sale with the North

Georgia Angus Association. In conjunction with the University of Georgia's Cooperative Extension Service, it sponsors the Georgia Angus Forage Bull Test. This is the only all-Angus forage bull test in the Southeast, with members consigning about 100 bulls.

The bulls for this year's test were sold November 4. Gazda says that after a good sale with satisfied buyers in 1990, members anticipate another successful sale.

During the last few years, the Georgia association has played host to two national events. In August 1989, the National Angus Conference and tour was held in the state.

The group also assisted the Georgia Junior Angus Association in hosting the 1990 Eastern Regional Junior Angus Show.

Gazda says they are proud of members who have gone to make their mark as board members for the American Angus Association: Ralph Bridges, immediate past president of Georgia Angus Association, and Harvey Lemmon, president of the national association in 1988.

They are equally proud of the early Angus breeders in the state such as: Col. E.B. Weatherly, a director of the American Aberdeen Angus Association; Carey Arnett; W.R. Howard; C.H. Blalock; Joe and Jimmy Johnson; and Howard Coffin. Not to be forgotten is the late Roebing, who was a grandson of the builder of the Brooklyn Bridge.

In a comment made by Roebing in 1961, he said, "Georgia Angus set a strong pace, but it took some doing."