

# SUNNYSLOPE ANGUS

*A place of history,  
hi-tech production and  
taking care of cattle.*

by Barbara LaBarbara

In 1964, just as a new age of technology was taking its first wobbly steps in the cattle world, Philip Abrahamson took the helm of Sunnyslope Angus. He met — head on — the challenge of carrying Sunnyslope's legacy into the 21st century.

Sunnyslope Angus have roamed the scenic hills of Root River Valley near Lanesboro, Minn., since 1898. It was 100 years before Philip took command that his great-grandfather, Iver Abrahamson, realized his dream of owning land in America and purchased property from the railroad.

Philip's grandfather, Peter Abrahamson, traded land from Texas to North Dakota, bought and sold businesses, traveled far and wide, and attended college. He christened his only home Sunnyslope Stock Farm.

In 1892 he began keeping diaries that recorded the weather, his travels, meetings, livestock sales and social life. The first entry was written Feb. 1, 1892. It read, "Very cold — 38 degrees below."

All through the records are dates people inquired about cattle, when a cow calved, and the bulls Peter sold. From the time he bought his first Angus in 1898 until 1924, he never sold a bull for more than \$100. He held a cattle auction on the farm Dec. 12, 1906.

One diary entry in 1900 tells of his joining the Minnesota State Breeders Association; a 1916 diary shared thoughts on his involvement as the first secretary of the Minnesota Angus Association. Trips to Angus headquarters in Chicago were a highlight.

Peter purchased his first registered bull, Negro of Greenview, and purebred heifer, Ivy of Canton the 2nd, in 1898. Negro weighed 2,160 pounds and closely resembles today's Angus bulls. For nearly 40 years Peter sold registered Angus breeding stock, Percheron horses, Poland China swine, Shropshire sheep, Wyandotte chickens, Shorthorns and dairy cattle throughout the Midwest.

Interlaced in the diary pages is Peter's love for adventure and his black cattle. Ruth, Philip's wife, could not hold her

emotion as she told of Peter's last entry just before his death in 1938: "I took care of the cattle."

**Arnold, Peter's second son**, took over Sunnyslope in 1946. Life on the farm changed. Arnold was not as adventurous as his father. Having experienced the Great Depression first hand no doubt made him more cautious. He raised crops, hogs, Angus cattle and did custom work. In 1948 he purchased Eric's Blackcap Heir EL, reserve champion bull at the Iowa State Sale.

He was flexible and supportive when Philip, an only son, took over his grandfathers beloved farm. Once again management style at Sunnyslope changed.

With the aid of the animal science department at the University of Minnesota, Philip began performance testing his Angus cattle in 1960. A number of performance field days were held on his farm.

Philip focused on carcass information gathered through Hormel. Steers out of an Eileenmere bull and OB Garner 13

were processed and evaluated. Philip said it was one of their many learning experiences.

Another was classifying their herd bulls, cows and yearlings on a 100-point system which was carried out by official classifiers from the American Angus Association.

"I found weighing and grading cattle challenging," Philip says. "In the first years of weighing the calves at weaning time, grades were assigned. The short, thick animals received the highest grades. When these animals were weighed as yearlings, many proved to be a disappointment. Later, changes were made to make the indexing system more effective."

There is no question that performance testing improved the Sunnyslope Angus herd. Total actual pounds weaned have tripled. There has been a beneficial increase in the size of their cattle since the early days.

From the 1960s into the '70s, Philip served as secretary/treasurer of the Southeastern Minnesota Angus Breeders Association. He collected semen from several bulls he consigned to the Association's sales. The semen, along with semen from other herds across the country, was sent to the U.S. Meat Animal Research Center near Clay Center, Neb., to launch a crossbreeding experiment. His bulls' genetics are among the first recorded at Clay Center.

**In the mid-'70s** Philip and Ruth questioned whether to stay in the cattle business. Cattle prices were down and everything else was up. Despite all of the negatives, they knew their future lay with Angus cattle.

Things began to change in 1975 when Michael Fraser, a New Zealand foreign exchange student, arrived at Sunnyslope.

"People always talk about being self-made," says Philip. "But a lot of people are key cogs. Mike was one for us."

With Mike's help, Philip built a state-of-the-art automated feeding system. They hauled 1,100 cubic yards of sand, poured cement, installed motors, U-Trough augers, a conveyer belt with plow, and stanchion dividers. Thirty steel gates were installed. Mike calculated gate swings and placing of the feed bunk to maximize utilization of barns, shelters, pens, and scales Peter and Arnold had built earlier.



*Jessica, Julie, Ruth and Philip Abrahamson manage Sunnyslope Angus in Minnesota.*

With this feed mechanism, four different groups of cattle with four different rations can be fed in just eight minutes without shutting down or breaking the feed flow.

Freeze branding became part of the Sunnyslope program in 1975. In 1976 Philip used artificial insemination (AI) for the first time. He also received a Minnesota Forage Award for crop residue utilization and forage production.

Mike and Philip attended a livestock seminar at Iowa State University in the fall of 1975 where they met Robert deBaca, a professor at Iowa State.

At the National Western in January 1976, Philip and Ruth joined deBaca and several other Angus breeders to organize a group for genetic improvement, advertising and merchandising of beef cattle. As a member, one could use semen from other members' bulls for the commercial price. AI certificates were at cost. Philip saw an opportunity to use genetics from some of the best Angus herds in the country. The group became known as Ideal Beef Systems.

The first year their advertising budget was \$22,000. Early advertising was in magazines such as *Angus Journal*. Later, deBaca published "The Ideal Beef Memo," which included a column by Richard Spader of the American Angus Association. The publication focused on performance. At that time performance was more popular with commercial people than registered breeders.

"The commercial people are

important," Philip says. "They are the bread and butter of the breeds."

During the worst of times in the cattle industry, Philip and Ruth planned their first production sale for 1978. Their timing was perfect. A week before the sale, market prices for finished cattle rose to a record 62 cents per pound. The Sunnyslope sale averaged \$1,100 — a lot of money for the time.

In 1983 Philip was named Minnesota Purebred Cattleman of the Year and received the Seedstock Award. In 1988 Philip, Ruth and their two daughters, Julie and Jessica, were honored as the University of Minnesota Farm Family from Fillmore County. Sunnyslope has been recognized by the American Angus Association for being one of the oldest herds on record and was featured in one of its early films promoting the Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) program.

**Although they breed** more than 160 females, have 280 head during the winter and 420 prior to their sale, Philip and Ruth do most of the farm work themselves. The cattle are calm and easy to work. "We don't baby the cattle but we don't abuse them either," Philip says.

During breeding season they use Kmar Heat Detectors and run the cows on a pasture with no trees. They buy 1.6 AI vials per female to be bred because as Philip says, "We are not here to save semen, we are here to breed females."

Philip AIs the cows and heifers in a

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— Philip Abrahamson

30-day period with a good track record. In a five-year period, AI calves averaged 79.8 of the total calf crop.

Heifers are bred to calve at the age of two. After AI breeding is complete the females are turned out with clean-up bulls that have been carefully selected through expected progeny differences (EPDs).

“Good EPD combinations are what sell our cattle,” says Philip.

Sunnyslope’s identification system makes sorting and recordkeeping easy. Tattoos, ear tags, freeze brands, name of the animal, and AHIR records carry the same three or four digit code. The code for each animal contains information on the sire, year born and sequence of calf born by a sire.

For example, the name of C711 is SS Challenger C711. The sire was Hoff Challenger. He was the 11th calf by Hoff Challenger born in 1987.

With this system Philip knows his cow herd’s breeding information, and can closely watch a cow’s mothering ability and how they winter.

“If there is a question about an animal, I can put the number into the computer,” says Philip. “And, with the “Managing Partner” program, find out all I need to know about that animal.”

Through “Managing Partner,” Philip receives updates from the American Angus Association every six months and has database back to 1931.

Records are vital to the Sunnyslope operation. They are used for culling and choosing 25 replacement heifers each year. They have not purchased a female since 1952. Changes have come through bulls with balanced EPDs, careful trait selection, and scrupulous culling practices.

“You have to remember the only difference between you and other cattle breeders is your females,” says Philip. “Anybody in the country can use a great bull.”

The females at Sunnyslope have produced several bulls that have had an impact on the Angus industry — SS Rito



*Sunnyslope Angus thrive on rolling Minnesota hills*

0715 OH3 “Mathematician,” SS Rim 8221 XO1 “Super X” and SS Traveler 6T6 — to name a few. A total of 12 Sunnyslope bulls are listed in the Angus Sire Evaluation report. They also boast 23 Pathfinder Cows.

Today Sunnyslope continues to market cattle through an annual production sale which is held the first Monday in June at the sale barn in Lanesboro, Minn. Philip prepares information for the catalog directly from his computer. The Cyclone Fitters, students from Iowa State University, do all fitting on the sale cattle.

At a recent Sunnyslope sale, a computer, hooked to the telephone, dialed the university. Many farmers and cattle buyers attending saw a computer modem perform for the first time.

An open house on the farm Sunday afternoon before the sale gives potential buyers an opportunity to inspect the cattle and ask questions. The majority of their cattle go to repeat buyers.

“Every animal in our 16 sales has sold. We take what we get,” says Philip. “That’s the way we operate.”

In 1993 an offering of 41 bulls averaged \$2,072. The 34 heifers averaged about half that, but Philip keeps his top 25 females for herd replacements.

#### **Looking to the Future**

At this time Julie and Jessica are not sure if they will be able to carry on the Sunnyslope legacy. Julie, a senior at the University of Minnesota, majors in scientific communications with a minor in piano performance and a second minor in foreign studies. She will graduate with honors. Jessica is a communications major at Northwestern College, St. Paul, Minn., and hopes to go into radio or television. Philip and Ruth are supportive of their daughters and happy they are prepared to venture into careers of their choice.

“We feel that agriculture and the beef industry face many challenges in the future,” Philip says. “But as in the past, we will do our best to adapt.”

Philip has managed to balance the past with modern day technology. The last entry in his computer will surely be, “I took care of the cattle.”

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