

F.C. MURPHY



SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS PHOTOS

Other eighth graders might have been disappointed had they received a folding chair for winning the school art contest. Not Frank Champion Murphy.

“My prize was a so-called art scholarship to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago,” Murphy remembers. “But when I got there, I found out the prize was actually a folding chair. So I’d take the chair, go around the museum, and draw animals. I went there faithfully. I loved it. I got to know that museum from top to bottom.”

“Looking back on it, that chair was a great prize. I probably got more out of it than if they’d given me \$5.”

More than six decades have passed since Murphy, then 13, won that school art contest. For the last five of them, Murphy, now 78, has been a part of the American Angus Association, doing what he does best — drawing. Through the years, his life-like paintings and illustrations of Angus cattle have graced the covers and inside pages of the *Angus*

*For half a century
Frank Murphy
has brought
Angus cattle to
life on canvas.*

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS

Journal and have been featured in *Angus* advertising throughout the beef industry. At the Association’s headquarters in St. Joseph, Mo., more than 100 of Murphy’s original pieces hang on the walls.

“It’s been a wonderful experience to be a part of the Association,” says Murphy, a tall and lanky man with a gentle voice. “They’re a unique and inspiring group. They all believe in what they’re doing with such sincerity, and it permeates from the top, starting with Dick Spader.”

Spader, Association executive vice president, has known Murphy almost 30 years. “I don’t know if enough good can be said about Frank,” Spader says. “He’s done an exemplary job in capturing what we have always strived to accomplish with our illustrations. And he’s a real gentleman and such a pleasure to work with.”

Childhood days

Murphy was born in Vinton, Iowa, in 1920 and grew up near Chicago, surrounded by

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Frank Murphy and his wife, Evelyn, now reside half the year in Wheaton, Ill., and the other half in Fort Myers, Fla.

pencils, crayons, paints and paper. Like his mother, Lucile Champion Murphy, he observed nature and drew picture after picture of what he saw.

“She painted and made beautiful, delicate drawings of flowers,” Murphy says. “Her painting of a deer on a mountainside was an early inspiration.

“I was always drawing as a child. I didn’t know I was going to make a living from it,” he continues. “I didn’t know that I could. I grew up in the Depression, and the consensus then was that artists starved in garrets.”

Summer visits to his mother’s family ranch near Brownsville, Texas, further sharpened Murphy’s skills in sketching

animals. His great-grandfather, Albert Champion, settled in the area in 1847 and ran Longhorn cattle on ranches he owned along the Rio Grande River. On La Gloria Ranch, Murphy — surrounded by cowboys, horses, Longhorns and endless vistas of the South Texas brush country — tirelessly captured the scenes on paper. To this day, he takes pleasure in painting Western-style scenes that recall those days.

His professional start

In 1938 Murphy enrolled at Iowa State University and studied aeronautical engineering. He also studied architecture at the

University of Texas in Austin but returned to Iowa State. “I couldn’t decide what I wanted to be when I grew up,” he says with a wry laugh. “My credits were too mixed up, so I ended up with an industrial economics degree and a double minor in journalism in 1943.”

At Iowa State the second time around, he re-met and married Evelyn Brown, his wife of 55 years.

“He was the first date I had at Iowa State,” recalls Evelyn, whom Murphy affectionately calls “Evie.” “One of his fraternity brothers fixed us up.”

After World War II began, Murphy was commissioned in the Navy. “I spent a year and a half in the Pacific on an amphibious ship as engineering officer, so I had a lot of time to think of the future,” Murphy says.

His older brother, Edward, who graduated from Iowa State three years before him, did not survive the war. “He was a B-25 pilot and was shot down in the Pacific in 1943,” Murphy says. “He held a degree in animal husbandry and had made a start in the meat industry when he was called to active duty. Edward was my greatest supporter and mentor.”

After his discharge in 1945, Murphy decided to pursue his dream.

“Evie was willing to put up with a struggling artist,” he says. He used the GI Bill to attend the Chicago Academy of Art. After one year he became an apprentice to a commercial artist in Chicago and began freelancing. “The first account I landed was Quaker Oats,” he says. “I drew pictures of cows, poultry and other farm animals for their line of livestock feeds.”

His work with Quaker Oats led to an important turning point in his career in 1948. “I started doing ads for Harry Barger, an account executive for Ful-O-Pep Feeds at Quaker Oats,” Murphy recalls. Barger also happened to be good friends with Lloyd Miller, then the public relations director for the American Angus Association, which was at that time headquartered in Chicago.

“Harry decided he wanted me to do work for the Angus Association because I’d done a Hereford steer for a Quaker Oats campaign,” Murphy says. For his first assignment, he created Miss Black and Baby Black to go with Mr. Black (done by Barger) to make a personable Angus “family” for ads designed to give Angus a strong identity in the beef cattle world.

“The problem with Angus is that they don’t photograph well,” the artist explains. “So this really made my work important to the Angus people, because I could draw black Angus and paint them so they’d reproduce well.



To commemorate the centennial of the introduction of Angus to the United States an Angus stamp was issued in 1973.

“The stamp was a highlight of my career and my career with the Angus Association,” Murphy says.

Reproduction then was very poor compared to today. So it was very fortuitous for my career as an Angus artist. I came along at the right time.”

The Association benefited from its relationship with Murphy, too. “Frank upgraded the image of the quality of Angus with his well-drawn illustrations,” says Miller, who retired from the Association in 1978 after 31 years. “They weren’t just of a bull standing crooked. They were gorgeous.”

On the Association team

After the Association moved to St. Joseph in 1956, Miller became executive secretary, and Bob Snyder replaced Miller. “Bob was a great innovator,” Murphy says. “He was very instrumental in developing advertising and a public relations program. He and I worked closely together on many projects.”

Snyder’s great dream was to get the U.S. Postal Service to issue an Angus “centennial” stamp in 1973, which would mark the centennial of the introduction of Angus to the United States in 1873. He lobbied in Washington and got the stamp approved — but not the design. Instead, the assignment went to an artist in Connecticut.

“One day my phone rang, and it was a woman with a Texas accent you could cut with a knife,” Murphy says. The high-ranking postal official had seen Murphy’s painting of a bellowing Angus bull surrounded by Longhorn cattle and asked if it could be used for the stamp. “I think I could accept that all right,” Murphy told her.

The Angus stamp, issued in 1973, became part of a “Rural America” series. “The stamp was a highlight of my career and my career with the Angus Association,” Murphy says. “It was a big feather for Bob to get that Angus stamp, and it was all because of him.”

Murphy’s Angus work

Whatever the Association needed — illustrations for newspaper and magazine ads, booklets or brochures — Murphy gladly drew or painted.

“I designed everything that the Angus Association put into print form, such as annual reports, educational and informational booklets, even matchbook covers,” he says. “They would send out prints of my work to various farm



“The way to get inside an animal is to focus on its eyes. They make the animal come alive,” says Frank Murphy. “Then I focus on the nuances, such as how the feet are poised and the head is held.”

The tools and techniques of an artist

On his cafeteria-tray-sized homemade palette, artist Frank Champion Murphy squeezes out dabs of ultramarine blue, burnt sienna, titanium white and other paints whose hues are as varied as their names.

But no black. Never.

“I don’t use black,” he says, “and I paint Angus cattle.”

A paradoxical palette? Not to Murphy.

“There is no black in nature,” he explains. “Black is actually an absence of light, an absence of color. The ‘black’ coat we see is actually reflecting the colors of light surrounding it.”

To create his own ebony and charcoal hues, Murphy blends ultramarine blue and burnt sienna. The mixtures produce subtle warm and cool shades of black that highlight the animal’s muscle tones and glossy coat.

Murphy most enjoys painting in the early morning in his studio, one side of the two-car garage at his Florida home. A thick sheet of plastic covers the concrete floor beneath the huge, wooden easel Murphy made years ago. Set upon it is a work in progress called *Dreams of Glory*. The self-portrait commemorates Murphy’s brief stint with a cavalry unit in the Texas National Guard.

“I always wanted to do a painting of that time,” Murphy says of four

cavalrymen on horseback. “It was a nostalgia trip for me doing it. That’s me in the forefront as a young man. My horse’s name was Top Kick. He was a beautiful horse but blind in one eye.”

Galloping to their destination, the horses in the painting train their eyes steadfastly ahead while one steals a sideways glance at his comrade, Top Kick.

“I love to get expressions into the eyes,” Murphy says. “That’s what gives me the most enjoyment in painting animals, to

try and give the expression of what the animal is sensing or feeling.

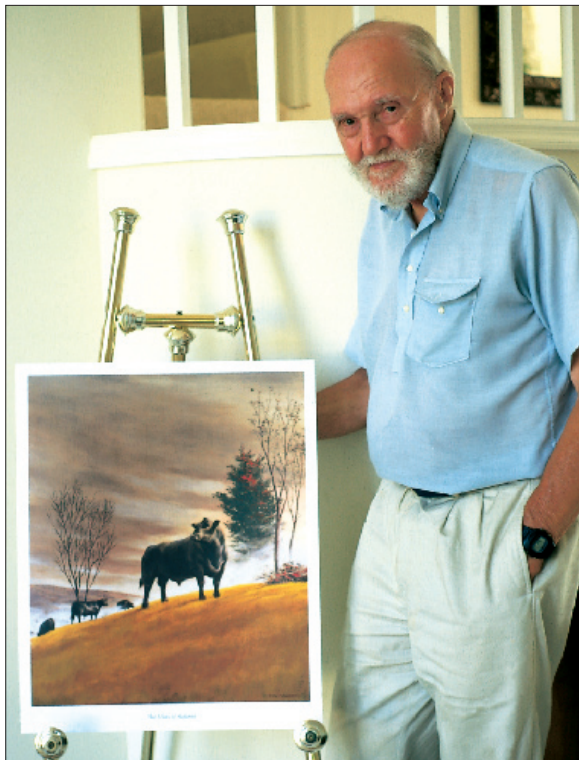
“I paint the eyes early on in the process,” he continues. “For some strange reason, I start out with the ears, but then I go right to the eyes. The way to get inside an animal is to focus on its eyes. They make the animal come alive. Then I focus on the nuances, such as how the feet are poised and the head is held.”

Murphy often paints from memory. “I see it in my mind’s eye, almost in a finished form,” he says. “But it undergoes a lot of changes as I paint. I make a lot of discoveries as I work.

“Painting is a creative process. You have an idea of where you want to go, but in getting there, you sometimes take some surprising turns.”



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The Mists of Autumn, a Frank Murphy oil painting that hangs in the Association's board room, has been reproduced as a limited-edition collector's art print. Only 500 copies have been printed, signed and numbered by the artist. Sales of the print benefit junior Angus programs through the Angus Foundation.



Murphy says this image of a calf mesmerized by a butterfly is probably his most famous painting. It was done about 1960.

magazines, which always liked to get color work they could use on a cover, and it was great publicity for the Association."

From the early St. Joseph years, Murphy worked closely with Keith Evans, the Association's long-time and influential director of communications and public relations.

"Frank Murphy came on board because he could make cows look good in print," Evans says. "No one can paint or draw Angus cattle that look realistic except Frank. No one has the knack that he does."

Murphy can take a concept and bring it to life. "No matter what project you're working on, if you give him the rough idea, it will always turn out better

than you could ever have hoped," Evans says.

Murphy also works with the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program, led by Executive Director Mick Colvin. He designed the Program's now well-known logo. Earlier this year he completed a large montage to commemorate the Program's 20th anniversary and its divisions. Using hundreds of photographs as references, Murphy sketched and painted nine detailed scenes, such as genetic consultant Richard Wilham seated before a computer, inspectors and meat packers on the job, and a blonde-haired woman (his favorite model — Evie) holding a plate of *Certified Angus Beef*[™] "value-added products" (corned beef, pastrami, sausage and other meats).

The artist today

These days Murphy and his wife live half of the year in Wheaton, Ill., and the other half in Fort Myers, Fla. They have two children. Son Tom Murphy is an executive in the

animal health division of research and development with Abbott Laboratories in North Chicago, Ill. Daughter Julie Heller, a special-education teacher, and her husband,

Rich, have one daughter, 7-year-old Katie, and live near Chicago.

Whether at home in Wheaton or Fort Myers, Murphy enjoys time with his paint brushes and canvases. Before starting, he always pulls on a knee-length canvas apron smeared with old paint, loops it around his waist, and snugly fastens the long ties.

"I've had it 40 years," he confesses. "It's an apron for feedmill operators that was given to dealers by Ful-O-Pep as a premium."

Evie has her own favorite apron — a frilly pink one made of gossamer fabric, given to her at a bridal shower. Evie, who frequently dons the apron when entertaining, retired in 1984 after teaching sixth grade in Glen Ellyn, Ill., for 21 years. Nodding toward her easy-going, soft-spoken husband, whom she calls "Murph" and sometimes "Champ," she says, "What you see is what you get. One time Murph went to the doctor, and his blood pressure was so low, the doctor told him, 'Man, I'm not sure you're alive.'"

In addition to Angus and Southwestern scenes, Murphy paints breathtaking portraits of Florida wildlife, especially birds. Scores of his many different works done in watercolor, oil, pastel and Conte pencil — both original and prints — hang in private and corporate collections around the world. In past years he also has received numerous awards in the annual Sanibel-Captiva Art League Show in southwest Florida.

Of all his many Angus paintings, Murphy has no favorites. But several have become famous, such as the bellowing bull standing among Longhorns and another of a calf mesmerized by a fluttering butterfly.

"That one is probably my most famous painting," he says of the calf painting. "It captured the imagination of so many people, especially women and children. I painted it in about 1960, and I needed something for the calf to focus on. Then I thought of a butterfly." Both originals hang on walls at the Association headquarters.

Despite his extraordinary abilities with a paint brush, Murphy remains a modest man who prefers to give others the credit.

"The real story is the exceptional people who I've had the good fortune to work for and with in the Angus Association," he says. "It was their enthusiasm and creative vision which inspired me to accomplish more than I thought I could."

Anyone who looks at a Frank Champion Murphy painting — be it Angus, Southwestern or wildlife — knows better.

