

The Abrahamsons share heritage and home with Sunnyslope Angus Farm's customers and friends.

ANGUS SHINE

on Minnesota's Sunny Slopes

BY L. J. BERG

"Sunnyslope. In an almost magical sense, time appears to have paused here since the turn of the century. Hand-crafted barns, hay sheds, corn cribs, a granary, a chicken house and a collection of equipment and livestock buildings are planted square with the world on the southern half of the farm yard. Constructed at the end of the nineteenth century, these red-painted edifices have withstood decades of storms, sun, snow and substantial use, yet they stand as firm as they did one-hundred years earlier and remain functional. The family manor that my great-grandfather built in 1892 presides over the northern half of the yard. Facing the manor is a stone bunk house; built in 1911, it provided a place to churn and cool butter and shelter the hired help. Surrounding these structures are lilac bushes that scent the air each spring; maple and walnut trees that provide shade in the summer; apple trees, plum trees and a wee vineyard that bear fruit in the fall; and a windbreak of aging pines, spruce and fir that supply protection from winter gales. The entire area is anchored at the bottom of a mighty slope, which rises at a dramatic incline, dominating the southern horizon. On this sun-washed slope, part of America's second-oldest herd of registered purebred black Angus cattle grazes quietly, unaffected by its sweeping view of the river valley."

— Excerpted from *Sunnyslope: A Norwegian Legacy* by Julie Abrahamson

Philip and Ruth Abrahamson, Sunnyslope Angus Farm, Lanesboro, Minn., know the importance of looking to the past in order to take a successful look toward the future. Philip's grandfather, Peter Abrahamson, founded Sunnyslope's herd of registered Angus cattle in the late 1800s. As the third generation to make his living on the farm, Philip carries on the rich tradition started by his forefathers.

The Sunnyslope Angus herd got its beginnings with Peter's 1898 purchase of an Angus bull, Duke of Lanesboro, from John Milne of Prosper, Minn. Milne was the first Minnesota importer of black Angus from Scotland, according to Julie Abrahamson, Peter and Ruth's oldest daughter. Sunnyslope's first registered Angus were sold to Ed Pickett, Carimona, Minn., in 1900.

Details such as these were preserved by Peter's series of personal farm journals and detailed cash books. Peter kept these records from the turn of the century until the end of his life in 1938. As Julie relates, "In these volumes every phase of Sunnyslope's



HISTORIC
Angus Herd

L.J. BERG PHOTOS



Third- and fourth-generation Angus breeders (from left), Philip, Julie, Ruth and Jessica Abrahamson celebrated Sunnyslope Angus Ranch's century in the Angus business at their June 1998 annual production sale.

development as a stock farm was recorded carefully.”

Julie has followed in her great-grandfather's footsteps. She carried the information contained in his careful notes a few steps farther, publishing a book detailing the history of the farm.

While visiting Norway in 1993, Julie started wondering about her own Norwegian pioneer ancestors and the struggles they endured while beginning a prosperous farming enterprise. She found the Norwegian landscape reminded her of the farm on which she had been raised.

Julie returned home and started an in-depth research project probing the legacy behind Sunnyslope. Her book, *Sunnyslope: A Norwegian Legacy*, rolled off the presses in the summer of 1998. Attendees to Sunnyslope's 21st annual production sale, June 1, 1998, emptied the first box of books and were begging for more.

■ Modern-day excellence

The Abrahamsons hosted an open house prior to that sale celebrating 100 years in the

registered Angus business. Visitors could stroll among the cheerful red buildings and white painted fences, viewing cattle offered for the following day's sale. The cattle displayed characteristics achieved after 38 years of performance testing.

“Philip and Sunnyslope have been in the purebred Angus business for a long time,” explains John Crouch, American Angus

Association director of performance programs. “Philip is sort of an icon in the Angus business, both in the state of Minnesota and in the country.

“He has developed a herd of cattle with the idea that he would concentrate on those

factors and traits that could improve performance and production on commercial beef operations,” Crouch continues. “I think he has done a wonderful job of that. He has been recognized as having one of the outstanding Angus herds in the country.”

Philip and Ruth like to calve a maximum of 145-150 females each year. They also raise corn, hay and oats and maintain pastureland as part of the 139-year-old farming operation.

They have been using artificial insemination (AI) since 1976. Philip says they AI almost all their heifers and cows. He credits the Sire Evaluation Program with accelerating the beef industry's ability to make changes.

Computer-assisted mating programs have helped both the progress of the industry and the success of the Abrahamsons' operation. They keep detailed records for customers.

Philip and Ruth have 20 years' worth of computerized records from which they can draw to meet customer needs for information. The late Bob DeBaca helped develop the record program used at Sunnyslope.

■ Service still No. 1

Customer service has been a strong foundation of Sunnyslope's reputation from the early days when visitors came by train to view the black cattle grazing on the green hillsides. Visitors would stay at the farm, build crates for their cattle purchases and put them on the train back to wherever they were going. Philip's grandfather, Peter, was even known to deliver cattle by sleigh.

Philip says he knows not every customer needs the same bull.

“We try to balance the needs identified by the beef industry as a whole with the needs of the individual customer,” he explains. Philip strives to develop animals that will meet both of those needs. Running through the changes the beef industry has undergone since the 1940s, Philip remembers various industry targets such as growth, calving ease, birth weight, milk production and carcass characteristics.

“Now the emphasis is on the fact that there's too much inconsistency in meat-eating quality,” he states. “We must have a total package of eating-quality characteristics from tenderness, juiciness and flavor to reduced backfat.”

Philip says today's customer studies the animal more closely than ever before. “The information available today is better and more complete than it has ever been,” he relates.

The information contained in the 1998 Sunnyslope sale book differed from previous years. Instead of taking one ultrasound scan on bulls, the Abrahamsons took seven scans. They were participating in an ultrasound research project being conducted by Iowa State University and the American Angus Association.

Fat thickness was measured in inches

“We try to balance the needs identified by the beef industry as a whole with the needs of the individual customer.”

— Philip Abrahamson

(in.) and served as an indicator of percent retail product. Therefore, as part of the project, two scans were taken between the 12th and 13th ribs, and one scan was taken between the hook and the pinbone. The average thickness of the two locations was published in the Sunnyslope sale book.

Rib fat averaged 0.25 in. and rump fat averaged 0.27 in. for all bulls. Since intramuscular fat, or marbling, is used to give beef a quality grade, it was measured by four scans taken between the 12th and 13th ribs; then the figures were averaged.

Since ribeye area is positively and highly correlated to percent retail product, two scans were taken between the 12th and 13th ribs, and the ribeyes were shown in square inches. All of the measurements were taken almost 1½ months prior to the sale and adjusted to 365 days of age.

When Philip started performance-testing his cattle in 1960, it was difficult to find other seedstock with information available on weaning weight and yearling weight.

“At that time the emphasis was almost exclusively on visual appraisal, and you could really make mistakes that took you backward very easily,” he remembers. “It wasn’t like today, when you can have 99% accuracy with EPDs (expected progeny differences).”

■ Custom matches

No matter who the customer is, Philip says he tries to keep their cow herd in mind while helping select the right bull.

“I think in most cases, people appreciate the fact we try to find out what type of animal would do the best job for them,” says Philip. He says his customers are still concerned with calving ease, so it is important to keep low and moderate birth weights in mind. Philip asks questions about what type of milking ability the customer’s cows have.

He also tries to find out the amount of time customers can spend with management of their beef enterprise. Is the farm a hobby that supplements the family income? How important is animal disposition to the customer? Does the customer need a really tame bull?

He says asking questions is an important part of a successful beef enterprise.

■ Lasting impact

Philip and Ruth say semen from the three best-known bulls produced on their farm has gone into herds throughout the United States.

SS Rito 8221 X01, sold in Sunnyslope’s 1981 production sale, made an impact on the Angus breed with semen and sons having been sold in most of the 50 states and Canada.

SS Rito 0715 OH3, born March 31, 1980, ranked anywhere from lowest to third-lowest birth weight EPD for the performance bulls in the Angus breed, says Philip. He signed a contract for SS Rito 0715 OH3’s semen with Genetic Horizons. Colorado State University produced OH3’s most famous son, CSU Bar Rito 1130. This bull sold to Aristocrat Angus Ranch, Platteville, Colo., and sired five purebred Angus steers that won the 1994 Great Western Beef Expo, according to Julie.

SS Traveler 6T6, who sold in the 1987 Sunnyslope sale to Robert and Larry Miller, sired the two top-selling bulls at the 1994 National Western Stock Show. OSU 6T6 Ultra, bred by Oklahoma State University, was the 1994 reserve champion Angus bull at the National Western. He later became the 1995 grand champion bull. Whitestone Traveler 2149, bred by Whitestone Farm, was the other top-selling bull. SS Traveler 6T6’s daughters milked well, and his progeny were well-balanced in their traits.

■ Time-tested advice

Philip’s advice to young people entering the Angus business is to watch what the industry is doing and saying.

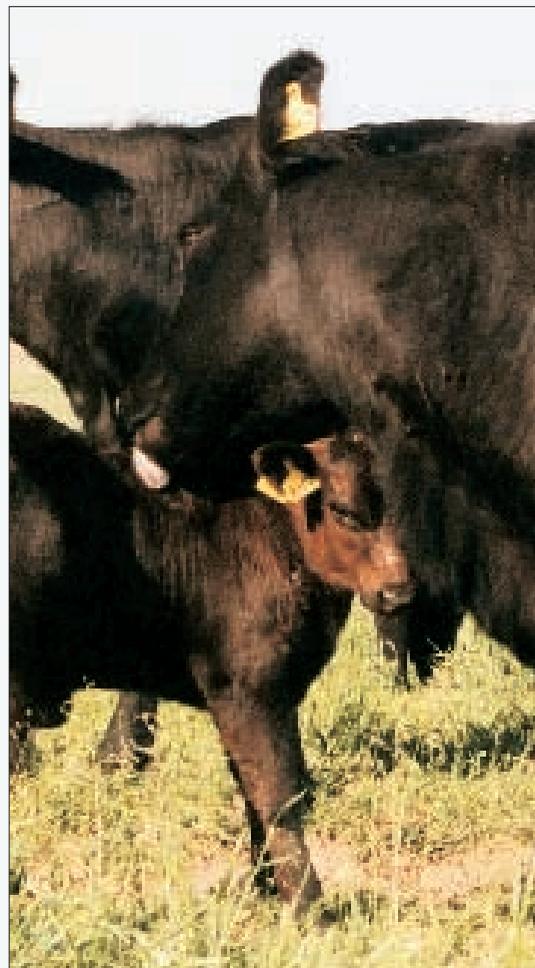
“Sometimes it’s hard to figure out who is right and who isn’t,” he cautions. “You have to separate the wheat from the chaff. Use common sense.”

He stresses the importance of developing a plan for the operation and sticking with it. But that doesn’t mean people should be afraid to make necessary modifications.

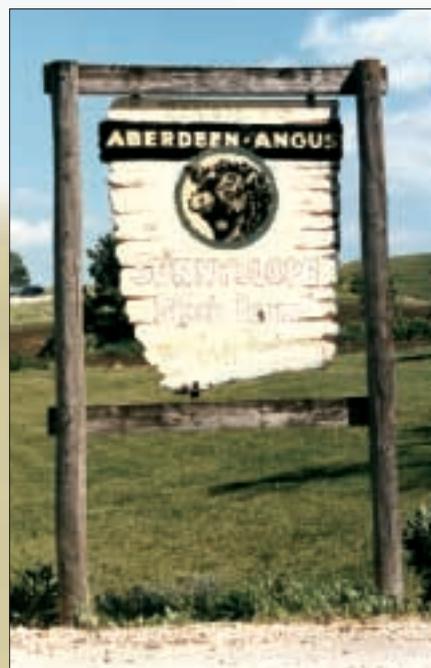
“We were committed to performance testing from the start, but we had to make some changes to stick with it,” he says.

“Trying to keep up with the times and produce the right product for customers has always been important,” Ruth adds. “If you don’t make critical changes and try to look into the future, you won’t keep your customers.”

Ruth says while Julie was researching the history of the farm, she discovered many familiar names. Subsequent generations of many of the same families that were coming to buy cattle in 1902 are still coming back to Sunnyslope today.



Philip Abrahamson talks to his customers about the amount of time they can spend with their beef enterprise. This helps him evaluate special needs, such as disposition.



Customer service has provided a strong foundation on which to build Sunnyslope’s reputation.

