



For Granted

► by **Eric Grant**, Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media manager

Monuments to rural America

Apart from the Cathedral of the Plains, which rises abruptly from the prairie, the landscape surrounding Victoria, Kan., is vast and featureless. No one knows what motivated George Grant, a Scottish silk merchant, to purchase 100,000 acres of land and to found this small town on the edge of the frontier.

Black hornless calves in Kansas

But there is little doubt that he had strong powers of persuasion. He convinced 38 of his Scottish neighbors to join him in America, telling them of boundless, fertile lands, tall grass and rich soil.

Together they carried into the Old West an Old World passion for farming and raising livestock. They embraced the mythology of Manifest Destiny, that the push westward was God's will, that virgin lands should fall under the plow. And they brought with them four Aberdeen Angus bulls, which Grant turned out with the vast herds of Longhorn cattle that roamed the prairie nearby.

At first, I'm certain, the cowboys chuckled at the sight of the strange, black-hided and hornless creatures. Kansas had anchored the northern valleys of the great cattle drives from Texas, so they were accustomed to spotted cattle with horns.

A year later, when those black, hornless calves weighed 100 pounds (lb.) more than their Longhorn counterparts, the laughing stopped.

For the most part, the Scots failed to achieve their dreams. Their settlement, like so many settlements in the West, shriveled in the dry wind and died.

Apart from Grant, who died in 1878 and was buried in Victoria, the Scots returned to their home across the Atlantic.

They had endured the worst of what America had to offer — isolation, drought and danger — and washed their hands of it. The hopes and dreams were gone.

Fitting tributes to change

German settlers, who had emigrated from the Russian steppe, moved into the open

spaces once occupied by the Scots. They were accustomed to big country farming and arid lands, and they found a good living here.

In 1911, thankful for three decades of prosperity, they erected the cathedral that still draws international attention today.

As it turned out, both the church and the little-known breed of cattle from Victoria became fitting tributes to the changes that swept across North America in the late 1800s and the early 1900s.

The church brought order and faith and comfort to people who had crossed oceans of water and grass to arrive here. It gave them a direct link to their past, a connection to the lives they'd left behind, yet nurtured their dreams of the future and defined what they could become.

Angus brought economic viability to people teetering on the edge of destruction, allowing them a century later to produce the highest-quality products possible for marketplaces not just across America, but around the world.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KANSAS GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

It's easy to confuse triumph with disaster. And while it was not a complete calamity that forced the Scots to abandon their dreams, I'm certain they never fully recovered from it after returning home. The scars of Victoria ran deep.

Yet the seed they planted in America — black cattle bred for raising beef — spread like wildfire across the continent.

Iowa feedlots filled up with black calves. Livestock markets in Chicago, Ill.; Kansas City, Mo.; and Saint Joseph, Mo., bustled with black cattle. Pastures across the Midwest burgeoned with black cows and calves.

Within a few decades, the breed had moved from being a joke to being the standard for excellence. Both ranchers and American consumers defined quality when they uttered the word "Angus."

Like the old cathedral in Victoria, the idea of Angus still resonates in isolated places across the continent. It's strange, sometimes, that ideas and movements can begin in such unexpected places.

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Editor's Note: "For Granted" is a monthly column written for the Angus Journal by Angus Productions Inc. Creative Media Manager Eric Grant. The column focuses on marketing beef, the beef industry and seedstock in particular — aspects of the business that are often taken for granted as day-to-day tasks take center stage.