

Century-old Thomas-Criswell Angus preserves family heritage on their central Missouri farm.

Story & photos by **Jena McReil**, digital editor



Evelyn Thomas often feels called to the north pasture of her family’s land.

She walks to a grove of trees along the fenceline and finds a quiet spot where she can sit and listen. When you are still, she says, there’s much the land can tell you. Each stretch of fence, gate post or faded trail tells a story of times gone by.

These silent moments welcome echoes of the past, as Evelyn recounts the family’s history on the nearly 200-year-old farm.

She remembers her father, a jovial character with a deep love for raising Angus cattle. She remembers her grandfather, who would walk the rural gravel roads with her, kicking rocks and telling stories. She remembers stories of her great-grandfather, a Civil War veteran who became a member of the American Aberdeen-Angus Breeders’ Association in 1916, and set in motion a family tradition now a century in the making.

“It’s amazing that members of the Criswell Family have been able to retain ownership of the entire farm for so long,” Evelyn said. “Every once in awhile,

you sit and think about that, and it makes you feel really humble.”

Beneath the canopy of trees, she also thinks of her son, Matt Thomas, the sixth generation on the farm and the fifth to raise registered-Angus cattle. He and his wife, Amy, live on the original home place where his great-, great-, great-grandfather settled in 1828. Since that time, cattle have dotted the pastures of the central Missouri hill country, just north of the Missouri River.

“The cattle have always been a big part of our family,” Evelyn said. “Daddy just lived and breathed the cattle, kind of like my son Matt does. We’re trying to carry on the tradition.”

Thomas-Criswell Angus was presented with the American Angus Association’s Century Award during the 2016 Angus Convention in Indianapolis, Ind. They are the first recipients of the award from the state of Missouri. With great pride, Matt accepted the award on his family’s behalf and shared the rich history of their Angus legacy.

“This is not our award, this

is my granddad’s award,” Matt said. “Not only him, but it’s also his granddad’s before him. It’s a way to honor where we came from, and, hopefully, the farm will continue to be here for a long time.”

A glimpse into the past

In gentle motion, Evelyn places a worn banker’s box on the island in Matt’s kitchen.

She opens the lid, unlocking the treasure chest, and years of family history, photos and mementos are uncovered. She slowly takes out each piece, shares a story and sets it out on display. Dutifully named the family’s historian, her eyes begin to light up and emotion fills her face with each heirloom.

“My dad was big on family history,” Evelyn said. “We try and keep those stories alive even today. I know I have impressed on my boys how important our history is, and I hope they’ve paid attention.”

A faded black-and-white photograph reveals a tall, slender man with a rugged, white beard. Dressed in a sharp suit from the 1940s is James Alexander, or J.A., Criswell. Evelyn’s great-grandfather J.A. lived his entire life on the family farm. His only trip away

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was at 14 years old, when he left home to join the Confederate Army.

Serving as a soldier in one of the nation's most hostile and divisive wars, J.A. was captured and sent to a Union prison in Saint Louis. The time the young man spent there is what likely saved his life. He was the last surviving Civil War veteran in Callaway County, Mo., and died at 95 years old.

Within Evelyn's box is an ornate membership document, dated March 21, 1916, from the American Aberdeen-Angus Breeders' Association titled to J.A. Criswell & Sons.

"From all the stories that I've heard from family and from neighbors, James Alexander was a great man. Everyone in the community called him Uncle Zan," said Evelyn, as she placed the certificate back among the family's treasures. "I never got to meet him, and really wish I had gotten to know him."

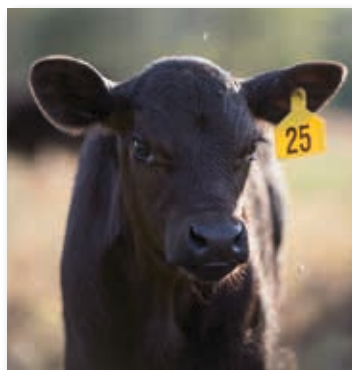
Another layer of the box reveals an old newspaper clipping featuring Russell Criswell, Evelyn's dad, standing in his garden, wearing dark overalls and a flat-billed cap. It was early spring, and he'd just started planting potatoes beneath the freshly tilled earth.

Evelyn says he adored the garden, and caring for the produce was a family affair. Russell was known to load up his truck with vegetables and fruit, and deliver it to nearby Fulton, Mo. — not to sell, but to give away. That was his character, Evelyn said, and Russell always had a story to share. At a young age, her father instilled a love of cattle in Evelyn.

"I was always a tomboy," Evelyn said. "I spent most of my time outside, and my Dad and I



► Amy and Matt Thomas are often accompanied by Evelyn and Keith Thomas while checking cows.



►The curious calf, TCA Centennial Design, was named in honor of the family's century Angus herd.

spent a lot of time together. We would go to the state fair and spend two or three days, just the two of us, and that was pretty special."

As a young girl in the 1950s-1960s, Evelyn was involved in 4-H and showed cattle at local and district fairs — always Angus cattle, of course. Her dad wouldn't have it any other way. Russell was a devoted Angus breeder who was proud of the family's multi-generation Angus herd. He believed the breed was well-suited for their environment and would work toward genetic improvement with each calf crop.

"There are other good cattle, I know that, but there's just something special about Angus, and I think it's because of my history with them," Evelyn said. "Any time there's a comment about bringing another breed on, I think, 'Oh gee, there's a Criswell in Heaven who would not like that!'"

A love for Angus

A common sight at Thomas-Criswell Angus is the family checking cows together.

Evelyn and Matt discuss how new genetics are performing, and make their picks for the next set of standout calves. Matt's older brother, Clint, is also involved on the farm, and will visit to lend a helping hand from time to time.

With about 20 mama cows, they know all the animals by name.

"I really enjoy looking at the cattle," Matt said. "I love to keep track of the different generations, and spending time with them so I can see their different personalities and individual strengths."

When walking through the herd, the cattle themselves represent how much things have

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►While generations may have passed, the Angus breed remains an anchor for Thomas-Criswell family history.



► The Thomas-Criswell herd is home to about 20 cows, and they welcome new calves each fall.



changed over the generations. From solely phenotypic evaluation to performance data and today's genomic technology, the modern era of cattle breeding represents more rapid genetic progress than ever before.

They rely on the GeneSeek GGPLD test to provide a precise look into the genetics of each animal. With genomic profiles on nearly the entire herd, they are able to improve quality at an unprecedented pace.

Matt says they focus on raising replacement heifers with strong maternal characteristics, which can improve genetic quality with each generation. They started incorporating artificial insemination (AI) about five years ago, and focus on the Association's dollar weaning (\$W) index when evaluating potential sires.

"I think the way the cattle business is going, we're all going to have to raise a lot better cattle to compete," Matt said. "Being a small herd, it's even harder, but people can come to us and know that they're getting quality."

About 125 acres of the original farm is used to manage registered cattle under the

Thomas-Criswell Angus herd. Evelyn's brother, Tom Criswell, and sister, Louise Trammell, split the remaining 375 acres and each manage a commercial Angus herd. They all live on the farm and appreciate the joys of living among history on the land.

"What I enjoy most about Angus cattle is the connection I have with my granddad. A lot of times I can feel my granddad walking with me when I'm checking cows," Matt said. "I think he'd be proud of us."

Carrying on

Evelyn and her husband, Keith, live a stone's throw away from Matt and Amy's house, and they'll often gather on the back deck to watch the cattle graze.

Matt keeps a telescope handy so he can keep a close eye on the herd. The family discusses how calves are performing, the plan for the next AI sire or how cattle sales have been faring throughout the region.

Then sometimes, they're quiet.

They spend the final daylight hours similar to their ancestors before them — observing the cattle and soaking in beauty only nature can provide. With nearly 200 years on the same piece of land, and a century with registered-Angus cattle, memories of the past are alive at every step.

Inspired by the past, the family will continue their call to care for animals and the land, and preserving their heritage for generations to come.

"I especially enjoy sitting out here on the deck and watching the cattle," Evelyn said. "Because I can not only see the cattle, I can see my dad."

Constant reminders

When your family has spent more than a century in one location, relics can be found in even ordinary places.

"When Matt and Amy were building their house, they found what looked like a wedding ring in the dirt. Well, maybe that was my great-, great-grandmother's wedding ring," said Evelyn, while looping the ring in her hands.

During her visits to the wooded, back pasture of the farm, Evelyn spends time looking for rocks, a favorite pastime of her grandfather's, and remnants of another family artifact: clay pottery.

Her grandfather once sold an Angus cow to a neighbor who paid them in Caldwell Pottery, which was produced just down the road and commands high prices today.

Like most little boys, Evelyn's father, Russell, had a bit of an ornery streak, and one day, he lined up the pottery to use as target practice with his slingshot.

With a few quick pops, Russell shattered the beautiful vases and jars into hundreds of pieces — shards that are still found on the farm today.

"I used to tell him, 'You're the reason that's so expensive now! And I can't afford to buy any of it because you broke so much,'" Evelyn said.

While walking among the trees, she is on the lookout for another piece of the pottery. Most times, she'll find it.

A large heap of broken pieces sits beside the deck of Matt's house with the treasure they've found over the years. They like to think they're signs from Russell, as a reminder that he's watching over them.

"I love to spend an afternoon, even if it's all by myself, over there along the woods. It's a place where we find a lot of the pottery, but I like to find lots of rocks, too. I'll think, my grandpa, he kind of liked rocks, too, and I think, 'Okay, maybe grandpa skipped that rock.'"



► A treasured piece of family history, J.A. Criswell's American Aberdeen-Angus Breeders' Association membership certificate is dated March 21, 1916.

