

Women In Ag

For generations, women have been the hardworking talent behind many successful ranch operations and ag-related businesses and activities. As a tribute to all women in ag — this May, the month we celebrate Mother's Day — we salute the women who are making their marks in the industry.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Take a glance around agriculture and you'll notice that more and more women are at the helm of leadership roles in the industry. Ann Veneman is the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture; Interior Secretary Gale Norton oversees management of the nation's public lands; and Jan Lyons serves the industry as current president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA). Similarly, on the national, state and local levels, women are fulfilling important duties in agriculture daily — as a volunteer on a county ag committee, as a 4-H leader for youth, as a partner in a family farm or ranch, as an employee of an ag-related company, as a self-employed business person providing services to others in agriculture — the list of roles is endless.

Ask any one of these women why they do it, and you're sure to get the answer that it is because they love the people and the lifestyle that surround agriculture. To get a glimpse of women shaping today's ag industry, the *Angus Journal* visited with four women who experience agriculture every day.

thought if I wanted a more stable job, I should go into production agriculture," Smith says. "I love the work and enjoy the cows. Cattle are intelligent, forgiving animals."

Smith gained experience in her first job doing ET for dairy operations in California. Then in 1990, she and her husband, Jay, moved to north central Montana, near Harlem, where they took over his grandfather's commercial cattle ranch. Shortly thereafter, Smith started her own business, Milk River Genetics, to bring in extra income.

Today, the successful business employs two people in addition to Smith and houses several donor cows owned by Angus breeders across the United States.

Smith admits it has been a challenging career, but she seems to enjoy every minute of it. "The best and worst part of my job is the same challenge: making problem donor cows work. I enjoy the success when it works,

but the hardest part is fooling Mother Nature to have consistent results day in and day out," she says.

On the people side, Smith says being a woman in a male-dominated industry offers some challenges. "In the beginning, until colleagues get to know you, they assume you do the lab work instead of being the one out there flushing the cows. Some people also wait for you to prove yourself before they'll become a customer," she says.

But she adds, "Most people don't care if you are a woman or a man as long as you get the job done well." Smith says that as more women fulfill roles as university professors, ag specialists and veterinarians, she's noticed men becoming more accustomed to working with women in different ag-business roles.

Smith also believes she brings some special attributes to her job.

"I think women bring some empathy to the business to reduce stress on donor cows,"

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Kathy Creighton-Smith Harlem, Mont.

With nearly 14 years of experience running her own embryo transfer (ET) service, Kathy Creighton-Smith has made a successful living in agriculture.

Perhaps more impressive, she got her start without a ranch background. Instead, Smith, who graduated high school in Phoenix, Ariz., had a fondness for horses. That led her to Colorado State University (CSU), where she initially considered vet school. An internship in the animal reproduction lab spurred her interest in reproduction and ET, and she earned her bachelor's degree in microbiology.

From there she pursued a career in agriculture, but focused on ET with cattle instead of horses.

"The horse market seemed real volatile. I



► Kathy Creighton-Smith, Harlem, Mont., makes her mark in the beef industry with her ET service.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MILK RIVER GENETICS

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she says. “Women also tend to have good lab and organizational skills. It’s not a requirement to be physically strong to do this job. Today’s facilities are such that we simply have to be able to mentally outwit an animal, not physically outwork them.”

As the mother of two daughters, Savannah and Alana, Smith feels fortunate that she has been able to raise her family on a ranch. “My girls have been involved in the ranch and my business since they were

born,” she says. Now 11 and 9, the girls detect heat, check cows and help with other duties.

But Smith is hesitant to steer them toward a career in agriculture. She says, “It’s a double-edged sword; you like the lifestyle, but I know how hard it can be to make a living in ag.”

With some time before her girls have to make career choices of their own, Smith will continue to appreciate raising her family in a

ranch setting and reveling in the business she enjoys so much.

Additionally, Smith serves another unique role as the first female elected to serve on the Montana Angus Association board of directors. She assumed the three-year term in 2002 and is currently serving as treasurer. It, too, is a job she enjoys.

“I like being involved in the state association and trying to help,” she says.



Shelby Parker Venus, Texas

At just 23 years old, Shelby Parker is representative of future generations of women finding success in agriculture. A recent graduate from California State University–Chico (CSUC), Parker has already founded her own ultrasound business, InnerView Ultrasound, and is determined to carve her niche in the livestock industry.

Like many farm and ranch youth, Parker got her start in agriculture as an active 4-H and FFA member. She grew up near Orland, Calif., showing cattle and buying a heifer each year to build her own small Angus herd.

Because of her upbringing in the beef industry, Parker says she knew she always wanted to be involved in agriculture. While attaining her degree in ag business, Parker worked as a student intern in the CSUC Meats Lab. There she began to learn more about the meat industry and developed an interest in ultrasound and the opportunities it afforded the livestock industry.

“I kept researching ultrasound and just felt it had the potential to make a positive impact in the beef industry and the livestock industry as a whole,” Parker says.

By fall 2000, Parker had found her future career. She went to Iowa State University (ISU) for a weeklong training session to become a certified ultrasound technician, got a bank loan to purchase the necessary equipment, and then founded InnerView Ultrasound.

“I’ve always been an entrepreneurial type of person and wanted to run my own business,” Parker says of her decision. “My ultrasound business allows me to work with livestock and people, which is what I enjoy. I love the fact that I get to travel, make lasting relationships with people from around the country and see so many cattle every year.”

Of the challenges in starting and running



PHOTO COURTESY OF SHELBY PARKER

► “My ultrasound business allows me to work with livestock and people, which is what I enjoy. I love the fact that I get to travel, make lasting relationships with people from around the country and see so many cattle every year,” says Shelby Parker, Venus, Texas.

her business, Parker says the initial hurdle was the capital investment for the ultrasound equipment. While Parker is certain that this is the perfect career for her, she notes it is probably not meant for everyone. “I’m often on the road working for weeks at a time, which means lots of fast food and hotels. A 14- to 20-hour day is not uncommon during my busy seasons, and by no means is my job glamorous,” she says, jokingly.

Parker adds that the support of her parents, her younger brother Marty and the “extended family” within the industry has been especially meaningful to her business effort.

“In the early stages of establishing my business,” she says, “I was concerned that people would not take me seriously given the fact that I was a young woman trying to make a career in a predominantly male industry. Fortunately, I haven’t found that

to be true. I’ve found that people in this industry respect honest, hardworking, positive people who have a sincere interest in doing a good job for their customers. People from outside the ag industry are usually the ones who are surprised that a young, college-educated woman in her 20s would want to make a career out of working with cattle.”

In offering advice to other entrepreneurs, Parker says she believes there are endless job opportunities in ag and that the industry is typically accepting of new technology and ideas — whether they are from men or women.

“I think it takes a certain type of personality to take on the challenges of running your own business. Nevertheless,” she says, “I would strongly encourage young people to pursue their dreams and not let the risk of failure or rejection stand in the way.”



Ann Bell and Christy Page Good Hope and Winder, Ga.

This mother-daughter duo has contributed much to agriculture in their home state, as well as to the Angus breed on a national level.

Their commitment to ag stems from a small Angus operation in Georgia where Wayne and Ann Bell raised their two children with an appreciation for the beef industry. Although the Bells both had off-farm jobs for their primary income, the family was very involved in exhibiting Angus cattle on the state and national level.

Ann says, "I think it is very important that kids be involved in activities, whether it is playing ball, scouting, 4-H, FFA or whatever interests them. It keeps their minds occupied, keeps them out of trouble, and helps them develop mentally and socially."

She explains that when their children were little, she and Wayne worked full time on a cattle farm nearby and traveled extensively with that venture.

"Our kids were involved in Angus activities continuously, and, through the years, that has developed our kids into who they are today," she explains. "Working with cattle taught them patience, responsibility and the ability to get a job done. . . . They learned that you have to work hard to achieve what you want."

Daughter Christy amassed a long list of Angus accomplishments, including serving as the 1995 Miss American Angus; earning the 1997 National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) Outstanding Leadership Award; exhibiting the bred-and-owned grand champion heifer at the 1997 National Junior Angus Show (NJAS); and serving as the first NJAA summer intern in 1998.

Christy says, "There is no doubt I am the person I am today because of the positive influences agriculture has played in my life. Specifically, the cattle industry gives so many opportunities to young people, including leadership, responsibility and independence. Most importantly, agriculture plays a vital role in everyone's daily lives because of the food we eat."

Ann points out that no matter what career path one chooses, those lessons are invaluable. She says, "Our son, Brian, has a successful electrical company, and even though he is in a field outside agriculture, he can attribute much of his success to the skills he built through his Angus career."

Today, Ann and her husband continue to operate their small Angus herd where she oversees daily feeding and care of the animals, makes breeding decisions, and handles vaccinations, herd health and recordkeeping. The Bells also own and operate a small used car business in Athens, Ga., where Ann spends a great deal of time. Additionally, she stays involved with the beef industry by serving both the Georgia Angus Association (GAA) and the American Angus Auxiliary.

Now married, Christy; her husband, Phil; and her father-in-law manage a 125-head commercial cow-calf operation where they utilize Angus bulls. Christy works off the farm, but in a field she loves — agriculture. She serves as the communications/events coordinator for the Georgia Agribusiness Council, which works to keep state and national congressional representatives aware of the needs of agribusiness members throughout the state. The organization also hosts many activities that support state youth programs.

Because of her upbringing in agriculture, Christy finds her job even more rewarding. "I am involved in something on a daily basis

**"Specifically, the cattle industry gives so many opportunities to young people, including leadership, responsibility and independence."
—Christy Page**



PHOTO COURTESY OF CHRISTY PAGE

► Georgia Angus breeders Ann Bell (left) and Christy Page dedicate their time to being volunteers in the beef industry.

that is important to me and is important to the well-being of our state," she says.

Christy and Ann also continue to work together and serve the Angus industry each year as co-chairwomen of the Miss American Angus contest. Christy says, "This is a great opportunity for young women to compete in a challenging competition showcasing their speaking abilities, cattle knowledge and interview skills. Being Miss American Angus allows one young lady to be an annual ambassador for the world's largest beef cattle breed. She'll promote products

such as CAB® (*Certified Angus Beef*®) and the Angus junior program, as well as visit with young and old — from people who know nothing about the cattle industry to those who have been involved in it their whole lives."

Both of these women's enthusiasm for Angus is evident in their involvement with the GAA. Ann has been on the GAA board of directors since 1994, serving two terms as president. (She has the distinction of being the first elected female in the state to hold that position, and during her two terms, the vice-president and secretary-treasurer positions were filled by women as well.)

Christy has served as the state secretary-treasurer for several years, and sees it as a great opportunity to help make decisions that affect her state's breed association. She reports that three women, in addition to herself, serve on the board today, and says, "I think this shows that producers respect women in the cattle industry as they have been elected into leadership positions."

Ann adds, "The presence of women in agricultural positions in Georgia has become more visible in the last few years. A woman has served as the state cattlemen's association president and Carolyn Gazda, regional manager David Gazda's wife, now serves as president of her local cattlemen's association."

Looking ahead, Christy sees more opportunities to come for women in agriculture. "Women in leadership roles in agriculture continue to make sound decisions to benefit agriculture. I admire women who have taken an active role in this industry that at one time was predominantly influenced by men. Whether a woman's role in agriculture is as a volunteer or as an employee for an agricultural company, women's involvement will continue to help make this industry better."

For Ann, the years ahead are about grandchildren. She says, "We now have three grandchildren, and I look forward to the years ahead and their involvement in agriculture and the Angus industry."

