

► Cheryl Oxley has some fun with her two favorite (and only) granddaughters.



The Word's Out

API veteran Cheryl Oxley retires after 31 years.

Story & photos by *Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

Seated behind her desk, Cheryl Oxley goes over a list she's penciled on a legal pad, then glances at her watch. Nearly 9 a.m. Right on cue, several Angus Productions Inc. (API) staff members have already congregated in the central office area just beyond her open door. Some sit on chairs or the floor, while others stand by desks and filing cabinets. With her hand-tooled leather folder in hand, a gift from API staff, Oxley joins them. Leaning against a table, she starts the session with an announcement.

"I'd like to congratulate LaVera Spire. She paged her first issue all by herself yesterday, then we did a high-five!" After everyone's

done clapping, Oxley, her right hand poised to take notes, asks for updates from around the room.

Welcome to another weekly production meeting, a Tuesday morning tradition at API in Saint Joseph, Mo. For more than 15 years, Oxley's gathered the API staff to confirm schedules and to share news (business and personal), kudos sent via cards and e-mail, and some humor. This April 6th meeting, however, marks one of her last. After nearly 31 years with API and 350 *Angus Journals*, Oxley passed her reins as advertising/production manager to Spire and retired April 30.

"This has been a good career for me," she later reflects at her desk. "Especially since I'm an organized person." She grins sheepishly. "Some of my organizational traits are a little excessive, so I have to rein myself in. But it's worked out great for this job."

Farming background

The oldest of four children, Oxley grew up on a five-acre parcel in Lee's Summit, Mo., where the family tended a milk cow, a few hogs and a vegetable garden. For a living, her father installed furnaces and did sheet-metal work. Her mother taught kindergarten.

"They had a strong work ethic, so we

"There's no one better in terms of service to Association members. In fact, she inspired our new annual Spirit of Service Award, which will honor one employee who has exemplified service to our members. Cheryl is our 2010, and very first, recipient."

— Kelli Armbruster, marketing and public relations assistant, Angus Foundation

learned by their example,” Oxley remembers. “My mother especially influenced me, so I decided I’d be a teacher, too.”

At Southwest Baptist College in Bolivar, Mo., Oxley at first worked toward an elementary education degree.

“Until I got into the classes on cut-outs and bulletin boards,” she says, making an “X” in the air with her two index fingers and grimacing. “I loved my lit classes, so I switched to an English major and got my teaching certificate.”

In 1969, Oxley graduated, married her first husband, and was hired as a high school English teacher in Raytown, Mo. Daughter Nancy was born in 1972. After a year off, she returned to teaching.

She entered the publishing business in 1976, accepting a position as assistant advertising manager for *The Packer*, a national newspaper in Kansas City, Mo., for the produce industry.

“I got a taste of publishing, advertising, and working with advertisers,” she says. “But I knew I wouldn’t be given any more responsibilities or advancement. Back then, it was mostly a man’s world.”

The following year, Oxley accepted a high school teaching post in Faucett, Mo., where she also served as yearbook sponsor. “That gave me more exposure to layout, production, photos and advertising,” she says. “But I knew in my heart that I wasn’t meant to be a teacher.”

Meanwhile, the American Angus Association purchased the *Aberdeen-Angus Journal* in November 1978 and moved the operation to Saint Joseph. The Association’s Board of Directors formed a for-profit entity called Angus Productions Inc., hiring a new staff to publish the magazine.



► Oxley conducts her last Tuesday morning API production meeting.

“A former colleague with *The Packer* told me that the *Journal* was looking for a typesetter,” Oxley recalls. “So I interviewed, and they hired me in May 1979. I was a good speller with good grammar skills, which were big pluses. So I set type and loved it!”

On the Angus path

Single, and with a daughter to support, Oxley practically lived in the Association’s basement, where staff members produced the *Journal*. “There wasn’t a time clock,” she says. “You worked ’til you got the job done. I’d

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“Cheryl gave me the chance to become who I am today when she hired me as a part-time paste-up artist in 1985. She helped me be better than I thought I could ever be. Plus, she’s been like family to me.”

— Mary Black, editorial artist, Angus Productions Inc.



► **Above:** Since becoming general manager of API in 1986, Terry Cotton has relied on Oxley to handle in-house responsibilities while he focused his efforts out of the office working Angus sales and selling the magazines’ advertising and catalog business.

► **Left:** Oxley works with advertising artist Monica Ford to ensure advertisers’ needs are met.

crank out copy all day on the big Compugraphic typesetting equipment. ... After school, I'd pick up Nancy and bring her back to the office. She'd make a tent with a blanket over a couple of desks, then play under there and sleep until I finished."

Dale Runnion, hired in 1981 to reorganize the *Journal*, remembers a "sassy redhead" in the office who was determined, smart and capable. In March 1982, he promoted her to production manager.

"Dale saw something in me, and he gave me a chance," Oxley says of her mentor. "He and his wife, June, took me through every facet of managing, producing and running a magazine. Dale inspired confidence in me, and he believed in me."

That trust in Oxley came easily. "If I had it to do over again, I'd still promote Cheryl as I did in 1982," Runnion says. "Even though she told me at the time, 'Dale, I've never been in a printing plant.' I told her, 'You will be!' She's been a real professional, whether it's been directing staff, working with breeders, or talking to staff, salespeople and printers."

Through the years, Oxley learned the printing business, inside and out.

"I visited all our printers," she says. "In Wisconsin, I toured a paper mill once, which helped me to understand paper and the

"Cheryl has amazing resilience. No matter what happens to her, she works at getting back to business and fun. She doesn't let anything keep her down. I admire that the most about Cheryl."

— Marg Dreesman, application developer, American Angus Association

different grades and weights that are available. I used to give demonstrations to the Board of Directors on literally how to put together a magazine, using perfect binding or saddle stitching. When you get good at something, you like to talk about it," Oxley grins, "a lot."

Teamwork

Terry Cotton, API's general manager, joined the *Journal* in December 1979 as a sales representative and regional manager. In September 1986, he assumed his present position and partnered with Oxley.

"It's been a unique relationship," he says. "She grew up on the print side, and I was out in the field. So that's how we've used our strengths. She stayed in-house, and I traveled a lot and visited with breeders. She was always strong enough to handle the management of personnel and the magazine as well."

"When I first started, we only had the magazine," he continues. "Not only did Cheryl take us through the transition from the old cut-and-paste way of doing business to desktop publishing, but she also got us moved into our new offices in 1998 and was instrumental in growing the *Angus Beef Bulletin*, Special Services and Web Services."

Large or small, Oxley always paid attention to details.

"If a breeder came in at deadline and wanted to change his ad because he had new data on a featured animal, Cheryl would accommodate him as much as she could," Cotton says. "She recognized the value an accurate ad had to a breeder."

Still, "no matter how late the last ad came into the office or the size of the publication, the magazine was always in the mailbox by the first of the month," Cotton stresses.

Bill Davis, president of the Association's Board of Directors, has worked with Oxley throughout her Angus career.

"She's been one of the absolute assets to API and the *Journal*," says Davis, who operates Rollin' Rock Angus in Sidney, Mont. "She always kept breeders and customers first, and she was always extremely knowledgeable and genial."

Beyond API

In the early 1980s, Runnion encouraged Oxley to represent the *Angus Journal* in the Livestock Publications Council (LPC), an international organization that serves the livestock communications industry. She quickly got involved. Throughout her years of LPC membership, Oxley served as a director, secretary-treasurer, second and first vice president and, finally, president in 1996. In 2003, she was inducted into the LPC Hall of Fame. Of the 23 honorees, only three are women.

Oxley also developed a mentoring program, which linked LPC members with college journalism students interested in the ag communications field. In 1996, the Agricultural Communicators of Tomorrow (ACT) named her its Honored Professional.

"When I graduated from Kansas State in 1998, I interviewed with the *Angus Journal*,"



▶ Oxley is retiring to focus time on family, which includes (clockwise, from left) son-in-law Carl Jennings, daughter Nancy and husband John, as well as granddaughters Emily and Erin.

The print salesman who stayed

The magazine and marketing business requires printing. Lots of printing. For years, Oxley Printing Inc. in Saint Joseph worked closely with the American Angus Association. Like his father had done for decades, John Oxley stopped by the Angus offices often to take orders and shoot the bull.

"Salesmen tend to want to be your friend, so John and I would visit a lot," Cheryl recalls. "He'd been coming by at least a year before he asked me out. On our first date, we double-dated with friends. ... When I got home, Nancy asked me how everything went. 'This one's a keeper,' I told her, 'He can dance!'"

A few months later, unbeknownst to Cheryl, John dropped by the API office and sat down with Terry Cotton. "John was intent on not disrupting his company's strong business relationship with the Association," Cheryl explains. "He was prudent to the point where he asked Terry first if he could marry me!" Terry agreed.

With the green light to go, John then asked Cheryl if she thought marriage would be a good idea.

Six months after their first date, they were married in 1987.



says Lance Ziesch, a former protégé of Oxley's who is now a graphic artist with the *High Plains/Midwest Ag Journal*. "A few weeks later, Cheryl called with the news that I'd been hired as an editorial artist. I spent the next four years of my career there. Looking back, I learned a lot and grew a lot as a person — both professionally and personally — at the *Journal*. Cheryl was responsible for a good portion of that growth."

Shift in priorities

When a self-exam turned up a lump in one breast in May 2009, Oxley called her physician for an appointment. The lump turned out to be benign, but a mammogram located a malignant one.

"One day you're fine, and the next day you're sitting across from your doctor, and he tells you that you have breast cancer," Oxley recalls. "When that happens, your life literally switches gears. It was one of the key reasons I eventually decided I wanted to retire and spend more time with my family."

"I learned about cancer in a hurry," she continues. "On July 24, I had the tumor, four lymph nodes, which were later found to be

cancer-free, and the surrounding tissue removed. By September, I finished 21 radiation treatments. I'm a survivor. I was blessed. God was looking out for me."

Family night

It's nearly 6 o'clock, and Cheryl Oxley's slicing a loaf of French bread at her kitchen counter while husband John tends a pan of ground beef simmering on the stove. Lucy, the matron tabby, has made herself scarce, likely under a chair in the living room. Then, right on schedule, a back door to the garage opens and in rush two little girls, wearing hot pink T-shirts.

Cheryl's face lights up at the sight of Emily and Erin, her two favorite (and only) granddaughters. They've come with their parents, Nancy and Carl Jennings, for "Family Night," another Tuesday tradition, only this one happens at the Oxley house, complete with supper, chitchat and maybe a rousing round of Mexican Train dominoes.

After some big hugs, Emily hops onto a stool and digs into an appetizer of gooey Brie cheese. Erin goes for the grapes on the fruit plate.

"Let me know when you're all ready to eat," announces head cook John, who's

stirring spaghetti sauce into the meat. "I'm ready NOW!" Erin exclaims. John just smiles. He's easy-going that way.

As everyone digs into their salads, Cheryl suggests, "Let's play High-Low."

"Yes," Erin squeals. "You first!"

Cheryl wrinkles her forehead in thought. "Hmm, the high point of my day was having lunch out with three nice lady friends," she says. "What was your high point, Erin?"

Round the table, the game goes. Then some share a low point while John sets out ice cream and biscotti for dessert.

While the girls watch TV, Cheryl and Nancy go over Cheryl's day planner, where she's jotted appointments, John's bridge games, Sunday school classes she teaches, getaways with her sister. "I use hot pink ink for my granddaughters' events," she says of the neon-bright notations that far outnumber all the others.

"I guess you've heard what Nancy and my sister call me," Cheryl adds, flashing yet another of her impish grins. "Our Lady of Perpetual Organization. OLOPO for short."

"It's actually one name I don't mind being called."

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"Cheryl took over advertising at API about the same time I went to work for Select Sires in advertising. Over the years, her guidance helped me get several new things off the ground. She learned early on that I would always question costs, and I learned that I wasn't going to change her mind. However, we always arrived at a decision we were both happy with."

— Brian House, beef program manager, Select Sires Inc.