



PHOTO BY SHEILIA STANNARD

People Person

Angus veteran Jim Shirley dedicates almost 25 years to members of the American Angus Association and their commercial customers.

Story by *Crystal Albers*

Step into Jim Shirley's office at the American Angus Association headquarters in Saint Joseph, Mo., and you can tell the man loves his job.

Not because his small office is decked in impressive memorabilia or expensive art or furniture — it's not. Rather, his affinity for the Angus breed and, more importantly, its people, can be found in his distinct voice and that always-jovial demeanor as he talks on the phone to an Angus breeder or Association regional manager (RM).

There, across from a few prized possessions, like the framed photo of his 4-month-old granddaughter and a handful of sentiments given to him by Angus friends, he's spent the last five years of his 24-year

career with the American Angus Association, doing what many say he does best — building relationships.

Shirley, who at the time of this article was beginning to prepare for his retirement from the Association, effective July 31, says his greatest enjoyment during his 19 years as an RM and five years as vice president of industry relations has come from meeting and interacting with both purebred and commercial cattlemen, industry contacts, RMs, and employees in the office.

"I've gotten the best of both worlds," he says. "I got to have the best job as a regional manager and work for the best beef cattle organization out there. I worked with people that I appreciate a lot — those people who

are in the production phase of animal agriculture. I've gotten to try new challenges from an office standpoint, too, helping breeders become successful in a different position."

Shirley's enthusiasm for the people in the industry is undeniable, says long-time friend and RM Chuck Grove. "Jim has a great ability to work with people from all different aspects of our business and to work with all of them with equal enthusiasm," says Grove, who has worked with Shirley throughout his career. "It didn't matter whether he was working with someone having a large bull sale or if he was working with a junior member. He had equal enthusiasm and got equal enjoyment out of that."

►Above: Jim Shirley says his greatest enjoyment during his career with the American Angus Association has come from meeting and interacting with the people of the industry — purebred breeders, commercial producers, industry contacts, RMs and Angus employees.

Natural-born communicator

Shirley grew up on a diversified farm in southwest Iowa, helping his family raise registered horned Hereford cattle, hogs and chickens, along with corn, soybeans, alfalfa and a few acres of oats. He immediately gravitated toward the cattle end of the business.

“When you were working with the cattle, you had more interaction with people than you did with farming,” Shirley recalls. “There was more excitement there.”

True products of the Great Depression, his conservative parents raised Shirley and his two sisters to understand the value of hard work and the importance of education. Shirley earned his bachelor’s degree from Oklahoma State University and returned to his family’s Hamburg farm for a year before being drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968. By 1970 he had finished his stint in the Army, married his wife, Linda, and enrolled in graduate school at New Mexico State University (NMSU).

Shirley left NMSU a few months later to work as an area coordinator for the American Polled Hereford Association. After nine years there, he accepted a position at the American Shorthorn Association as its executive secretary, serving for three years. He then worked as an advertising salesman and events reporter for the *Farm and Ranch Guide*, based in North Dakota, before establishing his career at the American Angus Association Aug. 15, 1985.

Living in Brookings, S.D., with Linda and his two children, Matthew and Megan, Shirley served as the RM for South Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska and spent the majority of his time on the road, attending sales and Angus events throughout the region.

His natural abilities as a “people person” served Shirley well, and his timing was excellent. Angus was enjoying the beginning of a long, steady rise in popularity. Each year was better than the last, and there was no shortage of sales to attend. Luckily, that’s where he truly felt at home.

“I enjoyed those auctions. There was great interaction between buyer and seller,” he says. “On one side, the seller was essentially harvesting his crop for the year, and on the other side these other guys were trying to buy genetics that would be the future of their herds.”

Shirley quickly found himself between the two, serving as an Angus representative to both purebred breeders and commercial cattlemen.

“You were working for the person selling the cattle for that day, but yet, to do that job, you had to help the guy buying the cattle because they would ask your advice about a bull that would fit their needs. So not only



► Jim Shirley and his wife, Linda, are looking forward to time with family and friends as they move back to the area in which they grew up and the family homestead.

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were you working for the seller, you were also working for the buyer, trying to serve both people and making sure both people at the end of the day were happy with the sale and with the purchase,” he says.

In this way, Shirley met people in every facet of the cattle business, including Howard Hillman, a former Angus breeder from Sioux Falls, S.D., and past president of the American Angus Association Board of Directors.

“Jim worked honestly and was well-liked by not only Angus people, but by others in the industry,” Hillman says. “One of his strongest suits was the fact that he was effective no matter the situation. He was a real asset to the Association, there’s no question about that.”

Hillman says Shirley’s likeability was matched by a sense of fairness, good work ethic, well-rounded industry knowledge, and sincere dedication.

“He always stayed optimistic about not



► Shirley spent much of his time as an RM serving both breeders and commercial cattlemen at sales. “I enjoyed those auctions,” he says. “There was great interaction between buyer and seller.”

only the breed, but the industry as well, no matter what kind of times we went through.” Hillman notes. “That personality made him easy to get along with and easy to meet.”

It also allowed him to mesh well with all segments of the industry, adds John Crouch, former Association chief executive officer (CEO), who knew Shirley even before his Angus days. Crouch says Shirley always kept the commercial cattle industry in mind.

“Jim’s understanding of the commercial beef cattle industry and its importance was a tremendous aid to him and his job and a benefit to the purebred breeders in the area that he served,” Crouch said.

“He had the integrity and character to work within all kinds of situations, with all kinds of producers,” Crouch says. “He had a real talent that is really required before one can be successful as an RM.”

Lessons from the road

Shirley set high standards for working with breeders and, ultimately, their customers, says Bill Bowman, chief operating officer (COO) and former RM for the neighboring Kansas, Oklahoma and Colorado territory. “It was neat to watch his ability to make the guys having a sale that day feel like they were the most important people in the world, and their customers got the same feeling from him.”

As a fellow RM for the first seven out of his 17 years with the Association, Bowman says he looked to Shirley as a mentor.

“I grew to respect Jim a lot and got a lot of advice and council from him starting out,” he says.

The two developed a friendship amidst the demands of spring sale season and similarly hectic travel schedules. As a friend and mentor, Shirley offered the younger RM insight on how to interact with members and the people with whom he worked, as well as how to manage conflict. His previous

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experiences within the publication business and other breed associations also proved valuable.

“He became a father figure to a lot of us. There wasn’t that much difference in our age, but we looked to him from that standpoint as a real mentor,” Bowman says.

Besides serving as somewhat of an advisor to his fellow RMs, Shirley was busy helping educate a rapidly increasing number of cattlemen new to the Angus breed.

“As we grew, we attracted a lot of people to the breed, so a big challenge was getting everybody up to speed about what it took to be an Angus breeder — that level of work and level of commitment,” he says. “The Association did a good job of educating our members that performance worked, that EPDs (expected progeny differences) worked, and that if they combined that with their own knowledge of beef cattle production, they could make rapid advancements in their herds.”

And advance they did, Shirley says, thanks to Angus breeders’ more aggressive, and often competitive, mind-set toward improving their cattle.

“The Angus breed, by far and away, has the largest percentage of both AI (artificial insemination) and ET (embryo transfer), and that’s indicative of our people,” Shirley says. “Angus breeders seem to accept and adopt technology faster and are always wanting to improve their cattle. Look at ultrasound, for example.”

Today, breeders of all sizes offer good, high-quality Angus cattle because they adopted the technology and advancements offered by the breed, he adds.

“You can go anywhere now and find a lot of good Angus. . . . I hope that in some way the Association and RMs were a part of that, helping breeders to adopt the technology and to have the confidence in the Association that was helping them go down that path.”

Man of the people

In May 2004, Shirley’s own path led to a position as vice president of industry relations at the Association headquarters in Saint Joseph, Mo. After 19 years on the road as an RM, he says he was ready for new challenges and wanted to give someone else the opportunity to serve as an RM.

Bowman says Shirley’s switch to the office setting provided a good tie back to the regional managers. It also allowed him to use his people skills to build relationships on a larger scale.

Shirley oversaw administration of activities; junior activities; industry and member communications; and the RM team, and he helped foster the development of AngusSource,[®] the Association’s U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Process Verified Program (PVP).

“His assistance in developing and working with the AngusSource program had a tremendously positive influence on the Angus breed,” Crouch says.

Shirley worked well as a team player in the office, Bowman says, and he took projects seriously. However, Grove says, that seriousness never faded his likeable persona.

“He was a leader, but at the same time, he wasn’t someone who you felt like you were working for, but you were working with — something I think he learned from Dick Spader somewhat,” Grove says. “You don’t always have to be a dominant personality to be a really good leader, and Jim understood that. . . . He always had a great sense of fairness, and he wanted everyone to be treated alike. He enforced rules when it came to that, but he wanted to do it fairly and consistently.”

Linda Campbell, Activities Department administrative assistant, has worked closely with Shirley since 2004. She says his genuine character and unfaltering optimism have given Association employees a constant friend.

“I think he would do anything for anybody if he thought it would help them,” Campbell says. “His cheerfulness alone has made all of us here appreciate him. There’s a lot of people around here who will miss him.”

Living legacy

With his retirement, Shirley leaves a legacy of service and a sense of optimism for the people with whom he worked — breeders, commercial cattlemen, auction markets, RMs, staff members, industry contacts and others.

“Jim really left a legacy as a regional manager in the territory he covered,” Bowman says. “I still have had several comments, even as recent as the last few weeks, on how good a job and how much attention, service and marketing assistance he provided to those breeders in his territory.”

After so many years of service, however, Shirley says it is time to explore other opportunities near the family farm, allowing for less time in the office and more time with family, including his beloved granddaughter, Madalyn. He has high hopes for her future — and for Angus as well.

Shirley says he’s confident in both.

“Angus has a bright future,” he grins. “My goal has been for us to leave the breed in a position so that the next generation of breeders can enjoy the success that this generation has experienced.” The key to that, he says, is breeders’ ability to focus on — of course — the people side of the business. “Acceptance of genetics by our commercial industry is what drives this breed. If we provide genetics that allow the commercial cattleman to be profitable and provide services that give the cattle additional marketability, then I think we’ve accomplished what we set out to do.”



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