

An Angus



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Golden Anniversary

Northwest breeder Randy Kessler commemorates 50 years of Angus exhibition.

Story by **Kim Holt**; photos by **Rod Wesselman**

Randy Kessler remembers well Jan. 20, 1962 — the day his parents bought his first registered Angus heifer. Even at 9 years of age and a new 4-H member, he knew, “I always wanted a black one, from the get-go.”

From this humble start in the Angus business, Randy and his family have grown their Kessler Angus into the 300-head operation it is today. Randy’s passion for Angus cattle continues to help him persevere through life’s challenging twists and turns and, this past September, he reached a milestone.

Alongside friends and family members, including his children, Tierra, 19, Cheyenne, 16, and Cody, 12, he celebrated his 50th consecutive year of exhibiting Angus cattle at the Walla Walla Fair & Frontier Days. This fair is Washington state’s oldest, located some 15 miles from the family’s home in Umapine, Ore.

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► **Above:** Fairs have played a large role in the promotion of the Kessler program. In this 1973 photo, Randy Kessler shows the grand champion FFA bull at the Oregon State Fair. He had already been raising and showing Angus cattle for 11 years.



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The recognition by fair officials Sept. 1 “meant a lot” to Randy, he says. But what means even more is the leather banner commemorating his 50th, which was handmade and given to him by several of his close cattle friends, including Sharrie Copeland, who considers Randy a big brother.

As teenagers, Sharrie and Randy’s sister Jeannie took care of his cattle at fairs, including the one in Walla Walla, while he worked at his day job.

Sharrie assures, “Randy was thrilled” to be recognized with this award. “The 50th year was a big deal. It’s pretty hard to find anyone who has exhibited Angus cattle at

one show for 50 consecutive years.”

What’s even more significant is that Randy is an 11-year cancer survivor. “This was a milestone, because on his 40th year he had just finished his cancer treatment,” Sharrie explains.

Self-made success

Randy’s story is unique in that he’s a first-generation Angus breeder who built the Kessler’s purebred herd from his own means. In high school he added females to his Angus herd with loans co-signed by his parents. He had around 50 head when he graduated.

Throughout the years he continued to expand, always working out while managing cows on the side. He used county and state fairs and bigger shows to expose and promote his Angus program, and averaged seven fairs for many years.

He even met his late wife, Dawn, at a county fair in the Tri-Cities, Wash., in 1984.

When they were first married, Randy says he and Dawn would take 20-30 head of their own cattle, plus his father-in-law’s Simmentals and a neighbor’s Shorthorns to the Walla Walla Fair. The premium money they won was especially handy in those earlier years, he recalls.

The Kesslers worked hard at their purebred business, and sold 70 bulls a year private treaty in the 1980s. They began supplementing this sale method in 1991 with top consignments to regional Angus sales.

It was that same year they sold Kessler’s Rainman 002 for \$20,000 in the Inland Empire Angus Association Sale in Hermiston, Ore. The sale made the down payment on the couple’s new doublewide home.

Another consignment highlight was in 2006 when they sold an interest in Kessler’s Frontman R001, a son of Connealy Front Page 0228, for a record \$21,000 at the Cowman’s Classic All-Breed Bull Sale in Spokane, Wash.

Their private-treaty numbers continued to grow to where this couple was marketing 100 bulls from October through June. While time-consuming, Randy says he enjoyed it. “I like visiting one-on-one, and I do well that way. You learn your customers really well.”

The Kesslers courted a strong, loyal private-treaty customer base for some 20 years. While they had this marketing method down pat [see “The Art of Private Treaty,” June 2007 *Angus Journal*], the reality was they had too many bull customers who wanted first pick. And the time commitment was substantial.



► Randy Kessler was honored for exhibiting cattle for 50 consecutive years at the 2011 Walla Walla Fair & Frontier Days. He celebrates here with his children, Cheyenne, 16; Cody, 12; and Tierra, 19.



► Randy’s close cattle friends presented him with this 50th banner to recognize his achievement. They knew he was looking forward to this day. His May 14 Facebook post says it all: “1st Walla Walla Fair 1962 showed a registered Angus heifer, showed an Angus of mine every year, haven’t missed a year. See ya this year. I’m kinda like a little kid in a candy store, can’t wait.”



► **Above:** In the early years, Randy used county and state fairs and bigger shows to expose and promote his Angus program, and averaged seven fairs for many years. The family continues the tradition today.

► **Left:** The Kessler children like showing cattle, especially in the bred-and-owned division.

► **Below:** The Kessler family had a great 2011 Walla Walla Fair, with Cheyenne showing the grand champion market steer (a Kessler bull reject, says Randy), and winning overall FFA beef and FFA master showman; Cody showed the supreme champion open class bull and Randy the supreme champion open class heifer.



It was Dawn who finally persuaded Randy to hold their first production sale in February 2007. To cry their sale, they called on long-time friend and purebred auctioneer Butch Booker, Colfax, Wash.

Booker already had a relationship with Randy from selling Kessler cattle at regional consignment sales. He knew they raised quality cattle, but didn't realize the depth until that first sale.

"I'm not sure I've been more impressed with a group of bulls from end to end as I was the very first time I went to sell at Kesslers," he remarks.

He adds, "It's very evident on sale day that Randy's customers are very comfortable with him. They trust him to make recommendations on what a bull will do for them. It's evident that he cares about people and what they are going to get from him."

Every bull born between Jan. 1 and March 15 is in the Kessler's sale. And Randy personally delivers each one.

Rod Wesselman, American Angus Association regional manager, comments that Kessler Angus has a very loyal following of bull buyers. He says Randy had the genetic product and customer base to sell his bulls all on one day long before he took that step.

"He's worked at it a lot of years. He's self-made, in my eyes, from the fact he started the herd by himself," Wesselman says. "He's been extremely successful, averaging over \$3,000 each year he's had a sale. And he's progressed and gotten better each year."

Randy credits Dawn for playing a large role in the development of their family's

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reputation Angus outfit and sale success. She died last January, about one month before their fifth bull sale and four months shy of their 25th wedding anniversary.

“We made a great team,” he remarks. While Randy remembers faces, Dawn could recall names, and she made more than half of their bull sale calls.

“She was our salesman,” he says. “Dawn could sell an Eskimo snow.”

She knew the cow herd as well as Randy. “Whether it’d be culling or who to breed what cow to, they made decisions together,” Sharrie says. “They were partners and best friends.”

Cattle are common ground

Randy, Tierra, Cheyenne and Cody are carrying on the family’s livelihood and Angus legacy in their Kessler program today.

Wesselman shares that Randy has been innovative in utilizing artificial insemination (AI). “While he uses the most up-to-date genetics, he is quite a researcher and has a knack for finding other bulls that work good as outcrosses.” One of these is Connealy Front Page, Frontman’s sire.



►Randy, Tierra, Cheyenne and Cody are carrying on the family’s livelihood and Angus legacy in their Kessler program today. Here they participate in the champion heifer drive at the Walla Walla Fair.

On the bottom side, Frontman has five generations of Kessler dams in his pedigree, something of which this family is especially proud.

“You can go back in almost all my cows five, six, seven generations before you find something that isn’t Kessler Angus,” Randy relays.

“The neat thing is my kids, knowing that we don’t buy cattle much, like showing bred and owned and, in fact, they’ll whine if they have to show one of mine.”

They actively show in the Washington Junior Angus Association and at regional shows and, like many families, work to find that balance between shows and sports.

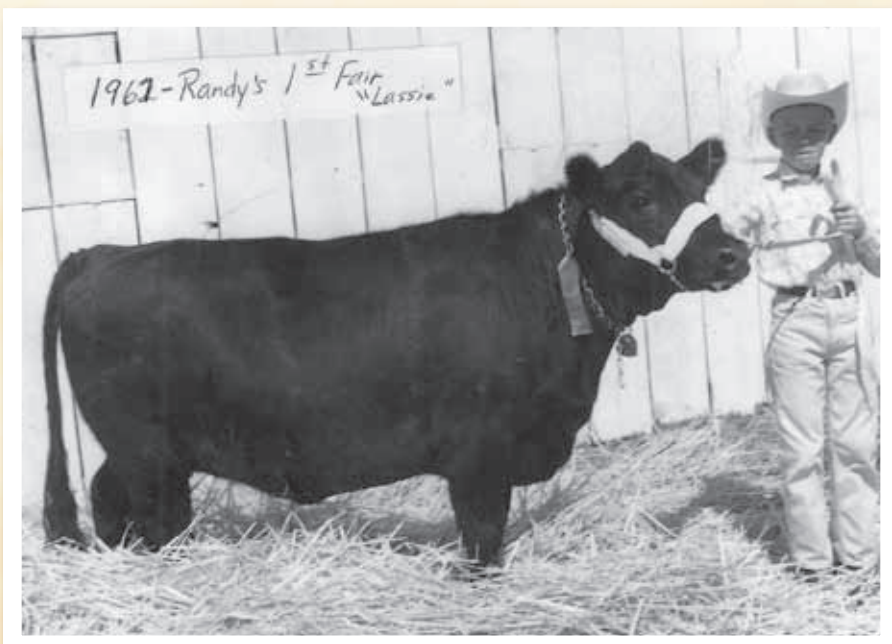
“They are awesome kids,” Randy says. “They know the cattle and like the cattle.” He says losing his wife and best friend has brought his family even closer, and he tries to involve his kids as much as he can in matters that pertain to their business.

In Dawn’s absence, the kids have helped bring their dad into the digital age with computer use, and he’s even learned how to post on their family’s Facebook page.

Tierra has registered all the sale bulls and is working on their next sale book while studying agriculture at Oregon State University. Cheyenne is a junior in high school and holds a passion for softball as did her mother. She hopes to attend college on a scholarship, while Cody is a seventh grader who enjoys the livestock.

“They’re just great people. They’d do anything for anybody,” Sharrie assures, adding that Randy’s 50th anniversary Angus recognition is “well-deserved.”

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►“Lassie” was Randy Kessler’s first Angus heifer and the one who started his family’s Angus legacy.