

# Rich History

After 48 years at the helm of the Association's finances, former CFO adjusts to life outside the office.

*Story & photos by Shelby Mettlen, assistant editor*



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### Early years

The first 18 years of Rich's career were rough ones for the Association, he points out. "We were under financial distress."

Some Continental breeds were becoming popular, and Angus registrations were declining. That didn't get what would become the world's largest beef breed association down.

"The Association never lost faith in performance records and breed improvement strategies that were in place or developing

over those years," Rich says. "It's still amazing to me that membership and the organization stayed focused on what would ultimately prove to be winning strategies through so many consecutive down years," he admits. "Through faith and leadership, the Association built the foundation on which it stands today."

### A hand to assist

Ten years after Rich arrived, Leota Wilson began her career as an accountant.

"I have tracked every investment since it was started," Leota says of the organization's investment portfolio. Rich maintained about a 40/60 ratio between fixed income and equities. "Any time we do anything with investments, he weighs the differences so he keeps the equality," she says. She's been tracking those transactions for 38 years.

"Things have grown," Leota says of the Association as a whole. It's provided growth, along with challenges and opportunities, in accounting.

"Would you believe, when I started, we did everything by hand?" she laughs. "To a point, it was more difficult. Then there's days when

“I just walked in and sat right out there, as a matter of fact,” Rich Wilson says, motioning toward the hallway outside his office. “The wall wasn’t there then,” he clarifies, just a table and chair, until they figured out an office space.

That was nearly half a century ago, and until Oct. 14 of this year, Wilson had a spacious office with a table and a couple of chairs. Outside that office was a plaque that read, “Richard Wilson, Chief Financial Officer.”

Wilson began his tenure with the American Angus Association Oct. 14, 1969. Forty-eight years later, he walked down the steps and out the door of the stately brick building on Frederick Ave. for the last time to begin his retirement.

Forty-eight tax seasons completed.

Forty-eight fiscal years come to an end.

Forty-eight years of presentations to the Board of Directors behind him.

Countless memories.

A native of Sheridan, Mo., Rich grew up

on a farm in Worth county. In 1966, he graduated from Northwest Missouri State University in Maryville, Mo., before taking a job with the state auditor in Des Moines, Iowa. From there the Missouri farm boy

moved to Ernst and Ernst, a certified public accounting (CPA) firm with offices in Des Moines.

His new position proved to involve more travel than he anticipated, so he began to look for opportunities closer to family in northwestern Missouri.

“Wanda and I wanted our children to know and share time with their grandparents,” he says.

Just 25 years old when he interviewed for his position at the American Angus Association, Rich admits, “I didn’t even know if I had a title,” he laughs. “The title was ‘comptroller,’” he recalls, describing it as a “glorified accounting-type job.”

From no title to CFO — in Rich’s words, “What a journey!”

**“His reputation for integrity was unquestioned by every Board before which he stood.”**

**— Paul Donnelly**

we say, “Bring back the books!”

Computers and developments in accounting systems have brought greater efficiency to the organization.

After nearly 40 years, the two share a last name (no relation, she points out), a door adjoining their offices, and a very strong friendship.

Leota describes Rich as “wonderful” and “the best boss you could ever have.”

### Forming friendships

“During my 24 years on the scene, Rich was the heart, the soul and the conscience of the

Association,” says Paul Donnelly, retired attorney with Stinson Leonard Street LLP in Kansas City, Mo. Donnelly represented the Association from 1991 to 2015.

Rich was a master, not only at presenting budgets, but at constructing presentations that served as the final take-away messages for Board members, Donnelly says.

“His reputation for integrity was unquestioned by every Board before which he stood,” Donnelly says. “He was a master of our budgets, and his Board presentations are something I will always remember — as I suspect every member of past Boards will, as well.”

“A lawyer is fortunate to come across a client like Rich Wilson once or twice in his or her career,” Donnelly says. “In my case, I had the great fortune to work for and with Rich closely for 24 years. His perspective on the Association was simply unique, honed by 48 years of working through every conceivable, difficult issue that a sophisticated business like the Association could confront. But what really set him off to me was his judgment. It was at a whole different level.”

“Rich is well-known for his integrity, and he’s well-known as someone very solid and fair,” says Sheri Spader, whose late husband, Dick, began his



► Coworkers for nearly 40 years, Rich Wilson and Leota Wilson share a department, a wall between their offices, a last name (no relation, Leota points out), and a strong friendship.

career path at Angus just two months prior to Rich on Aug. 7, 1969.

Both Rich and Dick were hired by then-executive vice president Lloyd Miller. Sheri says Miller’s wife, Mabel, taught Wanda and Sheri the importance of making the Association “feel more like a family.”

“Rich and Wanda have been great friends to our family and a great support since Dick passed away,” she says.

“They worked well together,” Sheri says of Rich and her late husband, “and through some hard times. There were some hard financial times when decisions needed to be made.”

The two worked well together and with other staff members, Sheri says.



► Wanda and Rich Wilson were honored for Rich’s 48 years of service to the Association during a celebration at the Albrecht-Kemper Museum of Art in Saint Joseph, Mo., in October. Inset: Great-grandson Aubyn, born in July, made an appearance at the celebration.

“Rich has been a servant leader,” she continues. “He understands that this is a grassroots membership organization and that, in my husband’s words, ‘We always need to remember who pays to turn the lights on in the building.’”

His servant leader mentality, she says, is why Rich has been successful in keeping the balance between the membership and the Association and its business.

“Rich understands the importance of an organization to be in alignment,” Sheri says.

“When an organization is in alignment with its membership, staff and Board, it will be very successful.”

### Moving forward

For the majority of the Association’s more than 100 years, that has held true. Yet the last 48 have seen significant changes.

“The issues people deal with have become more technical, more difficult, and there are more of them,” Rich observes. “The change has been the success we’ve had, the various programs we’ve developed along the way and the impact we’ve had on the Angus breed. The influence and the impact of the Association as a leader in the beef industry is really the thing that’s changed the most.”

“What has not changed is the great people I have been privileged to work with,” he says. “At the end of the day, it’s all about people and relationships.”

Just short of 14 years ago, Kenny Miller took a call from Rich that changed the course of the younger accountant’s career.

Prior to April 1, 2004, Miller worked for the accounting firm that completed the Association’s annual audit.

“Rich called me up and said, ‘Hey, how would you like to come work for us?’ I said, ‘Sounds like a great opportunity,’” Miller says.

Miller moved into Rich’s office Oct. 16,

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taking on the prestigious title of CFO.

“It’s odd, because everything leading up to my coming here pretty much matched Rich’s résumé exactly,” the Sedalia, Mo., native says. “He told me when he took my résumé home to his wife, Wanda, she said, ‘This is just like yours.’”

It’s true, essentially. Both completed their undergraduate degrees in accounting at Northwest Missouri State University before earning their master’s degrees there. Both served in the Missouri National Guard, and both worked in public accounting before taking positions with the American Angus Association.

Miller has grown with the Association, with guidance from Rich and a working relationship built on friendship and trust.

“In my opinion, it would be a challenge to find a better mentor, friend and person than Rich Wilson,” he says.

Though he’ll move on to retirement, the longtime friend of the Association will never be more than a phone call away, Miller says.

### Getting things done

“My involvement with the organization has been beyond the finances, which happened during the early years of my tenure,” Rich says. “Being a small organization there were many times when the job required me to wear several hats. . . . If it wasn’t on somebody else’s job description, it usually ended up back here.”

“When I started, the total assets for the American Angus Association were about \$3 million,” he continues. “Today we have added four subsidiary corporations with consolidated assets of about \$65 million.”

During his tenure, Rich has worked with six different CEOs, each bringing his own set of unique contributions and challenges. He even served as interim CEO. Things were certainly happening.

The 1970s brought the first National Sire Evaluation proposal, major legal challenges, staff reorganizations and the movement of the Association’s annual meeting to Louisville, Ky.

Between 1978 and 1980, the Association developed the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, formed the Angus Foundation and acquired the *Angus Journal*.

“The opportunities and the challenges that accompanied those acquisitions were plentiful and diverse,” Rich says.

The mid-1980s proved to be the turning point for Angus registrations. Bottoming out at 133,475 registrations in 1986, numbers have grown since. The 1990s saw the beginning of the diversification of the



► Sheri Spader (right) calls Rich and Wanda Wilson “great friends” and “great support” since the passing of her husband, Dick, in 2001. Rich and Dick began their careers at the American Angus Association just two months apart in 1969.

Association’s investment portfolio, cumulating to the major asset it is to the Association today.

So it has continued for the Association and its entities to the present day.

“I feel privileged to have been a part of Angus and to have experienced the challenges and successes of Team Angus,” he says.

### Change of plans

All those years ago, Rich admits he had no intention of staying at the American Angus Association for any length of time.

“I figured three years, at the most,” he says. He thought it would serve as more of a



► Former general manager of Angus Productions Inc. (API) and current vice president of sales Terry Cotton “tied up” former director of finance Rich Wilson for an ad campaign first published in August 1986. The September ad boasted API’s low-cost, high-quality sale books and brochures, reading, “Contact me, now, while I still have Rich convinced to see things my way.”

transition back to corporate America.

The years have flown by for both Rich and Wanda.

“Forty-eight years ago, we had a plan to come to Saint Joseph to work for the American Angus Association and to live in northwest Missouri so I could continue to look for a better job,” Rich says.

“God had a different plan,” Wanda says. “Angus was the better job. His plan was best.”

Daughter Lora Sondrol calls Saint Paul, Minn., home now and has two children of her own, Katie and Matt, with husband Randy. Son Troy is a father of five and lives in Lee’s Summit, Mo., with wife Jodi and daughter Bella, and two foreign exchange students, William Feng of China and Chris Chiang of South Korea. The couple also has four grown sons Chai, Corbin, Caleb and Noah. This July, Rich and Wanda were blessed with great-grandson Aubyn, and agree that they look forward to spending more time with family during his retirement.

“I’ll be lost,” Leota admits of Rich’s absence. “When you sit here for 38 years . . . you become friends. I know all his family, he knows all mine. We’ve gone through kids, grandkids.”

She’s happy for him, though.

“Oh, I am,” she says, smiling. “He’s a boss, he’s a friend, he’s very understanding. You just couldn’t ask for anybody better.”

### Much-needed R&R

Retirement plans?

“Everybody asks me that,” Rich says. He admits he doesn’t really have any hobbies. “I don’t play golf, I don’t fish, I don’t hunt, and I probably don’t have a great desire to take them up at this point in my life,” he quips. “I enjoy spending time with my family, attending my grandchildren’s activities and fellowship with many good friends.”

No travel is on the immediate horizon for the recent retiree. A trip to North Carolina to visit Billy Graham’s retreat, The Cove, and a trip to the Northeast to enjoy the fall colors will be in the couple’s future plans.

Rich and Wanda plan to attend the Angus Convention in November for recognition of Wilson’s extensive contribution to the Association.

Angus friends became like family, forming lifelong friendships, Wanda says. “We have been blessed.”

“It’ll be really different without Rich around here; I think everyone agrees,” Miller says. “Just the respect everyone has for him around here, I think that speaks volumes.”

“We’re fortunate that Rich stayed as long as he did,” Sheri says. “We needed him. He knew that.”

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