



Woodlawn Farm:

An Eye for Angus

Story & photos by **Barb Baylor Anderson**, field editor



▶**Above:** Woodlawn Farm genetics are still woven throughout Angus pedigrees. “We had a big influence,” Blanford Pierce says. “I would like to think we influenced the Angus industry by maintaining a high-quality standard of beef for consumers, a commitment to strong cow families, and having a reputation that we would always conduct business with a handshake and a good word.”



▶**Right:** Perhaps no herd has had as much influence as Woodlawn Farm. Blanford says if you wonder about the impact of Angus across America, look at the sire legends that came from Creston, Ill.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WOODLAWN FARM

Shortly after B.R. Pierce settled in northern Illinois in the mid-1800s, he traded in his Shorthorn cattle for Angus. He had seen his first black cattle at the Illinois State Fair, and said at the time, “they filled the eye.” Not unlike modern breeder philosophy, his belief was “if you like a breed, you can succeed with it.” Thus, the oldest Angus herd in the United States was created in 1881.

That same enthusiasm carried over into the next generation.

“Black and comely, smoothly and deeply fleshed, eminently adapted to Western Plains, thriving where others would lose weight, the entire absence of horns, and, above all, the superior quality of beef, led these cattle to command top prices in beef markets,” said B.R. in a letter to his son, Stanley.

“I hail the well-marbled meat in which fat alternates rhythmically with lean to make steak, roast, tenderloin, any cut you may choose, tender, juicy, delicious! It is these characteristics which give Aberdeen Angus the preference among beef cattle,” he stated at the time.

B.R. acknowledged packers were the meat experts of the country: “Since they are also the purchasers at the stockyards, it is they who must be pleased by the judges’ decision in the showing ... and must convince the

consumer he is getting the best possible product for his money.”

“The Angus carcass is so superior to anything else that it will remain tops for consumer demand,” says Blanford Pierce. “Having EPDs (expected progeny differences) available for carcass traits helps, but you need to balance that with maternal traits. You need correct, uniform and well-dispositioned cattle.”

Blanford is Stanley’s grandson, and the currently active Woodlawn Farm generation. Blanford’s father, L.B., also was active in the Angus business. While the herd was dispersed in 2005, Blanford and his wife, Joan, have found their way back into the business.

“It is a hobby now,” says Joan. “We missed everyone. All of our friends are cattle people. It was a good decision to get out, but also a good decision to stay involved with the people.”

Woodlawn Farm’s dispersion drew some 1,200 people and was the first \$1-million-plus sale recorded in the state of Illinois. “It was bittersweet,” adds Joan. “We were so used to seeing black cattle out the window. They were our seasonal clock.”



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Blanford and Joan don’t keep cattle on the farm today. They cash-rent all tillable ground to a tenant who is the great-grandson of the person who delivered some of the early cattle to Woodlawn from Canada. Blanford and Joan own cattle with John Kirchner,

JK Angus, in Mount Morris, Ill.; Steve and Julie French, Little Cedar Cattle Co., in Beaverton, Mich.; and Quintin Smith Family Angus in Lebanon, Tenn.

Wide-reaching, rich legacy

Perhaps no herd has had as much influence as Woodlawn Farm. Blanford says if you wonder about the impact of Angus across America, look at the sire legends that came from Creston, Ill. Several of the breed’s early bulls from Scotland and Canada were

purchased and utilized at Woodlawn.

“One of our early stock bulls in the 1890s was Wellington, which was the grand champion bull at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893,” he says.

“Wellington sired the dam of Advance, a steer that was grand champion over all breeds at the first International Live Stock Show in 1900. Advance was double-bred to Wellington. I like to say he was the start of *Certified Angus Beef*® [brand]. He was a well-muscled, compact steer.”

Other winners followed. Black Woodlawn was named 1902 International Live Stock Show senior champion — a bull that would go on to sire other international champion bulls and become one of the most sought-after sire bloodlines until Earl Marshall some 20 years later.

Eileenmere, Bandolier, Bell Boy and Blackcap Grandeur families all trace back to Black Woodlawn.

Stanley and then L.B. frequented the showing throughout the 1940s, which continued to affirm the value of Woodlawn Farm genetics. Blanford notes that often Woodlawn bulls would be walked to the railroad line from the farm so they could be shipped to breeders around the country.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Pierces began merchandising cattle through the National Western Stock Show in Denver. L.B. had a keen interest in “turning the West black,” as he felt Angus would perform well in that region of the country. Many of today’s established herds there got their first bulls from Woodlawn, which Blanford says pleased his father.

“Denver became an important show for my dad to meet his goals,” says Blanford. “We would ride the boxcar out there with the cattle, and we were successful. Woodlawn Farm exhibited and sold for 15 consecutive years the pen of bull champions beginning in the 1940s.”

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Tips for the long haul

Blanford Pierce has plenty of advice for beginning Angus breeders to stay in business, but boiling down all of his thoughts into a few crucial tips is tough. Here are some of his thoughts:

- Talk with long-time breeders and see what you can learn and apply on your farm.
- Find a niche. Do you prefer the competition of the showing? Breed for show cattle. Do you only have room for a few cows? Go into the purebred business, especially if you have a farm that is conducive to cow-calf pairs on permanent pasture.
- Invest in cow families. You can always get access to the bulls you want.
- Opportunities are out there to be successful in the Angus business. Expenses are always a challenge, but you can have a profitable herd if you work at it.
- Support the industry. Get involved with state associations or junior programs. Consider a donation to the Angus Foundation or volunteer to be a leader.

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Blanford remembers that L.B. preferred to vacation in the West every year to meet ranchers and sell bulls. He judged cattle coast to coast and was the first American to judge the Calgary bull sale.

Maintaining the lucrative tradition, Blanford spent time in Nebraska and Wyoming in the 1980s and 1990s.

"I didn't do anything too strategic," he says. "I just went to where the cows were, introduced myself to ranchers, got orders for bulls and then sent the bulls to central locations where producers could study them and make their choices. Eventually the reputation of our bulls traveled by word of mouth."

While Blanford says he was reluctant to chase the large-frame cattle fad of the 1970s, they had to breed bigger to compete. "We

used Wye bulls, getting some really extreme and competitive cattle," he says. "However, we came to realize having more moderate cattle was the path where we belonged, and we stayed there until the herd was dispersed in 2005."

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Editor's Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.



►Woodlawn Angus was so successful because they kept the consumer in mind.

Walk back in history

If you doubt the great history of or passion for the Angus breed, you only need to step into the Woodlawn Farm "museum." The barn where both Advance and Black Woodlawn were born and fitted has been refurbished to house Woodlawn memorabilia and other cattle mementoes.

Stepping into the barn, you see on display an antique ladder used by the family when traveling on boxcars so they could climb into the bunk to sleep and store feed above the animals. A wall is lined with photographs of the Pierce generations. Pins and buttons

worn by family members judging shows are preserved behind glass. Old showboxes, sale books, trophies, identification tags, championship photos and articles all can be appreciated within the space.

"Joan has been collecting our family's memorabilia, photos and awards in great detail to create this space. She spends a lot of time working in here to make it special," says Blanford.

