

NWSS Part 2:

# Growing a Presence in the West

*Part 2 of this series on the National Western Stock Show looks at the history of the internationally known livestock show.*



by **DAN GREEN**

It's a rare opportunity, to be able to look back over a span of years, and see the big picture. This great Angus event at the 2017 National Western Stock Show (NWSS) celebrating more than a century of Angus in the West allows us to do just that and gain great insight into the whole body of work — of what one year on top of another, one decade on top of another accomplishes.

They say hindsight is 20/20, but it also adds context, vision and appreciation for what our forefathers did.

From its founding in 1906 forward, getting the National Western off the ground wasn't always easy. It certainly didn't become the internationally known stock show that draws 650,000 fans each year overnight.

The late Willard Simms, NWSS general manager from 1955 to 1978, wrote the book *Ten Days Every January* to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the National Western in 1981. In it, he notes:

*"This story traces those meager beginnings in the hard life of a young Western livestock industry, and the struggles through the ensuing years to today's modern National Western Stock Show."*

*"It's about the pioneer leaders who built a livestock exposition from scratch. It's a tale of blown-down tents, impassable roads, cattle pulled out to trains through four-foot snow drifts and people who came to the show on horseback, horse-drawn carriages and street cars. Woven into the story are the threads of early-day livestock and exhibitors in the show and sales ring."*

*"It tells how determined, dedicated, independent pioneers battled forward through*

*blizzards, drought, economic panics, debts and wars, to be succeeded by equally persistent, devoted leaders who rode through financial disaster and ruinous livestock markets to maintain the Stock Show's original charter objectives as an educational institution for livestock improvement."*

Angus cattle and cattlemen were there, right from 1906 forward. The Angus breed and the National Western have a joint place together in growing from, and overcoming, the hard life of a young Western livestock industry, as recounted by Simms.

As I reflect on the history of the NWSS and the active involvement of the American Angus Association and its members in its purebred and commercial shows and sales — as well as all the spin-off hoopla around it — what is most impressive is the degree to which both

organizations adapted to the environment in which they were operating.

## A 'natural desert'

Any stock show, or any cattleman for that matter, adapts to the area where it operates and its constituents live, or it dies. There are plenty of carcasses lying around from old stock shows and herds that fell by the wayside, as they failed to adjust to their surroundings.

In the case of the Mountain and Plains states from which the National Western draws a large number of its participants, and where the participants operate their farms and ranches, you can look back through years of change in the type of cattle and how they were raised, in order to take maximum advantage of the climate, the land and the grass.

When there's enough mountain snow in the winter or rain in the spring and summer, there's irrigation water. Otherwise, it's basically dry land. On the High Plains, the scientists tell us they've about pumped out the Ogallala Aquifer. Drought in California and environmentalists redirecting what water there is have dried up a lot of agriculture there. You can only fool Mother Nature for so long. The West is a natural desert.

One grizzled old rancher said, "You take what the weather and the land will give you." In the case of the Mountain and Plains states, you have thousands of sections in a semi-arid climate and land that is good for growing highly nutritious grass. The growing season is too short and moisture too limited to support the kind of productive farming you see in the Midwest and South. There are crops raised where irrigation of some type is available, but certainly not in the volume typically found in the nation's more verdant farming areas.

Instead, vast expanses of prairie have neither rich enough soil nor reliable enough moisture to till in crops year in and year out, as they found out during the Dust Bowl years of the Great Depression, when they plowed up huge tracts of pasture land that literally dried up and blew away. It took decades to get them back in grass and grazing, where their highest and best use was raising livestock.

## Making it work

From an Angus and National Western perspective, this bit of economic reality played heavily into the kind of cattle, and the breeders who raised them, that took the best advantage and could be of the most service to the burgeoning Western livestock industry. Both Angus cattle and the National Western played leading roles, in synergy, to cause the vitality we see today on ranches and livestock markets across the West.

As the demands of the Western range became ever more apparent to Angus breeders across the United States over the years, they bred the hardy, sturdy kind of cattle that could survive and thrive in that environment. It was in the show barns at the National Western that Eastern, Midwestern and Southeastern cattlemen got acquainted with Western producers, and each shared their mutual needs. The very essence of the free-enterprise system

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took it from there, as profit comes from finding a need and filling it. Angus breeders did that.

Operating in parallel and in tandem, the American Angus Association was developing the performance testing and data to document what kind of cattle producers had, and what they had accomplished, to backstop and undergird what Angus breeders had achieved. Such a storehouse of data also points to and leads the way toward progress still to be realized.

The National Western Stock Show provided the forum and backdrop where this could occur. It really was almost a force of nature that couldn't have brought together a system that works any other way. It was around the comfortable, informal discussions at show boxes and around showrings that a whole industry evolved and grew.

### The 'Hill' and the 'Yards'

Almost unique among stock shows, the National Western set up dual cattle divisions, jocularly called the "Hill" and the "Yards," to bring in and serve the needs of both purebred and commercial cattlemen. The show barns on the Hill are where the purebred seedstock are shown and sold. The open-air pens in the stockyards are loaded with bulls and females — also purebred, but aimed to suit commercial producers. These pens in the Yards are where Western range operators, who frequently needed quality bulls and females in quantity, could come to Denver and find them in one place.

On the Hill, the showing in the historic, 1911-vintage stadium held the finest purebred seedstock the Angus breed could produce in a given year, placed by the nation's top cattle judges. The best registered Angus breeders came to town to show the best cattle they had and then share them in high-dollar auctions afterward, infusing the latest new and improved genetics into Angus and commercial herds across the continent, and particularly in the Western United States.

The annual Angus bull sale at the National Western is always a highlight of the entire event. In the past, Stock Show officials would bring down a giant curtain from the ceiling of the stadium to cordon off the western end of the arena into an auction pavilion. A stage was rolled in against the curtain to form an auction block, with the dirt arena floor forming the gates and auction arena, where each lot was brought before a packed house in the bowl of the stadium's west-end seats.

In more recent years the sale has attracted standing-room-only crowds in the Beef Palace Auction Arena. A top, nationally known purebred auctioneer has always been brought in to conduct the sale. Ringmen from the *Angus Journal* and other livestock publications are well-dressed at ringside, ready to take bids from the crowd, and help the auctioneer conduct a memorable and orderly sale.

Of course it is hoped that the consignors profit from the cattle that are fortunate enough to be selected for the sale offering, but the best result of this glittering annual event is to spread top Angus genetics to herds across the country, and even the world.

In the old days of the central big city stockyards, ranchers were used to coming to Denver to buy and sell cattle each year, so in a sense, it was only natural that the National Western would spring up and grow. What was less natural, and unique among stock shows, was that as the big city stockyards declined in influence and eventually closed down, only in Denver did the livestock show take over the stockyards and see its growth continue unabated.

Almost unique to the National Western, the Yards in their heyday burst at the seams with Angus bulls and females that were judged in pens and carloads, stressing the traits most crucial to Western range conditions and the depth in herds producing them. Most were sold private treaty in the Yards, priced so commercial cattlemen could afford them. Most importantly, cattle in the yards showed Western producers where they could go to get more, as multi-section operators on Western ranges needed quality bulls and females in volume. Only in Denver could they find that.

Cattle marketing has changed as the years have rolled on. The Yards have become more of an exhibit than an actual marketplace, as the biggest numbers don't come anymore. Commercial cattlemen can still see the pens and carloads as they're judged and kick the tires, so to speak. The rising popularity of on-ranch production sales, video and online auctions, and direct trade have made it more feasible for ranchers to keep and sell the big numbers of cattle at home.

### Changing times

Of course, the ugly head of economics has entered the picture, too. In the old days of the big traveling show strings, gas was less than \$1 per gallon, good motel rooms were well under \$50 per night, and the number of hands it took to handle that

many cattle in the "Big City" cost a lot less.

The yards are still the big store for commercial cattlemen, however, as they can see dozens of herds exhibited in one place and compare one to another without extensive travel ranch-to-ranch, state-to-state. It's of the same value to the exhibitors who bring their cattle to Denver because they believe their cattle compare favorably to the best in the country, and here's the place to show it.

At commercial video sales and in local auction markets, if you go there, you repeatedly hear the cry from the auction block, "and in this lot are cattle from a reputation herd." That means something, and the reputation part comes right out of the National Western Yards in Denver, followed up by how well the cattle perform in actual commercial herds and the feedlot — which is easy enough to find out in the extensive data kept by the American Angus Association.

That's a big part of how Angus seedstock and Angus crossbreds have established dominance in commercial herds across the country. They work. That's why the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand has taken off in the consumer marketplace. Of course this Angus division has brought great marketing expertise to the wholesale and retail meat markets, but it would all be for naught without the ready availability of the quality Angus cattle behind it all.

This is where the vision of National Western leadership like President Paul Andrews, Board Chairman Pat Grant, and the executive committee that they led, was committed to ensuring the next 100 years for the signature annual event. The Denver city fathers bought into the resulting long-range plan they developed and presented to them, in a big way.

Now it's the eve of the 2017 National Western, and big change is in the air. The city and county of Denver last year renewed the rental car and hotel room tax and dedicated it for the next 10 years to provide some \$800 million to completely rebuild and update the stock show grounds. Mayor Michael Hancock delivered the first \$200 million symbolic check at the May 2016 Western Stock Show Association annual meeting.

As he said on that occasion, this money will largely go "in the ground." It will purchase some 29 properties surrounding the present 92-acre National Western, expanding the site to 250 acres. Underground utility work and new access roads are already under way, as structures on the newly acquired properties are torn

down. No new buildings will be in evidence at the 2017 event, but the plans are unique in preserving the best old traditions while thoroughly modernizing the infrastructure, parking and convenience as the new facilities are constructed.

To begin in 2017, the present stockyards will be demolished and new ones constructed directly to the west, on the shore of the Platte River, with an unobstructed view of the front range of the Rocky Mountains. This will allow the present stockyards site to be redeveloped into the first two new show facilities: one for cattle, the other for horses. The exterior of the buildings, as well as the new stockyards, will resemble and fit in with the historic Livestock Exchange Building, which is being preserved and updated.

It is inside the new livestock pavilion that the modernization will be most evident. It will be state-of-the-art, from the pens, cattle-grooming facilities and electricity to the show arena.

When you show Angus cattle in Denver in the coming years, it may not look all that different from the outside, except that new traffic patterns and modern livestock-handling facilities will eliminate all the bottlenecks and lengthy waits for exhibitors to get their cattle checked in and situated. There will be no shortage of stalls, electric power, water and all the other present-day conveniences.

However, preserved will be purebred shows and sales currently presented on the "Hill," in a completely new building, and the much improved, more convenient new stockyards will house the carload and pen shows, as always. The cattlemen directors and members of the National Western would not allow the leadership to have it any other way.

When you arrive in Denver in January 2017, the venue will look familiar and operate much the same way, except for more vacant land and parking lots adjoining the grounds on the newly acquired lands. By 2018 when you arrive, earth will be moving, and the sites and sounds of progress will be evident across the grounds.

In just a few short weeks, we'll look forward to seeing you in Denver.

**Editor's Note:** Dan Green is a Denver-based historian, author, retired editor of the *The Record Stockman* and the voice of "Along America's Angus Trails," a regular feature on *Angus Media's SiriusXM satellite radio program*, *Angus Talk*. *Angus Talk* airs at 10 a.m., Central time, every Saturday on *Rural Radio, Channel 80*.

