

Minnie Lou Bradley

Still Striving for Better Beef



Portrait by Richard Halsted

Note from the Publisher

Looking forward to 2015 and what this year may bring is top of mind for all of us, particularly on the market front, but looking back needs to be part of the adventure. There is no one better than Minnie Lou Bradley to put it all in perspective. Celebrating her 83rd birthday recently, Minnie Lou is the epitome of perseverance and determination in our cattle community. We all need heroes and she is certainly one of mine.

AgroServices and others. For several years, Bradley 3 operated a small packing facility in Childress. Their branded beef was a hot commodity at supermarkets and other beef retailers.

It was all-natural before natural was in. It accepted only natural cattle from producer suppliers. Minnie Lou had carved a natural niche for Bradley 3 cattle, a production system that didn't set well with many.

"Mary Lou worked her tail off and made that plant work," she says. "The reason we went into it is that we had to be different from the industry. Why else would anyone look at a little place like us? We ate our own all-natural beef and didn't even realize it. So we decided that's what we would do.

"That was nearly 30 years ago. The feedlot industry and NCBA didn't want to touch us. We were weird in their eyes. We were the bad boys."

But as more consumers began demanding natural, no-hormone foods, the natural market expanded. So did the market for higher quality, better tasting, more tender beef. Minnie Lou has admired how other producers and seedstock operators have realized the benefits of keeping consumers happy, especially in a time of high beef prices.

"It pleases me to see how things have come along," she says. "As good as we are as a business, we're sometimes very slow to change. Everyone in the cow business should have a week of running a feedyard and a week of running a packing plant. We would know more about what each other does. So it pleases me to see how we have come along."

Still, too many cattle operators are unaware of how other parts of the industry work, she says, and worse, many remain distant from consumers. "It has improved some," she says. "But when I was on the Angus Board, I was astonished about how little the board members knew about the industry. We still have a long way to go. About half the producers are people with 10-15 head who never read a beef magazine. Some have no idea about anything in the industry, other than it's time to sell a calf when mother needs a new refrigerator."

By Larry Stalcup Contributing Editor

Minnie Lou Bradley is still at it. The sometimes hard-nosed, sometimes ornery cowwoman remains dedicated to pushing the envelope – if it means producing higher quality beef and educating consumers about the high value of beef in a healthy diet. Her efforts, which once aggravated her early doubters, recently earned her one of the livestock industry's highest honors.

Kentucky State Fair Board named her the 2014 Saddle & Sirloin Portrait Gallery inductee. The honor is bestowed by the Saddle & Sirloin award committee, based on service to and impact on the livestock industry. Her painting now hangs in the portrait gallery of the livestock industry's hall of fame housed at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville.

The Saddle & Sirloin portrait presentation was made in November at the 41st annual North American International

Livestock Exposition in Louisville. The Saddle & Sirloin Portrait Gallery is curated by the Kentucky State Fair Board and is displayed throughout the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville. The collection includes nearly 350+ oil paintings dating back to the turn of the last century.

Minnie Lou, her daughter, Mary Lou, and son-in-law, James Henderson, a member of the American Angus Association Board, operate the Bradley 3 Ranch near Childress, Texas in the southeastern Panhandle. Minnie Lou and her husband, Bill, started the ranch in 1955 with the purchase of 3,300 acres. They had 20 cows. Today, they run about 400 registered Angus cows. The 10,000-acre spread is one of the nation's most envied seedstock and commercial Angus operations.

With years of land and water improvement programs and rotational grazing systems, the ranch has been recognized as a model of stewardship by Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Dow



Family and friends gathered with Minnie Lou for the induction in Louisville, Ky. Photo by Paul Lane.

Further discussing her experience as a packer, she says ranchers and feedyard operators were cooperative in most areas, except one. “We would send out surveys to those feeding with us,” she says. “The one thing that struck us was when we asked if they would be willing to come and stand in a grocery store and talk to consumers about beef. They were negative toward that.

“That is a problem when producer doesn’t want to talk to the end customer. The average cowman often doesn’t even consider the consumer as his customer. The sale barn or feedyard is his customer, not the consumer. Every producer has to want the next man to make money, and want to make sure the consumer enjoys his beef.”

Tell beef’s story

A long-time supporter and promoter of the beef checkoff, Minnie-Lou sees the need for more money to be spent dispelling myths about beef among consumers. “I think we have to spend more checkoff dollars on advertising and telling the public how beef is good for you,” she says. “They have been receiving bad information on beef from doctors and others for too long.

“Also HSUS and PETA continue to fight us. I have no idea exactly why they want to wreck us. We provide consumers with a product that is good for everyone, as a good source of protein, minerals and vitamins and with byproducts that are used in medicine and many other industries. We need to prove to doctors that beef is lean and good for you. I think it energizes your brainpower.”

She notes that even the artist who

painted her portrait for the Saddle & Sirloin Gallery normally avoided beef because of his doctor’s advice. “He eats beef about twice a year, usually at the Saddle & Sirloin ceremonies,” Minnie Lou points out. “He says the doctor told him at a young age that ‘beef killed your daddy’ who had been a butcher. People like them enjoy beef, but are afraid of it. We need to better educate those types of people.”

Minnie Lou does her best to inform others. “I learn a lot when I go to the beauty shop,” she says. “One woman mentioned she didn’t think she could afford beef anymore. I said, ‘did you quit driving when gas was nearly \$4 a gallon?’ She said ‘no.’ I told her it was all supply and demand, and that beef was still a great value at the grocery store.”

Innovation has always been in Minnie Lou’s blood. In 1949, she was the first woman to major in animal husbandry at the then Oklahoma A&M University. She went on to earn her degree and was the first woman to win the high individual overall award at the National Collegiate Livestock Judging Contest.

She served as American Angus Association Board member (1997-2003) and went on to be the AAA vice president in 2004. She then became the first-ever female president of the association in 2005.

Minnie Lou has been honored as a Master Breeder by Oklahoma State University and was named by *BEEF* magazine as one the nation’s Top 50 U.S. Beef Industry Leaders.

Her Bradley 3 Ranch’s DNA identification program began in 1994. The program has made their Angus bulls highly sought after by commercial producers looking for superior genetics with proven

carcass merit. In 2013, the ranch was recognized with the Beef Improvement Federation’s Seedstock Producer of the Year Award.

The BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year award was one of her finest honors. It was presented during the 45th annual BIF Research Symposium and Meeting in Oklahoma City. This award is one of the most prestigious and historical awards presented annually in the beef industry.

The Texas Angus Association nominated the Bradley 3. “We were honored to receive this award. I have admired many of the previous winners and it is humbling to be considered in these ranks,” Minnie Lou says.

In one of the letters of support that was submitted with the ranch’s nomination, Bryce Schumann, CEO of AAA, wrote, “It is indeed an honor to recommend Bradley 3 Ranch for the Beef Improvement Federation’s Seedstock Producer of the Year Award. Each year this award recognizes those in our business who advance innovation and integrity in the science of seedstock production. Bradley 3 Ranch is a true embodiment of both traits, and serves as an important inspiration to those striving to produce industry relevant genetics to the commercial cattle industry.”

The Bradley 3 has maintained discipline and commitment to produce genetics that benefit each segment of the industry. It has concentrated its breeding efforts on the beef industry’s most basic traits – fertility, calving ease, fleshing ability, soundness, high performance and carcass value – while employing the latest technologies.

The ranch was one of the first in the Texas Panhandle to employ EPDs in selection decisions. As an early adopter of performance testing and Integrated Ranch Management Records, the operation also embraced DNA technology as early as 1994. Today, the ranch is an aggressive user of DNA technology and obtains samples on every bull to further its parentage testing and use of genomic-enhanced EPDs.

When Minnie Lou was interviewed for this article, she had to take time from cooking meals for those involved in videoing cattle for the Bradley 3 annual February bull sale. And she had time to reflect

Continued on page 9 →



By Will Verboven
Contributing Editor

Industry Engages in More Navel Gazing

One thing the Canadian cattle industry has become known for is its seemingly endless involvement in national strategizing about its future. The latest attempt is the National Beef Strategy. It was developed jointly by all the major national producer groups and the national research and promotion agencies. As stated by one of the participating groups, the Canadian Cattlemen's Association, the National Strategy "Seeks to position the Canadian beef industry as the most trusted and competitive high quality beef cattle producer in the world, recognized for its superior quality, safety, value, innovation and sustainable production methods."

Those are noble and commendable goals, but I suspect they're similar to the American, New Zealand and Australian national strategies.

These types of strategic planning – some call it navel gazing – is what many organizations engage in at one time or another. In Canada, it really got going after the BSE crisis in 2003, when the various sectors of the cattle and beef business were forced together, under government encouragement, to seriously consider the industry's survival. Such cross sector cooperation is still possible in Canada with its much smaller beef industry. It's probably a more difficult process in the U.S. with its larger industry players and vested political positions.

The newly-minted Canadian National Beef Strategy covers the usual wishful thinking and philosophizing about better and more improved production, handling, processing and marketing. But it goes even further and includes statements about politically-correct trends like sustainability and social license.

One ponders if such trends are real or just spill over from other sectors of the

economy. It raises questions about who issues a social license and who decides there is no social license. It all remains a mystery.

As expected, various lobby groups (*who gives them a social license?*) of every ilk seem quick to appoint themselves as the authorities on social licenses on behalf of consumers. If the cattle industry hasn't had a social license for the past 300 years, why do we need one now? Do we need a license to produce food? It all seems rather conniving – but I digress.

The idea behind national strategies is to guide and promote development of a specific sector of the economy for the benefit of its members and participants. But there is more to it than that. These exercises are also efforts to deal with challenges and threats from government regulators, industry opponents, competitors and, invariably, duplicitous lobby groups.

All of that is a serious concern to the cattle and beef industries of North America. The overarching concern is that non-industry lobby groups and busybody government agencies will impose onerous and discriminatory regulations on cattle production and meat processing. The intent with strategies is to get a handle on developing issues and then be able deal with them on the industry's terms – at least that's the idea. Clearly the industry on both sides of the border has not always been successful in thwarting those threats.

The problem is that the cattle and beef industry suffers from a lack of unity in the face of issues that threaten its viability. Industry politics and power brokers have been at the root of many challenges, and many problems are even self-inflicted (*Need I mention COOL?*). Having said all that, the new Canadian National Beef Strategy has been created by most national producer-related organizations from cow-calf to purebred

to feedlot. That by itself is a considerable achievement, considering the generally fractious political nature of the industry.

There is one glaring exception to this unity group – it's missing the Canadian Meat Council, the national organization representing the meat processing sector. One might have expected their formal participation in this endeavor since their success depends on the success of their suppliers in the cattle production sector.

At the end of the day the success of strategic plans depends on whether there's a robust implementation and accountability process to achieve the goals of the strategy. That's a real problem when a strategic plan is developed by a coalition of diverse groups who all have their own mandates. Two things tend to develop: groups want to protect their own turf and vested political interests, and who does what to implement and pay for the strategic plan to be carried out. The latter will be the real test in order to avoid the fate of so many strategic plans – being filed away to gather dust. ■

E-mail comments to willverboven@hotmail.com

MINNIE LOU BRADLEY Continued from page 7

more on the Saddle & Sirloin award.

"It's just something you don't dream of happening to you," she says. "The experience was outstanding. The artist was super great. He came down here for three days from Chicago. He took a lot of pictures, then took his paintbrush and did a wonderful job. A lot of people with Ph.D.'s get this and I sure don't have a Ph.D."

Well, anyone who knows Minnie Lou knows all the Ph.D.'s offered at the nation's best animal science programs couldn't match all she has done for the beef industry. Her latest honor was well deserved. ■