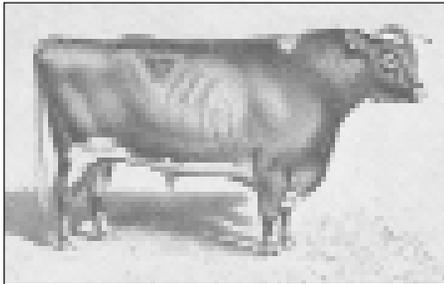




Pedigree Phobia

by Harlan Ritchie, Distinguished Professor of Animal Science, Michigan State University

It is my observation that an undue amount of emphasis is currently being placed on pedigrees by some seedstock breeders. This is especially true of females that trace back to certain valuable cows. These females occasionally bring prices that are ten to twenty times higher than cows in the same sale that actually have more merit than those belonging to a currently "hot cow family." But this tendency is not just restricted to females. Bulls that are sons of a particularly unique cow are also selling for inordinately high prices even though their genetic merit as measured by EPDs may not be out of the ordinary.



This mid-nineteenth century Shorthorn typifies the conformation of the Bates' "dual-purpose" bloodline.



"Anxiety 4th" imported from England by Gudgell and Simpson became the most influential sire in the foundation of North America Herefords.

Pedigree fads are not new to the industry. In fact, they date back as far as the origin of cattle breeds in the late 1700s and early 1800s. One of the first was the so-called "Bates boom" in the Shorthorn breed. In 1804, Thomas Bates, an early English breeder of Shorthorns, purchased the cow Duchess for \$500, which was an extremely high price for a purebred animal at that time. Descendants of this cow became very popular in England and even more so in the U.S. following their importation in the late 1830s. By 1850, there was a craze in the U.S. for Bates-bred cattle, primarily those of straight Duchess breeding. In 1869, a sale of Duchess cattle in New York averaged \$5,500 and one female sold for a world record price of \$40,600. Another U.S. sale of Duchess cattle averaged \$18,742. This was at a time when the going price for the very best Shorthorn cattle was about \$250. Individual merit of the animals was of little or no concern if they were of the Duchess family.

The Bates-bred boom took place in spite of the fact that Duchess females were known to be notoriously low in fertility. By 1831, the Duchess family had produced only 32 cows in the Bates herd over a period of 22 years. It is quite likely that this low reproductive rate only fueled the strong demand and high prices for Duchess Shorthorns. The

inflated prices tapered off during the mid- to late-1870s, and by 1880 had totally collapsed. This collapse was partially brought about by the first American Fat Stock Show in Chicago, where the highly touted Duchess Shorthorns were shown to be of considerably lesser merit than the newly arrived Hereford and Angus breeds (see pages 8-10, *The History of Red Angus*).

By 1890, the Hereford breed was well established in the U.S. It, too, was not immune to pedigree fads of which there were three. The most notable of these was the craze for straightbred or so-called "air-tight" cattle from the influential Gudgell and Simpson herd at Independence, MO. For 40 years, from 1877 until their dispersal in 1916, Gudgell and Simpson had maintained a closed herd that was tightly line-bred to the imported English bull, Anxiety 4th. The craze for "air-tight" Gudgell and Simpson cattle gained momentum following the 1916 dispersal sale and continued well into the 1930s. Considerable advertising was done, and many air-tight cattle were sold at exorbitant prices that were quite out of line with their individual merit.

Angus cattle were imported from Scotland in the 1870s and gained a secure foothold in the U.S. after the turn of the Century. Scottish breeders had placed a great deal of

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emphasis on cow families. This trend carried over into U.S. herds, and a craze for certain favored cow families developed. Extremely inflated prices were paid for members of these families, especially if they were scarce in number. Like females of the Duchess family in the Shorthorn breed, little attention was paid to functional traits.

As a young lad in the mid-1950s, I recall saving up a hard-earned \$500 hoping to purchase an Angus heifer calf from a nearby breeder. At that time the Blueblood Lady and Cherry Blossom families were very popular. Upon asking the breeder about buying a heifer from one of these families, he laughed and promptly informed me that it would take ten times \$500 to purchase one. Therefore, I settled on a heifer from the plentiful and relatively common Blackbird family. She was actually a better heifer than any of the Blueblood Ladies or Cherry Blossoms, and turned out to be a wise investment of my \$500.

Angus breeders no longer emphasize cow families, but they do pay a great deal of attention to individual cows and their descendants. It is not uncommon for such females to sell for six figures in highly advertised sales. Furthermore, it is not unusual for embryos from such cows to bring \$10,000 or more in these same sales. These transactions are often a matter of trading dollars from one highly promoted sale to

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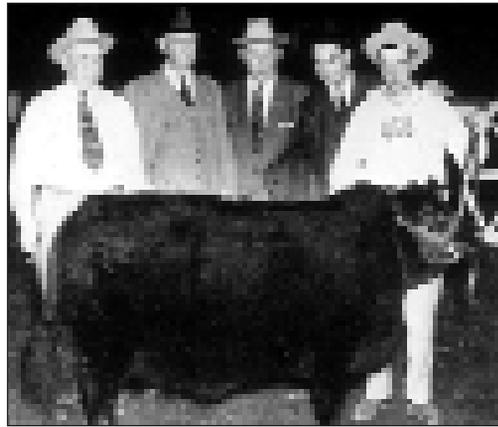
another. Although the dollars spent are usually considerably less, similar transactions occur in other breeds as well.

Obviously, pedigrees deserve some measure of consideration when purebred cattle purchases are made. However, they are only one piece of the selection process. EPDs, especially if they have a reasonable level of accuracy, should be given major consideration. Functional traits are

also of major importance: sound skeletal make-up, udder and teat structure, etc. In the case of mature cattle, reproductive history should be examined. I have observed several instances where extremely high prices were paid for

cattle that ended up being severe disappointments from a reproductive standpoint.

In summary, I wish to reiterate that pedigrees deserve some degree of consideration. But history has clearly demonstrated that "pedigree phobia" can often lead to unintended consequences. ■



“Shadow Isle Black Jestress 2”, Grand Champion Angus Female, International 1953. She vividly portrays the trend to extremely fat, small, “belt buckle” cattle.