

Farewell To A Red Angus Founder

George Chiga • 1913-2007



1954 inspection at Beckton Stock Farm. From left to right: Waldo Forbes, President; George Hetzel, Sec./Treasurer; Joe Perry, Director; and George Chiga, 2nd Vice President.



George and Vernice Chiga always operated as a partnership in their promotion of beef improvement.

Humble Beginnings

George Chiga's parents emigrated from Hungary to America to work on the railroads, which they had been led to believe would result in independence and a comfortable living. Instead, they found only hard labor and indebtedness to the company store. This resulted in a migration to Regina, Saskatchewan, in Canada, where they hoped they could find work and could eventually homestead a place of their own. It was here that George was born in 1913. George grew up working a variety of odd jobs - selling papers, shoveling snow, caddying - until after a series of family moves, his parents realized their dream of homesteading on land about 100 miles east of Regina.

George started school at a younger age than normal and skipped a grade along the way. By the time he reached 10th grade he was a stout lad. His parents decided that he was needed at home full time to help clear land and work the homestead. Despite this setback, George still harbored dreams of further education. With his hallmark determination, he would again see the inside of a classroom, although it would be after a nine-year hiatus.

This large family of six brothers and two sisters had lots of mouths to feed. So, as George's younger brothers reached the size and age to help work on the family's homestead, it was suggested that George leave the homestead to make a living on his own, to ease the family's financial burden. Although George returned home during harvest to help his family and hire out to other neighbors, he mainly worked a variety of other jobs. These included cleaning bricks piecemeal, cutting ice, working on the highway, cooking in mining camps, and serving as a bouncer.

In the book *Courageous Cattlemen*, George recounted his leaving home to fend for himself. His brother and a

friend were working in the mines in Flin Flon, Manitoba. George decided to head that way in search of a job. The first part of the trip went fine, because he jumped onto a freight train. Although this had gotten him part way there, he was still faced with another 87 miles of ground to cover. The first day, he walked 55 miles on the tracks. Forced into an unnatural gait to walk on the cross-ties, he recalled that he was almost dead when he reached the next town, Cranberry Portage. Undeterred, the next day he walked the final 32 miles to Flin Flon, only to find no job openings at the mines. Instead, he ended up as a cook. In his spare time, he frequented the local gym.

George was a natural athlete and had a competitive personality. This combination allowed him to excel in a variety of sports and eventually led to opening the doors for further education. He played football for the Regina Rough Riders for three seasons. He also developed an interest in boxing and wrestling while in Flin Flon. With the coaching of Jimmy Trifunov, George's wrestling skills blossomed to the point where he had become the Dominion champion. He earned the honor of representing Canada as its heavyweight wrestler in the 1936 Olympics hosted by Hitler's Germany. It was there that his talents were recognized by Oklahoma State University Wrestling Coach Ed Gallagher.

Although economics had prohibited George from completing high school, he arrived at Oklahoma State University, then called Oklahoma A&M, as an over-aged student with a keen mind and a desire to learn. George arrived at Stillwater with two suitcases and 75 cents in his pocket. As an athlete, he received room and board at the dorms. Ed Gallagher had arranged a job for him at the Campus Shop, which paid \$10 per month. The Swim family, who owned the shop, would become lifelong friends of the Chigas.

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From left to right: George Chiga, Sal Forbes and Joe Givhan at the 1996 RAAA 43rd National Convention in Fort Worth, Texas.



George Chiga: Listening, learning, and turning innovative thoughts into progressive actions.

He would go on to play football and wrestle for O.S.U., but, more importantly he was honored as a Phi Kappa Phi student, graduating with a degree in Animal Science. He also had developed a deep interest in animal breeding and genetics. To further his studies in this area, George enrolled in graduate school in 1940 under the direction of geneticists Drs. Oliver Willham and James Whately. His master's research and thesis focused on the inbreeding and outbreeding of Duroc swine.

From his master's research, George became a disciple of linebreeding and inbreeding, which were central to his breeding philosophy throughout his career. Later, when asked the difference between linebreeding and inbreeding, George replied, somewhat tongue in cheek, "It's called linebreeding when it works and inbreeding when it doesn't."

Always a man of goals, George decided that his future lay in breeding seedstock cattle in the U.S. This would allow him to put into practice the scientific animal breeding concepts he had developed. However, before he could achieve this goal, he had to overcome many challenges and roadblocks. The first of these was an unwelcome return to Canada when his limited educational visa lapsed upon completion of his studies. It would take a year before he could gain another visa to return to the U.S.A.

To gain U.S. citizenship, George volunteered for military service during World War II, expecting the war to only last one more year. Unfortunately, he miscalculated the length of the war, spending the next 36 months in the military, which included serving as part of the occupying force in Japan. After the war, he returned to Oklahoma and taught Agriculture in Guthrie, Okla., to World War II veterans under the G.I. Bill of Rights. "I came down here with the intention to be a veterinarian, but I think I made more impact with my animal breeding background than I could have as a veterinarian", said Chiga. Caught amid a reorganization of OSU's veterinarian school at the time, Chiga took his degree in animal breeding and enrolled at the Oklahoma City Law School. He

took night courses, passed the bar, and began to practice law. He continued to practice law throughout his professional lifetime.

George met his wife Vernice during the summer of 1946 at Swim's Campus Shop. George, who had recently returned from military service, was helping out the Swims by working at the soda fountain. At the time, Vernice was attending summer school at Oklahoma A&M. She started to stop at the Campus Shop for refreshments. George, who often waited on her, was smitten, thinking her "quite a looker" as well as fun and interesting. They would marry in November 1947, beginning a lifetime of love and friendship.

George and Vernice shared common interests in teaching, breeding cattle and artistic expression, she through her music and George through his poetry. Vernice also shared George's passion for Red Angus. She served as his business partner, secretary and office manager.

Entering the Red Angus Business

Both George and Vernice dreamed of being in the seedstock business, but their finances were not sufficient to purchase quality purebred cattle from the established breeds at the time, mainly Angus and Hereford. However, in 1949 George spotted a less costly way to build a quality herd by buying the occasional red calf produced in registered black Angus herds. They were the same quality, same bloodlines, and same purity of ancestry as their black contemporaries. However, because they were red, they were an unwanted embarrassment for their breeders. The idea of utilizing these red calves also fit George's maverick personality.

"I decided that Red Angus was the outcropping of sub-linebreeding. To me the opportunity was valid," said Chiga. "If you'll notice, all of the breeds that made an impact were linebred. Keep in mind this was in the late 1930's and early 40's when Red Angus cattle were nothing more than an embarrassment

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to the Black Angus producers who ended up with red calves from time to time."

Their odyssey to piece together a Red Angus herd would take George and Vernice from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean and from the Mexican border to the Arctic Circle. George remembered that on many Fridays he waited at the school parking lot with their pickup truck and trailer for Vernice to finish her last class. Off they would go to pick up Red Angus calves, often returning just in time for Vernice to make it to her Monday morning class.

George admitted that in the early years, their fledgling Red Angus herd was far from being a gold mine. He related that their first Red Angus female had to be bred to a Hereford for want of a Red Angus bull. Even after they had found a Red Angus bull, they ended up having to ship him, because they were not able to get proof of ancestry. Their luck turned when an old friend of Vernice's, who was living in Higgins, Texas, and knew that they looking for Red Angus, told them about a stout Red Angus bull calf he had seen. When they went to see the calf they liked what they saw. With the help of the local vocational agriculture teacher, Olen Smith, they brought home a yearling bull that would become a Red Angus legend, "Superchief." He was large for his age and very masculine, with an intensely linebred pedigree. The breeder of his sire had a long record of champion carlots at Denver and Chicago. Superchief's dam was an 18-year old cow with a big calf at side.

The foundation of the Chigas' early cowherd came from the Breyfogle Ranch near Garden City, Kan. The Breyfogle Drylake Angus herd had been selectively line bred for 42 years. They knicked perfectly when bred to Superchief. Another important Chiga herdsire was Kansas Chief whose daughters also produced excellent calves when bred to Superchief.

Native American Names

In one of his many articles and

newsletters, George recounted his reason for choosing Native American names for his cattle: "Although of Hungarian parentage, I had always been friends with and partial to the American Indians." Migrating for college put him in a land of many Indians, Oklahoma. The state name means 'Red People,' derived from the Indian Okla 'people' and homma 'red.' So the Indian names were appropriate and gave instant recognition of Chiga-origin Red Angus.

A teammate at Oklahoma State in the late 30s was Allie Reynolds, a star running back on the football team and a star pitcher on the baseball team. He was a Creek Indian. Later, as a pitcher of no-hitters for the Yankees, Allie was nicknamed 'The Superchief.' Thus came the name 'Superchief' for Chiga's 6F bull.

Red Angus Association of America

George recalled the 1954 Red Angus organizational meeting in Fort Worth: "We took the train down from Guthrie, and we walked into the meeting in the hotel, having met only Joe Perry, Mrs. McDaniel, and Hetzel previously. Fortunately, the unit of Red Angus breeders that gathered for their initial meeting included breeders that were dedicated to following approved animal breeding principles and were willing to by-pass the traditional Registered-breeder production practices. They deemed it necessary to follow the dictates of logic while intentionally avoiding hypocritical practices that had long dogged and handicapped real progress in the beef cattle industry, both seedstock and commercial segments. Fortunately, a number of the breeders that joined the Red Angus breed soon after it was organized were performance minded and supported the principles of the new Red Angus charter."

George explained, "From the very start, the Red Angus Association charter membership chose to adhere to Animal Breeding Principles aimed at utilizing all the available tools for beef cattle improvement in an effort directed at



George Chiga was frequently on the scene at the RAAA National Office in Denton, Texas.



Whether through his many official roles or simply one-on-one, one of George Chiga's major aims in life was to educate producers on all aspects of superior beef production.

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producing needed and valid seedstock for the efficient production of beef." Reflecting on the Association's formation, George emphasized the teamwork needed to start an association based on performance. "Every charter member had a contribution to make, and the association retains considerable effects of their influence."



June 2000: George and Vernice Chiga relaxing at their Tulsa, Oklahoma home.



George Chiga helps with the ribbon cutting ceremony for the newly remodeled RAAA National Office during the 50th anniversary convention in Denton, Texas.

Chiefling

George set the highest possible goals for his Red Angus seedstock operation. His ambition went far beyond just breeding good cattle. He strove to build a whole system, one that he would call Chiefling. He defined Chiefling as "a practice of following animal breeding principles that, in the aggregate, are a practical approach to solving problems of producing valid, useful seedstock as efficiently as possible, using all available tools for improvement in timely fashion,"

More specifically, in some of his graduate linebreeding research of brother-sister matings, Chiga concluded that "along with uncovering any genetic trash, after several generations of performance regression, the disciplined breeder can break across a sort of genetic threshold where performance increases with successive generations to a point of superiority over non-linebred counterparts. This linebreeding approach demands total discipline and commitment toward constant improvement," something Chiga has championed since beginning his career as a seedstock producer. "You can't linebreed successfully until you clean up your cows first; otherwise, all you'll do is show the dirt," said Chiga. "In other words, linebreeding leaves no room to make excuses."

George explained, "I wouldn't keep a cow or bull around that couldn't stand inbreeding. I close-bred as fast as I could to check my genotypes; sire-daughter or brother-sister matings. We didn't want to have bulls around three years or more that were going to become problems for us. Also, when we found a flaw with a cow, we sold her and all her progeny. Once you get rid of the problems, a relatively fault

free herd can be developed with a low culling rate."

Working with Beecher Breyfogle, who supplied the Chigas with many of their foundation females, George recognized the importance of soundness first, and then balance. As part of Chiefling, George developed these concepts into what he referred to as "Comfort Zone" and "Convenience Traits."

A few years later, Chiga was exposed to Professor Jan Bonsma of South Africa, a worldwide authority on visual appraisal of cattle for fertility and functional efficiency. Chiga recalled, "Bonsma explained more fully the reasons and practical importance of balance as it related to fertility in bulls and females alike. His influence on Chiefling and on the cattle breeding industry was profound and permanent." Chiga previously had been a student of maternal traits, and Bonsma's seminars further strengthened his appreciation of their importance. Another who helped shape the Chiga comfort zone was the redoubtable master breeder Jim Lingle of Maryland's Wye Plantation.

Based on the influences Breyfogle, Bonsma and Lingle and after many years of observation and study, Chiga finally decided, "What top bulls pass on is SEX, which, in females, is expressed as femininity in appearance and maternal ability in performance. Likewise, with bulls, it is revealed as masculinity traits, an abundance of good quality semen, with the libido and ability to transmit those things. All resulting in production of females and bulls and not steer like creatures - Compliments of Comfort Zone selectivity."

The last aspect of Chiefling is selection for Convenience Traits. Among the convenience traits George emphasized were calving ease, polled cattle, moderate cow size, early sexual maturity, overall soundness, and good temperament. According to George, "Convenience is of growing importance as dependable labor becomes increasingly difficult to obtain and as efficiency becomes increasingly important - those things about cattle that

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require special attention can be inconvenient."

"How much performance do you need?" asked George rhetorically. "Just enough to make money; then add convenience to it. You don't have to have the biggest this or the biggest that. Nature has very little use for freaks....Nature is interested in only one thing - perpetuation. You can do what you like, but nature will win out."

Choctaw Chief 373

This no-excuses linebreeding approach is how the Chigas ended up producing Choctaw Chief 373, one of the most prepotent bulls of the breed. Many would call him the most prepotent of any breed. His sire was a son of Superchief out of the famous "2" cow, and his dam was the daughter of Kansas Chief. According to Garold Parks, who purchased him and 40 heifer mates in 1967 to start the Pioneer Red Angus herd, "Choctaw Chief 373 was intentionally bred to 20 of his daughters for the purpose of identifying any deleterious genes. He came through with 100% flying colors, plus the added bonus that his inbred progeny performed in a superior manner for all production traits without the usual degree of inbreeding depression."



Although born in 1965, before widespread use of A.I. was common in the beef industry, 373 ranks in the top 15 sires of all time in the number of progeny registered. In addition, many of his sons have also made a positive contribution to the breed. Several years ago, Colorado State University did a study to objectively determine which were the most influential bulls in the Red Angus breed. They did this by quantifying the genetic contribution of all sires to the genetics of the 1996 Red Angus calf crop. Although born in 1965, Choctaw Chief 373's direct coefficient of relationship to the 1996 calf crop was 9.38 percent. That means for the average animal born in 1996, 9.38 percent of its genes were from Choctaw Chief 373; an amazingly high number in any breed.

Garold Parks noted, "Greatness has been claimed by many, but few achieve it. The term GREAT is overused and truly abused when applied to many sires. When applied to a truly great one, Choctaw Chief 373, it is almost an understatement."

Promoting Red Angus

George utilized his pen to promote Red Angus; literally writing volumes of material on a wide variety of Red Angus and cattle industry subjects. Ever since Forrest Bassford, editor of the Western Livestock Journal, had

published one of George's letters - one that George never intended to be published - and encouraged him to write more, George was one of the beef industry's most prolific writers. Starting in the 1950s, he wrote and edited a newsletter for the Red Angus Association. When the office moved from the Chiga's house to Ballinger, Texas, he started writing a newsletter for Red Plains Cattle Company (a partnership between the Chigas and W. H. Gilmore of Midland, Texas), and then one for the National Red Angus Listing Service established by George, Roy Beeby and other like minded performance breeders as a breed promotion and marketing cooperative. When the Listing Service had run its course, without interruption George started the "Chiga Red Angus News." Finally the Newsletter emerged as "Chiefline Red Angus" and continued into the 1980s as "Chiefline" when George and Vernice went into semiretirement.

George also wrote several other publications, including Chieflining, Red Angus Oriented Seedstock Production

Articles, and Beef Cattle Seedstock Production (In Blank Verse). In the foreward of this last publication, which contains George's poetry, Forrest Bassford wrote, "Reaching the 1990s state of performance based seedstock selection has been a struggle against entrenched tradition and vested interest in the status quo; a struggle with Chiga in the forefront."

More than anything, though, folks believed in Chiga's integrity. "If I'm for anything, it's fairness," said Chiga. "Integrity is worth a hell of a lot. That's what makes dealing in the cattle business so nice. It's a place where native decency can do business with native decency."

Early Challenges and Ultimate Success of RAAA

Forty-one years after the association was formed, George wrote about some of the challenges faced by the Association and key components of Red Angus success: "At the particular

time when Red Angus was first coming on the scene, many of the seedstock breeders of the various recognized breeds were loath or reluctant, and in most cases unprepared to do weighing of calves at birth, at weaning or checking on their gaining ability after weaning. Performance testing was just coming on the scene. Many breeders of the old established breeds did not take kindly to compulsory weighing of the cattle at anytime. The new breeders came in to the new association uninitiated and tended to copy or adopt the prevalent and conventional attitudes of breeders of the established breeds and the attitude of Stock Shows. For the most part Stock Shows paid little or no attention and were little interested in the programs that had to do with gainability and carcass quality and other performance traits. However, the shows did dominate type selection in beef cattle production. As a rule the show judges and the instructors of college judging classes were not faculty members with PhDs in animal breeding. Books could be written on this facet of the cattle industry."

To break with long established custom and prevailing tradition was not popular with most of the purebred breeders of the established breeds. There were those unsatisfied souls in other breeds that, like the charter members of the Red Angus Association, were truly interested in the performance movement early on. In contrast to the old attitudes, the Red Angus Association was performance oriented from its inception. Even so, there were some unconvinced new members joining, often inclined to follow industry tradition, sometimes even delaying progress within the breed. It was fortunate that most of the new breeders that came into Red Angus early were breeders that liked the logic of performance testing, and were pleased to follow the logical Animal Breeding Principles.

George may have summed up the spirit of Red Angus best when in 1975 he wrote, "Progressiveness was the key character of the Red Angus breed - it is note worthy that all breeds organized in recent years have adopted similar

performance programs. There has always been a spirit of dedication to progress among those breeders that have fashioned the Red Angus breed program. It is their ideas that have had the most impact and lasting effect on the breed. The ideas of the charter members was nurtured and advanced by many that came after. The progressive spirit has survived and expanded."

50 Years With Red Angus

George's impact on Red Angus and the early performance movement is incalculable. George once said, "What's the sense of knowing and not doing while you're here?" Certainly he is one who spent his life doing, never sitting on the sidelines. He built an operation from less than 20 cows to where he controlled the breeding and marketing on over 800 cows. In the Red Angus breed, almost all the cattle in some way descend from George and Vernice's Chiefline breeding. Above all George

was an individualist who stuck with, promoted and expanded the use of performance testing during the time when it was anything but popular. For Chiga, the bottom line was always simple: "My goal was to make Red Angus go. Everything was done to improve the Red Angus breed."

Perhaps George's life is best summed up in Robert de Baca's book *Courageous Cattlemen*, when de Bacca explained, "Chiga is an entrepreneur. He capitalized on his opportunities. He rose above the limitations that were his given the economics of the times and family means into which he was born. He succeeded while doing the things at which others were failing. He knew how to be a friend. And he believes strongly in society's giving a helping hand to other survivors who have a right and a desire to share in the American dream." ■

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