

Meet Rachel Breck – The First Lady of Angus!

A Legendary American Family



"I hadn't fully realized how many friends I'd made over the years and how they felt about me. It's just that I loved being in the Angus world and I loved what I was doing. I never was happier than during this period of my life. Why my father (whom I loved) believed I'd make it in the cattle world, I'll never know. But how right he was to get me out of New York City..."

"Dave, I'll be out to your sale this year, I've always wanted to get there."

From Rachel Breck's letter to David McMahon, Sr. (whom she considered her "arts patron") after Cow Power XXXI, September, 2003, Heathcote Farm.

The great-great-granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt, Rachel Hammond was born January 24, 1908. Her home was a six-story mansion on 91st Street between Fifth and Madison Avenues across from the Carnegies' Manhattan digs. The second floor housed a ballroom that comfortably seated 125 for concerts or parties, and the fourth floor sported a two-story, regulation-size squash court, with a balcony for viewers and a complete locker room.

She learned early that she had a knack for creating things, and her determined, competitive nature served her well in difficult situations. But as a 5-foot-nine-inch gangling fourth daughter in a family of five, Rachel might have felt like an ugly duckling. She says she remembers meeting Eleanor Roosevelt and commenting that everyone always told her they looked alike. "Oh, you poor dear," the First Lady responded. Her sisters Emily and Adele were beautiful, her sister Alice (wife of Benny Goodman) was not only lovely to look at but also a highly intelligent and charming woman, and her brother was the highly accomplished music producer and talent scout John Hammond.

Her mother Emily Vanderbilt Sloane was descended from the railroad tycoon Cornelius Vanderbilt, known as "The Commodore." She was an avid philanthropist, serving as president of five charitable organizations. After graduating from Miss Porter's preparatory school in Farmington, CT, Rachel returned to Manhattan. Her father knew of some cousins who had attended Vassar College and felt it made them unfeminine, so his daughter was encouraged to forego higher education. Instead she followed her mother into charity work.

(Excerpt from "It's Turned Out Quite Well," by Elf Lefjerts, Litchfield County Times, September 22, 2000)

"Aunt Peachie"

As Rachel Breck's nephew and godson, I was asked to reflect on the "top-side" of this remarkable lady's pedigree, the Hammond family. (By the way, Rachel has always been "Aunt Peachie" to me!)

"The Great Ones Make It Look So Easy"...Rachel is a pretty good example of that saying! Here are some of the reasons why she is the person we all know and love. The daughter of Mr. and Mrs. John H. Hammond, she had three older sisters Emily, Adele and Alice. Her younger brother John Hammond was a music expert and legendary talent scout who discovered or was instrumental in the careers of innumerable artists, including Benny Goodman, Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Bob Dylan, Bruce Springsteen and Stevie Ray Vaughan. (Mikie Harris, who was John Hammond's executive and production assistant for the last ten years of his life, will accompany Rachel on her journey to Arkansas – we thank you so much, Mikie!)

Although Rachel's father was a successful attorney in New York City, his real passion was his fine dairy herd and his rose garden at the family's Dellwood Farm in Mt. Kisco, NY. His Guernsey herd was made up of prize animals and he knew them well. His father, General John H. Hammond, began his military leadership during the Civil War, he was the youngest general in the Union Army and concluded his career as Chief of Staff for General Sherman. After the war, General Hammond was assigned chief of the Bureau of Indian Affairs to the Lakota. Highly revered by them, he is said to have been Sitting Bull's only white friend.

My grandfather's love of animals was passed on to several of his offspring. My mother Adele, Rachel's sister, raised us with livestock and their eldest sister Emily and her husband had a fine herd of registered Herefords known as Hayfield Farm in Maryland. Rachel tells stories of her father making her feel very special by allowing her to sketch the calves on the farm so that they could be registered. And she always credits him with the idea that she leave New York City, buy a farm and take up raising cattle, as a 39-year-old divorcee with four children! As a younger member of this clan, I am proud to have graduated from the University of Arizona with majors in Animal Science and Range Management. During college, I worked on two ranches one of which was the J-Six, owned by Aunt Peachie's ex-husband. During the Second War she tended to the ranch while her husband served as a Marine officer in the South Pacific. The ranch was nestled in the northern foothills of the Whetstone Mountains east of Tucson and, today, our place borders the mountains to the south.

Rachel's knowledge of Angus cattle grew along with her Hedgerows herd and she is considered to be one of the great figures in the breed as it is known today. At 96 years young, she is still fascinated by the cattle industry and shows her sincere devotion to Angus by traveling all the way from the East to attend this fine occasion. And after the big sale at Belle Point, Aunt Peachie has decided to travel on to Arizona for a "herd visit" that is long overdue! Yes, the Great Ones do make it look easy!

– Bevan Olyphant, Tucson, Arizona

Guided by Enthusiasm and Love of a Challenge

Hedgerows Farm is perhaps best known in show circles for Topp Hill Annie 4106 and Hedgerows Jestress 5209. The herd traces back some thirty years though and Rachel has been a leader in northeastern Angus circles for much of that time.

"I bought my first animals in 1950, back when the greatest praise you could give a heifer was to call her a doll baby...I had champions then, but it's appalling to see what we were breeding."

Rachel bought some top individuals in the early days of her herd, but worked to keep bloodlines similar. DorMacs Bardoliermere 60 "Maximilian", the 1957 International grand champion, had a strong influence in those pedigrees. Then in 1963, Rachel imported Buccaneer of Lisonagh, a son of Pearlstone of Gaidrew, from Ireland. He caught her eye when she saw him as a calf and she bought him on a return visit to Ireland, bringing him to the states as a yearling. He was "typey" and a good bull in his day, but dramatic changes in the purebred industry were just around the corner.

At a point in her life where many may have questioned the new direction of beef breeding and sat back to let a younger generation take over, Rachel Breck zeroed in on changing the genetics of her herd...and came out with champions again.

She smiles when she holds up contrasting pictures of judge Herman Purdy and herself behind a "doll baby" and later Topp Hill Annie 4106. She feels she should have known better long ago than to breed the "belt-buckle" type.

"The change to modern type was much harder for someone my age, but we should have known better...breeding them smaller and smaller didn't make any sense, but that's what the judges liked. I should have known from my experience with Herefords that those small cattle wouldn't work."

Rachel raised Herefords in Arizona with her former husband before she bought the Connecticut farm and got into the Angus business. In fact, she credits much of her working knowledge of beef cattle management to those years.

"I was just an extra pair of hands during the war and I learned because I had to. Pulling calves, castrating and treating cows all had to be handled when we rode pastures." (She also relates how she tried her hand at roping, but never pursued that training!)

Anyhow, when the purebred industry began to demand larger cattle, Hedgerows changed in stride too.

"It took me quite a few years, but I was determined not to just sell out all my animals. I wanted to breed up, which takes longer, but it's far less expensive and much more fun...it was a real challenge."

Rachel owned half interest in Camilla Wye 60A with Topp Hill Farm (of Hillsdale, N.Y.), and his influence of Canadian and Wye breeding helped her progress toward larger cattle. It was the purchase of the entire Topp Hill herd in 1974 though that put Hedgerows in the national lime-light. Rachel bought the herd in partnership with her daughter Lorna Anderson and although they owned the cattle just a few years, the impact on Hedgerows Farm was great.

Topp Hill Annie 4106, born shortly after Hedgerows acquired the herd, earned 14 championships in 8 major shows during that first year – capping her career as grand champion female at the National Western in 1976. Hedgerows sold the heifer just after she claimed the purple in Denver, but Rachel still remembers "Annie" with a special smile.

"Some animals just show better than others. Annie was a real ham-actor and couldn't wait for the applause to begin...I called her the Gertrude Lawrence of the cattle world. I spent a lot of time with her and I'm convinced she knew me, even when she was at Fairview Farms...it was tragic that she died when she was only five."

Hedgerows Jestress 5209 kept the farm's name among champions the next season and Rachel was excited to be recognized for her national wins. She laughs though when explaining that she had not changed at all as a person, but all of a sudden everyone knew who she was.

Excerpt from Angus Journal, March 1982 by Nancy Ann Sayre



Benny Goodman, "The King of Swing" helped celebrate in 1984 when the All-American Angus Breeders Futurity in Louisville, KY was dedicated to his sister-in-law Rachel.



Noted University of Connecticut animal scientist Dr. W.A. Cowan and Rachel posed at Cow Power XXXI at Heathcote Farm, New York in September, 2003. The two cattle breeders had a long association from the very early years of Hedgerows. Rachel selected Heathcote's feature heifer in the offering and Belle Point partnered with her to purchase and donate the heifer to UConn's Angus Beef Educational Program. In a letter to Rachel after the surprise donation, Dr. Cowan reported that "the heifer is an excellent prospect. Your performance record stands out in the Angus world... Rachel you made a difference."

Rachel is pictured at right with her friend and advisor the late Herman Purdy, world-renowned Penn State animal scientist and author of "Breeds of Cattle." In the lower right photo, Rachel holds her "Shorthorn Painting in Wool" created for Julie and Steve French as a wedding gift in 2001. She wrote to Julie...

"I know you will like it, as you know and like my work – but will Steve approve – have I done his heifer justice? All markings are accurate but I inadvertently lengthened her loin slightly (and that would never hurt a Shorthorn)! I could only think of myself at age ten making sketches of father's Guernsey heifers in order to register them. He made me feel so important allowing me to do this. The second thing I think of is a remark Al Gore, Sr. made to me once. 'Why is it Rachel, your cattle are so much better than mine?' I longed to answer, 'because I have a better eye,' but I was too polite! I seem to be able to duplicate a photo or even safely judge cattle in line. What I never had was Herman Purdy's ability to foretell how a calf would develop. I remember his telling me my Jestress heifer would be a great brood cow, this was when she was only a few months old!"

THE REST OF THE STORY.....Hedgerows Jestress 5209 (calved 3/21/75) produced over 400 calves (naturally and by embryo transfer) in her 17-year life span and was described by the American Angus Association as one of the breed's best all-time cows.....Rachel refers to the late U.S. Senator Al Gore, Sr. (1907-1998) of Tennessee who was an avid Angus breeder throughout his life and political service.....Tom Burke estimates that Rachel's original artworks donated to the American Angus Auxiliary have raised "conservatively, over \$50,000" to fund scholarships for Angus youth.....In 1980, Rachel Breck was the first woman to run for the American Angus Association Board of Directors. "I felt the Association just wasn't ready for a woman director at that point in time," she said. "But maybe I made it easier for other women to follow."

Hedgerows photos, logo and story excerpt are reprinted courtesy of Angus Journal.