

George and Fred Buckham

“Never take for granted the privilege of showing purebred livestock” was an idea that fueled their passion for raising livestock. The phrase “Breeders of Quality Livestock” was painted on their signs, truck and show box. These were words the Buckham brothers lived by.

They had been raising Shropshires all their lives as their father had done before them. Throughout the forties and into the fifties trends in the showring had turned nearly ideal farm sheep into a small compact breed that had lost touch with the commercial sheep industry. The Shropshires were becoming obsolete and irrelevant to the farm flocks on which its former greatness had been built.

Twin brothers, George and Fred also maintained a herd of 40-50 Angus cows. The cattle business had been through a cycle similar to the sheep and was quicker to realize the need to be larger and more productive. The Angus reached out to the western commercial herds for new genetics to improve their breed. Realizing that a shift in styles was coming they saw that the Suffolks had much more to offer than the Shropshires. A new breed addition was in the fold for Buckham Brothers.

The Buckham brothers had always had strong ties with Michigan State University, from which Fred had graduated. Close friendships with Drs. Henneman and Nelson provided direction and access to the quality breeding stock they demanded.

Early on Fred was the more recognized member of the Buckham brothers, serving two separate terms on the Board of Directors for the NSSA. The first term was during the early sixties, travelling to Chicago for the International where he spent his honeymoon, leaving his bride Barb to fend for herself while he attended to “business”. His second term was more eventful. He helped with the development of the National Jr. Show which was modeled after the National Jr. Angus Show. It was at this time that “The Spider” syndrome arose. Fred was among the first to believe this was a genetic abnormality and that action should be taken to control its spread. Fred was a man of few words. When he spoke, they were words that needed to be said and people listened.

Together on many trips to Sedalia, George and Fred argued over which ram they should buy. Once they each bought a ram unbeknownst to the other.

After Fred’s battle with cancer concluded with his passing in 1986, George stepped into the limelight, best known for his “Story Telling Time”. Much time was spent at shows “researching” for his next article. Some more noteworthy quotes include “Men standing around pooling their ignorance” and while I’m offending people anyway.... Many things were written tongue in cheek, but still to make a point. The other constant through all the articles is that his wife Thelma must be the greatest woman on earth!

After witnessing the decline and fall of the Shropshires and eventual resurrection, George started to express concern over the trends currently presiding over the show ring, expressing the need to moderate if you were going to remain viable to the commercial industry, lest history repeat itself. A quote from one article mentions, “The Reserve Champion Suffolk ram and The Reserve Champion Market Lamb in Louisville were both of the same breeding. The Suffolk business was going wild, sadly we may never see that again.”

Perhaps the greatest achievement breeding Suffolks was the bittersweet moment showing “White House”. Reserve Champion and high selling ram at the Mid-West Sale in 1987, a year after Fred’s death. Hey, if we live long enough we are bound to see anything.

I would share a story that has been a favorite of many readers in the past, and tells much about George and Fred.

A Christmas Story

I’m not one to dwell on the past, but at Christmas I like to reminisce. I feel this is a special time for us parents and grandparents to tell our children stories of the things that we did when we were their age. They should know of our culture and the important moments in our lives.

We all have great stories, and I thought that I would share my very favorite. It’s a story that I’ve only told my children and a few veterinary students at MSU. Maybe they are the only ones that would really appreciate it. It may be that you had to be there or get the real emotion and meaning of it or that you had to live at the time. It’s not about sheep, blue ribbons, championships, or big trophies. It’s about the pride and faith that men have in their livestock. This is a story of my father and his favorite and most dependable team of horses. I’ll try to write it; if you’re interested, read on.

We’ll go back to 1938, when my twin brother and I were ten years old. We were just coming out of the great depression of the early 1930’s. Like everyone else, we were as poor as church mice, but things were finally looking up for us and the rest of the country.

At the time, we didn’t have a tractor. We had eight good work horses, and we always raised two or three colts a year. My father took great pride in his horses, as he did all of his livestock. He gave them special care, and in return he expected them to always produce, work, and of course, help him make his living farming.

It was about dark, a week before Christmas, when we heard a knock on our door. It was a fellow who owned a fuel truck. He had gotten his truck stuck delivering fuel to one of our neighbors and he wondered if we had a tractor that could pull him out of a very muddy driveway. My father told him that we had no tractor, but he did have a great team of horses that could pull better than most of the tractors of that time.

The fuel man of course thought that my father was crazy to think that a team of horses could accomplish this tough feat. But my dad assured the man that he could pull him out. We quickly went to the barn to get the horses harnessed. Before we left, my dad made sure that the harness was clean and polished, and he brushed the team’s manes and tails. We hooked them onto a hay wagon and drove the mile to where the truck was stuck.

By the time we got there, probably 15 or 20 people were standing around waiting for the big show to start. Of course, not one of them thought that our great team could pull the truck out of them mud. We quickly hooked the team to the back of the truck as my father told the fuel man to start the truck and be ready to back up when he started to pull.

But things did not go as planned. The driver killed his truck, and Dad’s team failed to pull like they were supposed to. I could see by the look in my father’s eyes that he knew he was in trouble, and maybe he had bitten off more than he could handle.

My father quickly halted his team to a stop. He seized them by their bridles and just stared into their eyes. He then spoke to them in a very stern voice, as though they were human, and told them his very reputation as a horseman and livestock man was at stake. They could pull the load and were not to let him down. Then, he again shook their bridles and just glared at them.

At this time, I was relieved to see that my dad was in control, and his big team had understood the meaning of his stern words. But the suspense began as he told the driver to start the truck and that he better be able to keep it going. My father had changed his strategy this time. He backed his big team up and was going to give the truck a huge jerk to get it moving.

I can still see it and have thought about it a million times. My father had backed his team up. Reins look like shoelaces intertwined with his huge hands. He held the lines so tightly, you could almost hear them crack under the pressure. He was calling out their names, very slowly at the start, his voice getting louder with each second. When he thought his team was together and ready to pull, he let out a war whoop to PULL! When the force of the pull hit the horses, it picked their front ends off the ground as though they were dangling in the air. They were breathing so hard that it looked as though fire and smoke were streaming from their nostrils in the cold night.

When my father's powerful team came down, they were together, pulling like the champions that they were. My father was calling out their names, commanding them not to stop. He had let the lines almost drop and was towering over them as the horses were almost up to their knees in the soft, muddy ground, but every step got easier. When they reached the road my dad even put a flare of showmanship into his great pull. He turned his horses sharply in the road and just pulled the truck around to straighten in out.

The look on his face was one my brother and I had seldom seen during the hard years of the '30's. He was almost laughing, his eyes dancing like big brown diamonds. What he did next I will never forget. He took the horses by the bridles, looked them deep in the eyes, and thanked them for not letting him down. The horses, still breathing almost fire and smoke with slobber all over their mouths, rubbed their damp heads all over his shoulders, knocking his hat off. It was like three kids bragging and laughing about a great victory, a truly joyous moment. Everybody there was shaking hands with my dad, confirming what a great team of horses he had. You can be sure that he was enjoying that special moment as much as we were.

We quickly hooked the horses up to the wagon, and I got to drive them home. The Christmas trees were all on in the neighbor's homes. The sounds of the horses' hooves on the pavement were like a Christmas carol as I let them trot home.

Like I said at the start, maybe you had to be there to appreciate this special event. Or maybe one had to live at that time to appreciate the special emotion that my brother, father, and I had felt that cold night. To me, it will always be the greatest livestock event that I have ever seen. The ribbons and trophies weren't there, but there was no doubt that my father was a master livestock man.

Once again, I thank you for letting me come into your homes; love your families. Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.