

Craig Van Arkel *Van Arkel Suffolks*

Craig grew up on a farm near Grinnell, IA. There were always a few commercial ewes on the farm, but Craig's first enterprise was raising purebred Chester White hogs; the hogs put him through college. Craig graduated with honors from Iowa State University in 1973 with a degree in Animal Science. He began farming and raising sheep fulltime in March of 1974. Craig preferred sheep over hogs and traded his hogs to his father for the commercial ewes. Craig knew the Suffolk ewes in his commercial flock had the fastest growing lambs and he saw more profit potential with purebreds by selling breeding stock.

In his quest for production data, he started being involved in the National Lamb Show in Minnesota and was a regular at the Iowa Ram Test Station and surrounding states test stations each year. He was notorious for his record keeping and ability to recite the genetics and production behind every individual in the flock. To identify superior replacements, he used an objective approach with scales, a calculator and a tape measure. At birth, lambs were weighed and scored using a system he devised using four measurements: from the last rib to the pin bone, length of hip, from dew claw to the elbow of the back leg and on the front leg. By plotting it against their birth weight, he had a frame score for the individual. Also he noted any other significant observations in the infamous lambing book. This allowed him to track both ewes and rams from top to bottom in different traits finding truly superior females to determine which ones would become mothers of stud rams. Pictures of the ideal Suffolk ram and ewe were always on the wall near his desk which supported his personal flock goals and judging guidelines: good bone, long strong tops, level rumps, structurally correct with natural muscling.

It was always a family affair; wife Debbie and daughters Emily and Thea worked alongside Craig especially in the preparation for showing and sales. It was one of the major family "together" activities. Annual family events were the Iowa Junior Suffolk Show, the National Junior Suffolk Show, the Iowa State Fair, the North American Livestock Exposition and other major shows and sales throughout the country.

In 1990 one of Craig's rams, "Country Music" was recognized as only the third Certified Meat Sire in Suffolk history. The recognition was based on rate of gain and carcass merit of a ram's offspring. The Van Arkels exhibited many champions at the various shows and sales over the years. Rams from the flock went on to be stud rams in many of the leading flock throughout the U.S.A. At its peak the brood ewe flock numbered about 200 head with 100 head of yearling ewes. Semen was sold in the United States, Mexico, Canada and Europe.

Craig judged numerous county fairs, the Denver Stock Show, Toronto Canada, and the North American Livestock Expo in 2000. He enjoyed "talking sheep", sharing with fellow breeders and encouraging youth getting started in the sheep business. He hosted tours at the farm to share his experiences and foster the industry. He helped several new breeders by creating satellite flocks where he could test rams he raised while helping the breeder improve the new flocks bloodlines.

Craig served 11 years on the board of directors, first on the American Suffolk Sheep Society, then through the merger and continued on the United Suffolk Sheep Association until his death in May of 2002.