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Foundation Builders

By Ted Serhienko



Catherine the Great was born a princess in Germany, converted to Orthodoxy and married the heir to the Russian throne, the Grand Duke Peter of Holstein, grandson of Peter the Great. On September 22, 1762, in the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin in Moscow, she was crowned ruler of Russia. Not many people in European courts believed that Catherine would last long as she was just another German without a drop of Russian blood in her veins. Soon after her coronation, it was rumored, she may have been behind Peter's death. Catherine the Great was often remembered for her many lovers.

During her reign, Catherine the Great expanded Russia's borders to the Black Sea and into central Europe. She promoted westernization and modernization, though within the context of her autocratic control over Russia and increasing the control of landed society over serfs. One of her mandates was to improve techniques in the agricultural regions, namely the fertile "steppe" in the country of Ukraine. She sent experts to study the soil and propose suitable crops. She made grants to landowners so they could learn the ways which were being devised in England, and to buy machines that were invented there. She encouraged introduction of modern methods to breed sheep and cattle and promoted horse-breeding. To work the under populated areas, she saw that more workers were needed. Catherine turned to advertisements in foreign newspapers, mostly German, inviting settlers and offering attractive terms. Thousands took to the road Catherine and her mother had traveled twenty years before.

Many of the settlers were of German-Dutch origin immigrating to that country from East Prussia. They spoke both high and low German as well as Russian and Ukrainian and some belonged to the Mennonite Church. Their beginning was very primitive, since the little possessions they had were brought in by horse and wagon. For reasons of safety, they settled in villages and farmed their parcels of land from their village homes.

Many immigrants entered the area from 1789 and well into the 1900's. Villages and towns sprang up over a wide area beautifying the region. In over a century of their existence and production, in their established homeland, they not only brought their farmlands into high production, but brought prosperity to the entire region.

But all of this prosperity came to an abrupt halt in 1917, with the uprising during World War I, the Russian revolution and the onslaught of communism. Calm had changed to chaos, a typhoid epidemic struck in 1919 and 1920, followed by the great famine in 1921. The people of Russia suffered greatly with many perishing.

In 1924, John and Mary Willms, left their native country of Ukraine, and along with fellow countrymen, boarded a vessel and journeyed to the new homeland, Canada.

With the aid of the Canadian Government and the C.P.R., they traveled west to Dundurn, in the province of Saskatchewan. With fellow immigrants, they purchased land and formed a co-operative village to replicate their forefathers in this unknown land. This was short lived due to the peacefulness and safety of the area and each separated to their new found holding. The couple acquired four hundred acres of land of which eighty acres was an alkali slough only suitable for livestock. The property was purchased from John Schwager, an immigrant who had previously come from Minnesota and had several land holdings. It was called the "Schwager Number One Farm." The couple's savings were spent on the purchase of the land, the journey limited the possessions they could carry, and therefore their life style was very meager in their new home.

On February 18, 1925, Jacob John Willms was born in Dundurn. He was the second eldest of nine children in the family. Jake took his schooling in Dundurn but after grade nine, he left to work on the family farm. In that span of Jake's young life, the drought of the thirties coupled with a struggling economy, put stress on the families and the community in general. To get further education, he took classes by correspondence and even went back to school at the age of twenty-two. From there, Jake Willms attended the Canadian Bible College in Regina and achieved a degree in Theology.

Several of the students attending the Canadian Bible College often skated at the rink located at the Regina Exhibition grounds, the same rink that bulls were shown and sold through the Regina Bull Sale years later. There, Jake met a pretty young blonde student from Edmonton, Bernice Taylor, who was attending the same college. They skated together, Jake played the saxophone, Bernice the organ (which they play to this very day) and the rest is history.



Fifty-eight years ago

Fresh out of the ministry, the young couple took charge of three of the area's churches, Hawarden, Glenside and a church they helped to construct in Elbow. When John and Mary decided to retire, Jake and Bernice returned home and took over the family farm. The couple moved into the Schwager house which had seventeen rooms and was a noted landmark in the area. The farm was a mixed operation of grain and a commercial herd of Hereford - Shorthorn crosses. Jake recalls, "it would frustrate us because the buyers (drovers)



The Schwager House

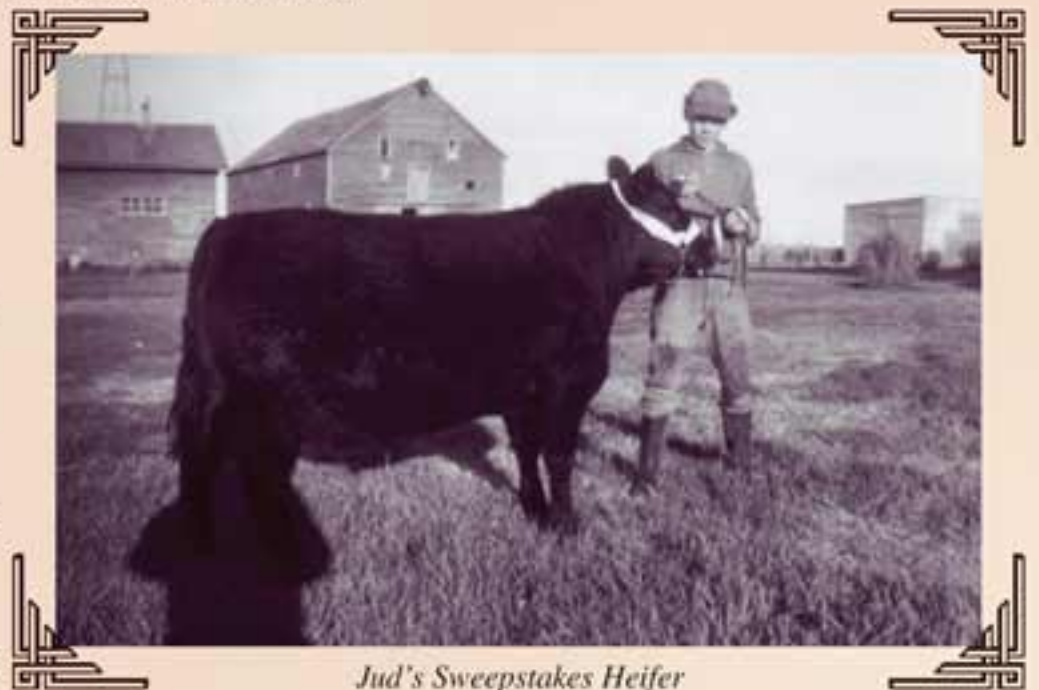
discounted our steers for their patchiness. I called Bill Miller (Miller Bros. Livestock) and asked him to find us a package of good Hereford heifers, but we had a limited budget." Miller told him of a good set of black cows west of Saskatoon that he should consider, but Jake wanted Herefords as they were the preferred breed at that time. Not able to get his heifers, Jake eventually took the trip out west to see the cows, liked them and bought the entire herd of fourteen. (They traded the commercial herd and added money to purchase the cows.) Jake adds "the cows had tattoos and we tried for several years to get the registration papers but to no avail".

The year was 1954 and the Willms family got their first taste of the Angus cow.

The following spring, the couple made a trip to the Battleford's Bull Sale to purchase a herd sire for the new black herd. John Grant had Grand Champion Bull which they bid on but could not afford as he fetched \$625.00 so they purchased the Reserve Champion bull from Robert Stables for \$510.00. For the next seven years they ran a straight bred commercial black herd. Although the breed was not popular at the time, Jake got to like the black cattle. He recalls "We appreciated the simplicity of the breed, the function, fertility and calving of the Angus cow and we stayed with them."

In 1962, they purchased a group of cows from George Lensen of Vanscoy, Saskatchewan. Jake recalls "the cows were all ages with several quite old. Several people told me that the cows were too big and excessive in frame which was very unsuitable for that time period when breeders were selecting the small 'box-like' type." This was the starting foundation of Wilbar for the next four and one half decades to follow. Another package of females was purchased at the Saskatoon Fall Female Sale. One being Blackcap Rose 3 from Alton Erickson, Mervin, SK. She was the foundation of the Ruby family in the Wilbar herd, which is still strong today. The other female from the same sale, Georgette Marshall, also coming from Alton Erickson was the foundation of the Wilbar Lucy's.

The post war years brought the baby boom, and in the 60's the 4-H movement in Canada was at its peak. Every farm kid wanted to be in a club and have a calf. The Dundurn 4-H club was one of the most powerful 4-H beef clubs in the area. Year after year the neighboring Evans family would bring their Hereford projects and sweep the club and later the Saskatoon Regional Sweepstakes. Jake and Jud, selected a heifer from Belbeck Angus Farm, Ron and Audrey Garbutt of Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. The purchase price was \$500.00, a very large sum of money to pay for a heifer calf in those days and they hauled her home in a home-made trailer. She was Jud's 4-H project and as luck would have it, the heifer was defeated at local club level, but at the Saskatoon Sweepstakes a week later, Judge Bill Small, named her Supreme Champion overall breeds, a first for the Angus breed in Saskatoon. Jud was also selected as the Champion Showman and had the thrill of riding in the Exhibition parade. "That was the day" Jake recalls "we got the show and promotion bug ... I know that Jud sure did."



Jud's Sweepstakes Heifer



Wilbar Georgina 5H

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As the children grew, so did the land base and the cowherd. They began exhibiting at local Saskatchewan fairs and each year sold bulls at the Saskatoon Bull Sale. As their bull numbers grew, they expanded the marketing circle by taking bulls to the famous Regina Bull Sale. A few years later, Wilbar consigned ten bulls to Regina and averaged \$2700.00.

With the startup of Canadian Western Agribition in Regina, Wilbar, like many leading operations became a part of the national scene. In 1976, Wilbar captured both the Heifer Calf Championship and the Reserve Heifer

Calf Championship under Judge Don Currie. The heifer calf champion, Wilbar Georgina 5H, had been selected by Lloyd Pickard, the Angus breed's leading marketeer and promoter to sell in the famous Cross-Country Sale. Immediately after the heifer winning the championship, the Willms were offered \$5000.00 for the female. Jake recalls "It was an unheard of sum of money for a nine-month old heifer calf and there was quite a family discussion over the offer. But we chose to gamble and let her sell in the Cross-Country." The next March, she was a feature of the sale and when the heifer entered the ring, Auctioneer Baldrige asked "If you would like to bid a thousand dollars to open the bidding on this heifer, put you catalogue in the air." At that moment, the room turned into a sea of white. Bernice stated "It was one of our most exciting moments in the Angus business." Wilbar Georgina 5H sold for \$16,250.00 to Loos Angus Ranch in Nebraska. A Canadian record and possibly a North American record at that time. Wilbar continued to be a regular feature at the Cross-Country Sale for many succeeding years.

By the mid eighties, Jud and Dan were taking over the decision making at Wilbar. Dan whose, preference was the land and cropping while Jud ran the cattle operation. In 1984, Wilbar purchased the Grand Champion Bull at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colorado – Premier Thor. The livestock industry was booming due to the influx of continental breeds being imported from Europe. These exotic bulls were putting pressure on the British breed bull market especially the Angus breed. Although the demand for Angus bulls south of the forty-ninth parallel was active, the northern market was stagnant. Looking for markets, the folks at Wilbar discovered John Carpenter from Kallispell, Montana who purchased their bulls by the "pot load" or two, depending on demand. To fill the orders, they also acquired bulls from Perryville, Benlock and Colin Matheson. This market was repeated annually for nearly twenty years until the discovery of BSE closed the borders for Canadian breeding cattle allowed south of the line. In the early 90's, Wilbar set up a herd of registered Angus in Czechoslovakia with countryman Milos Menhart, to cultivate and develop beef breeding standards in that country.

In 1996, Wilbar joined forces with M Double B Livestock, Bob, and Marjorie Blacklock to host the "Tools of the Trade Bull Sale," the third Wednesday in March each year. The sale provides producers the ability to select from the largest offering of Red and Black bulls in central Saskatchewan. In 2006, Wilbar along with Six Mile Angus Ranch hosted the annual "Sure Bet Female Sale" in mid October in Moose Jaw. They have been supporters of the "Angus Pride Sale" since it began. Each year they consign one of their best individuals to this leading event. In 2004, the top seller in the sale was, Wilbar Ruby 955N, purchased by Hamilton Farms. The Sandy Bar Advantage calf she was carrying , HF Kodiak was top seller in the Agribition Masterpiece Sale purchased by Geis Angus and Soo Line Angus for \$50,000.00. Geis Angus and Soo Line purchased the full sister in the following Angus Pride for \$10,000.00.



Sandy Bar Advantage



Although Wilbar runs a small battalion of herd sires to cover the three hundred black and red cows that make up the core of the herd, there are two sires that are noted new generation builders for the program. Early Sunset Hight Time 47G left a big mark on Wilbar's herd with his high producing, ideally made, broody daughters. Sandy Bar Advantage who was Grand Champion Bull at Saskatoon Fall Fair and a top ten finalist in the Royal Bank Supreme competition. Jud related "he was entered in Agribition, but Bob Switzer was the judge so we had to leave him in the stall as he would refuse to evaluate him, but his progeny have proven that he is a true champion in the pasture." Rob and Gail Hamilton liked what they saw in Sandy Bar Advantage and asked to acquire a portion of the bull. Since Bryan and Jud were looking at Hamilton's Power Source 94M bull, the Reserve Senior Champion at



Grand Champion Steer – Fall Fair

Agribition, the two operations agreed on a sire interchange so that they could all benefit from joint ownership. This past spring at the "Tools of the Trade" bull sale, Power Source sired the top selling sire group for Wilbar.

After fifty-three years of walking Angus sires at Wilbar, the Willms purchased a Simmental bull to walk in their commercial herd. As Jud explains "this is a first for our generation but our parents used Shorthorn and Hereford bulls in their early years. We cannot lose sight of, what our customers that we sell bulls to, are experiencing in their programs. By using another breed bull on our grade cows, we are putting ourselves in the same environment as our customers."

In the late 70's, the Angus breed was struggling for market share with the introduction of the new breeds from Europe. Jake was appointed to the AGDEVCO Co., a Provincial government committee to promote and market Saskatchewan purebred seed stock for foreign markets. When Agribition became "the" livestock show in Canada, the Board of Directors decided to send

representatives of the various beef breeds to the Royal Show in Coventry, England. Being haying season, it was difficult to find willing participants. Jake and his good friend, Ben Blacklock offered, Ben making the comment, "What the heck, we'll buy our hay this year!" That was the beginning of many Saskatchewan cattle being exported to the United Kingdom and around the world.

The history of the founders of Wilbar would not be complete without the mention of volunteerism by both Jake and Bernice. Jake has served on the Beef Committee at the Saskatoon Exhibition (now Prairieland), the Saskatchewan Cattle Breeders Association and Saskatchewan Livestock Association board of directors, was a founding director of the Saskatchewan Cutting Horse Association, a representative to the Saskatoon ROP Test Station and National ROP Advisory Board. He is a Past-President of the Saskatchewan and Canadian Angus Associations and has served as a director of the Saskatchewan Agricultural Hall of Fame. In 1981, the



Jake & Ben at the Royal Show in England

Willms attended the World Angus Forum in Christchurch, New Zealand. There, Jake, presented a paper on the benefits of ROP in Canada and later was a member of the judging team.

Bernice served as the Secretary-Treasurer of the Saskatchewan Angus Association for ten years. During her tenure, funds were very limited and remuneration was friendships and the love of the breed. She has served as a Commissioner on the Saskatchewan Horse Racing Commission, the Canadian Western Agribition International Committee and was Chairperson of the Hosting Committee for the International Business centre in 1990 and 1991. In 2006, Bernice was named the Saskatchewan Angus Association Honorary President.



57 Happy Years

Jake and Bernice were active in the Dundurn United Church where they worked with Sunday school and youth groups. They have served as leaders and volunteers in 4-H, were involved with their local Home & School organizations, and the Rink Committee.

The Willms were also involved with the inception of the Moose Jaw Angus Feeder Sale. In 1992, Jake and Bernice received the Saskatchewan Livestock Association Honor Scroll for their contribution to their community and the livestock industry. They were presented the 2006 Heritage Award for their commitment to the Angus breed and in that same year, Wilbar Farms was named Purebred Producer of the Year.

Jake and Bernice have been blessed with two sons, Jud and Dan and daughter Sherri (Hueser). All the children grew up with 4-H, reside within a mile of the home farm and are still involved with agriculture. Jud and Dan are partners in the farming operation while Sherri is Producers-Relations Manager at the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization (VIDO). Jake and Bernice are "sort-of" retired and spend their winter months in Arizona and Southern California.

When asked about his life and accomplishments, Jake replied "I have had a wonderful fifty-seven years married to a great lady and there was always a black cow at the end of each road."

THE SECOND GENERATION is built by two sons.

Jud was born in 1950, the eldest of two boys. He attended school in Dundurn, graduating with his grade twelve diploma. Through his teenage years, Jud was involved in 4-H, sports and activities on the family farm. He was a running back for the Saskatoon Hilltops of the Prairie Junior Football League and a member of the 1969 National Championship team. In addition to his love for football, Jud was a sprinter and a member of the Canadian National Track team.

In 1970 Jud graduated from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Regina and was posted in the Canadian capital serving on the Prime Minister's and Embassy details. But after being transferred to a three man detachment at Boyle, Alberta, he decided to come home and return to his agricultural roots. With his savings, he purchased four quarters of land adjacent the main farm for sixty thousand dollars.



But coming home was a two-fold mission, as while he was on the force, Jud was away from his high school sweetheart, Betty Reeves whose family was in the Simmental business at Hanley, a town just across Blackstrap Lake. They were married in 1972 and later blessed with a son Tom and a daughter Jennifer (Lyle Damrowsky) two grandsons, Tareq and Tyler. Betty has been the executive secretary for Prairieland Exhibition for nearly two decades.

At Wilbar, Jud's responsibilities are mainly the cow herd and marketing. He campaigned a show herd each summer to several shows and exhibited annually at Saskatoon Fall Fair and Canadian Western Agribition. The Willms' family was integral in organizing Fall Fair and Jud served on the beef committee and was



Constable Jud Willms

chairman for a term. Jud recalls "In those days we would struggle to get enough numbers to have an Angus show. The rules stated that in order to get prize money, you had to have a minimum of twenty five head exhibited. I remember John Bruce and myself calling people to get enough entries and even having to go get more at the time of the show in order to have it. Now at every show, Angus are the largest breed." When asked about the finest memory exhibiting cattle, Jud recalled "there are many, but 1989 was a special year. I entered one heifer in Agribition and the Eastern Angus herds had been dominant in the show ring. Well, on Sunday the Saskatchewan Roughriders defeated the Hamilton Tiger Cats in the Grey Cup and the next day, we exhibited the Grand Champion Female...the West beating the East on both occasions."

Jud served on the Saskatchewan Angus Board, the Regina Bull Committee and the Saskatoon Fall Fair Committee; he has judged numerous shows throughout this country including the Canadian National Red Angus Show at Agribition. Jud and Betty along with partner Doug Howe find great enjoyment in the field of horse racing. Among their string of horses is a filly called "Wind Dancer", named Horse of the Year and the winner of the Saskatchewan Derby.



Dan was born in 1952 and like his older brother, after graduating high school, chose to enlist with the RCMP. After getting his colors, he was posted to a detachment in Cranbrook, British Columbia.



Constable Dan Willms

While in training in Regina, he met Bonnie Bruck, who was employed at the Royal Canadian Mounted Police depot. Since the Mounties motto is "we always get our man," you know the rest of the story. Dan and Bonnie are blessed with a son, Bryan and a daughter, Angie (Rick Prokosch).

As the land base increased, Dan resigned the force and returned to his grass roots. The Red Angus influence began at Wilbar when Dan purchased a package of cows from John Wilmot of Pense, Saskatchewan. But Dan's love of agriculture is in the crops and soil which has been his division at Wilbar to this day. The land base consists of 10,000 acres of which 7000 is cultivated and 3000 acres of hay and pasture. The crop rotation consists of cereals, oil seeds, legumes and timothy hay which were exported to the Far East.

With the severe drought conditions in the late 80's, the Willms family chose to install four irrigation pivots sourcing water from the neighboring Lake Blackstrap. They now have nearly 1400 acres under irrigation.



THE THIRD GENERATION is formed by two grandsons. Jud and Betty's son Tom; and Dan and Bonnie's son Bryan. This combination is very unique as Tom's interests lie in crops while Bryan's are primarily livestock.....a reverse of their fathers' interests. Tom returned to the farm after completing high school and works with Dan in the crop side of the operation.

Bryan attended the University of Saskatchewan and graduated from the Agriculture program before returning to Wilbar. In 2002, Bryan married Tracey Edge, an Alberta ranch girl who was working as the general manager of the Saskatchewan Stock Growers Association. They have two youngsters, Kylie and Owen who will be the next generation.



Bryan has become the integral part of the livestock operation. He has served as President of the Canadian Junior Angus Association and the Saskatchewan Junior Angus Association and was a founding member of both associations. Tracey was the founding coordinator of the Canadian Junior Angus Association, and a director of the Saskatchewan Angus Association. She is currently show chairman of the 2007 National Show being hosted by Saskatoon at Fall Fair, Vice-President of the Saskatchewan Breeder's Association and Director of the Saskatchewan Livestock Association.

From humble beginnings, with perseverance, hard work and a special dedication to a breed of cattle, the hopes and dreams of Jake and Bernice Willms have become reality as Wilbar supplies the purebred and commercial livestock industry with seed stock of quality. And as the winter sun falls to the western horizon in the southern desert of Arizona, the founding couple will reminisce about the days they had trouble selling an Angus bull. These are the builders that have made the breed what it is today.

