

The Mohler Story

(Part One)

(Prepared by Mike Parks, with excerpts from the book
“Courageous Cattlemen” by Robert C deBaca.)

Many Red Poll enthusiasts today have never met Marshall Mohler of Thorntown, Indiana. This article is an attempt to explain to today's breeders what one person can do when they set their mind to it...this is the Mohler story.

Marshall Mohler was born in Hagerstown, Indiana in 1922. Times went from roaring to rough very quickly in the twenties. Marshall's father worked for the utility company, and was killed in an accident when Marshall was eight. He and his two siblings did whatever they could to help their Mother survive. Marshall's first interest in livestock was with pigs as a 4-H project. This interest never lessened. In fact, it still exists today.

After first starting at Purdue University, Marshall spent three years in the Army Infantry during WWII in Germany. His job? He planted “land mines” in what they called “No Man's Land”. When the ground became frozen, he would set land mines on top of land mines! Can you imagine doing that? No wonder he welcomed to opportunity to go back to Purdue after the war, graduating in 1946.

No story of Marshall would be complete without mentioning Peg, the love of his life. They met at Purdue, married in 1949, raised three sons and a daughter, and now, 59 years later, they are retired together near Thorntown. Always supportive, Peg (the city girl) traveled many places with Marshall helping to promote both the cattle and Purdue University.

Marshall received his Master's Degree from the University of Illinois (his thesis was on the breeding of low-line and hi-line Hampshire hogs) in 1949. He was hired by Purdue University that same year to be a farm superintendent. His first year was spent on campus, and the next thirty-five were spent in Wanatah, Indiana as Superintendent of Pinney-Purdue Farm. Purdue was the only employer that Marshall ever had.

When he arrived at the farm, there were thirty Red Poll cows waiting for him. Half of them were milked for the cream check and the skim milk was fed to the pigs. (It was very typical in the 40's and 50's to milk half of your Red Poll cows and let the other half raise all the calves.) By decree of the Pinney family when they gifted the farm to Purdue, a herd of Red Poll cows were to always be maintained on the farm. Since Marshall had the cows, he decided to improve them.

As was typical of the era, the cows were small in stature & gained rather slowly. Slaughter weights seldom exceeded 900 pounds. Here is where the story of the most innovative, most widely known Red Poll breeder in the world really begins.

In the early fifties, he realized that to increase the rate-of-gain in his herd he would have to increase their size. Here is how it worked (as re-told to me by Marshall & from my own memory). He selected the five biggest bull calves in the herd, weighed them, fed them to yearling status, & weighed them again. He then used the fastest growing of the five on those same five cows the next year. What he also very quickly discovered was that the fastest growing calves also had the best carcasses. This remained consistent throughout his research trials. For the first five years he did not worry about inbreeding; he was after weight gain & growth. It should be noted that from 1950 until today, Marshall has always been involved with linebreeding. The process works, works well, and made him famous.

(Quotes from the “Courageous Cattlemen”)

“In the early fifties, before Performance Registry International (PRI) set up their performance registry, Mohler had established a program of gain registry (GR) and carcass registry (CR) for his breed.”

“Let’s look at results. In the mid fifties, Pinney-Purdue set a goal to breed a Red Poll strain of cattle that would consistently produce steers weighing a 1000 pounds at a year of age and grade low choice. Later, a minimum of 50% cutability was added.

From 1960 to 1978, they added 100 pounds to weaning weights, took essentially 100 days off of slaughter age (same weight), added a half inch to the ribeye, & took off .2 inches of fat. As geneticists will tell you, these differences are permanent. They are not environmental, they are heritable.”

“Marshall Mohler knew what he wanted to do and he did it. Not hampered by an over-popular breed, he set out with selection to make a great herd out of the cows on the Pinney-Purdue farm. He proved that it is amazing what you can accomplish if you set your mind to it.”

(End of quotes from the “Courageous Cattlemen”.)

Always loyal, often frustrated, constantly thought challenging and highly opinionated, Marshall Mohler almost single-handedly made the Red Poll breed that all of us enjoy what it is today. At 87, he still tells me “I don’t think people understand all that we accomplished with these cows”. I tend to agree. Thank you, Marshall.

The Mohler Story

(Part two)

(Prepared by Mike Parks)

Pinney-Purdue Farms were exhibiting Red Polls at state and national shows before Marshall arrived there in 1950. When asked how they got along, Marshall replied “not well...we saw the bottom of the class pretty often.” That would begin to change in dramatic fashion once Marshall started being in control of the breeding program. (One of his pet peeves, then and now, was how the photographers of the forties and fifties would “doctor” the pictures of the cattle with paint brushes, making them perfect with no obvious flaws in their profile.)

Early on, he developed a relationship with the Donahue family of Earl Park, Indiana. Purdue bought all of their calves for seven years. Each year most of these calves were better than any that Purdue had bred. Then, Marshall was given permission to purchase the whole herd. From this purchase came the foundation of the performance program at Purdue. In that group, the first major herd sire that would make a “difference” arrived. His name was E.P. Pinpur Prince Edward. He appeared in EVERY pedigree when the herd was dispersed in 1985.

After five years of selection referred to in Part one, Marshall began to notice dramatic differences. He recorded them all. His records, all kept by hand, were amazing and all-inclusive. One set of records, lost now forever, was on calving ease. Every calf & their mother were weighed within 24 hours after the calf's birth. Over a period of 20+ years, Marshall determined that a calf would weigh 7% of their mother's weight, regardless of cow size. Consistently, after a bull's first calf crop, Marshall would castrate 90% of all bull calves for carcass evaluation. Amazingly, only 40% of those herd bulls would ever be re-used in the Pinney herd. He offered, in 1985, a complete set of records on birth, weaning, yearling, & carcass information that had been compiled over a period of thirty years. No one wanted them.

I first met Marshall in 1958. I was ten. I purchased (Dad paid for) the first Red Poll I ever owned. Thus began fifty years of affiliation with the mind of a great cattle breeder. It should be noted that any purchase that I have ever made in this breed that did not have a strong influence of Purdue blood DID NOT work. I understand that that is just my experience, but it has been consistent for fifty years.

Until the mid seventies, the Red Poll breed held summer field days, called Type Conferences, fairly often. Usually, the largest attended with the most documentation presented at these events were held at Pinney-Purdue Farm.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, State sales were a popular spring event each year. Pinney-Purdue supported many of these sales with consignments. This is what I remember. They almost always topped the sale and had the highest average. At the time, you were allowed to sell one bull for every five females you sold. That suited Marshall's plan to a tee. He would sell a good bull, 2 really good females, 2 more that weren't too bad, and one that he really needed to get rid of. If you wanted to buy one his "great" bulls, you usually had to make a trip to Wanatah. The "great" ones were almost always sold privately at the farm. At these sales, his sharp eye and knowledge of weights enabled him to buy cattle, take them home, resell them the next day, and cover all of his sale expenses with the profits. More than any consignor I ever knew, Marshall would almost always go home with several head. He strongly believed in and supported sales. Along the way, he set the price structure for the entire breed, based on what his cattle brought.

Marshall made several trips overseas, especially to New Zealand & Australia. There, he became a legend, both as a judge and a geneticist. He was asked by one Australian herd (I do not remember who) to select cattle for them that would win their national carcass show. He picked out six cows and a herd bull and suggested that their offspring would win. The result, four of the next six years, Marshall was right! (As a side note, Marshall judged a carcass show for pigs at a county fair in northern Indiana for over 15 years. He picked the champion carcass while still on foot every time except for three. These three placed either 2nd or 3rd. Remarkable!)

Pinney-Purdue produced many National Champions in the show ring; today no one remembers how many there were. For many years, they won both the bull & the female show trophies, along with being Premier Breeder and Exhibitor.

The first great one that I remember was Pinpur Baron. He was the first Red Poll bull ever produced that had a higher post-weaning gain than he'd had as a weanling. He was awesome, and so were his calves. Baron produced perhaps the four greatest sons the breed had ever seen. They were Pinpur Basic, Pinpur Walking Tall, Pinpur Sizemore, and Pinpur Pro. If you trace back a few generations, these five bulls and their sons and daughters can be found in over 85% of Red Poll pedigrees today. Pinpur Baron is the only bull in this breed that I can remember that produced three National Champion sons (Basic was reserve to Walking Tall) that all produced national Champion offspring. Baron certainly changed our breed forever.

Marshall has collected more carcass data than any Red Poll breeder alive today. Here's a tip on marketing for you. He had a card file of customers that would buy quarters and halves of beef from him. He never met most of them, but with his card file he would call them when he knew that they were about out of meat. They almost always re-ordered, Marshall got his carcass data, and the Pinney-Purdue farm consistently was the only one of the Purdue outlying farms at the time that operated in the black every year!

Did we end up making Red Polls too big? Absolutely. Did Marshall contribute to that? Yes, he certainly did. But the story doesn't end there. After retirement in 1985, Marshall purchased (with Purdue University approval) six females to start his "retirement herd".

He moved them to Thorntown, Indiana and combined them with his son Alan's herd and with the McVey herd, which Alan managed.

When the MARC Red Poll Research herd was dispersed, Marshall selected two cows and instructed Mike & Hal Johnson to buy one of them for him. This cow, MARC Eva, became a new foundation female for Mohler's. His goal became to make their cowherds more grass-based, smaller framed, and extremely sound. From all of this, came a bull Marshall called Hoosierland Classic. Classic sired Hoosierland Marcus, and Marcus sired Dunroamin' Century Twenty-one. Century 21 was on his way to Louisville, trying to become Marshall's last National Champion Bull, when he slipped on wet concrete being led to the trailer and was injured & left at home. (I know this for a fact...I was on the halter.) Today, four sons of Century 21 are the predominant sires of big topped, deep ribbed, very sound Red Polls being produced today.

As with all of us who've been around a while, there are many stories that could be told on us and about us. Marshall Mohler is no different, except for this one fact. **HE REALLY MADE A DIFFERENCE IN OUR RED POLL BREED.** This difference will live on for as long as our Red Cows shall walk our pastures. Thank you, Marshall.