

Robert Wagner

Colorado

Bob Wagner met his first Suffolk sheep in 1977 or 78. At the time he was living in central Maine and raising replacement dairy heifers belonging to a local dairy farmer. The heifers arrived as week old calves and were kept until they were old and large enough to breed. Badly wanting a livestock operation where he actually owned the stock and could make all the management decisions, Bob purchased a flock of mostly commercial ewes of which the Suffolks were only a small part. However, it must have been something approaching love at first site, since, in a relatively short time, the flock became completely registered Suffolk sheep and grew to be as large as 150 ewes.

Bob grew up and was educated on the East Coast. He was born in Maryland and went to school in Delaware (primarily to play football) and Boston before moving to Maine and getting into agriculture. After a year spent in Belgium, Bob moved to upstate New York where he first began showing at his county and state fairs and selling sheep at sales in Ohio and Virginia.

In 1993, Bob and a colleague he met, worked and became friends with in graduate school founded a company where they intended to use technology they created to do DNA testing for genetic defects and production traits. Bob planned to operate that company and his friend, Miroslav Radman, a brilliant scientist from Croatia, would continue to operate his lab, which, at the time, was in Paris. Thus Gene Check was created. In looking for a home for the new company, Bob needed to find a place where he could easily recruit scientists and yet still afford to run his sheep operation. He selected the front range in Colorado and moved with his 14 year old daughter and his Suffolks. Gene Check officially began operating March 15, 1994 in Fort Collins (the company later moved to its current location in Greeley, Colorado).

A chance meeting at the Top of the Rockies Sale with John Eagle (who was then living in Oregon and has since become a life-long friend) introduced Bob to Katherine O'Rourke, a leading researcher of scrapie and allowed Gene Check to be the first company in the US (perhaps the world) to offer scrapie susceptibility testing for sheep.

(Sheep are fortunate and unusual in that they have dominant resistance to scrapie. Scrapie is a "transmissible spongiform encephalopathy" a class of lethal diseases found in most mammals, including humans. Dominant resistance means that a sheep needs only to have one copy of the resistant gene to be resistant to virtually all scrapie.)

Gene Check today tests tens of thousands of sheep each year for scrapie susceptibility and other genetic traits and defects.

Shortly following the move out West, Bob met his wife Jan (an anesthesiologist and pain management doctor). They kept the sheep and began selling at Top of the Rockies, Reno and Sedalia. Over the next few years, they had Champion Ewe and Champion Ram at Sedalia.

About this time, Bob began to get more involved with Suffolks at the national level. In 1997 or 98, although he was not a director of either board, Bob was approached by the secretary of the National Suffolk Sheep Association (NSSA) and asked to chair a meeting of the two boards representing the two national Suffolk associations active at the time (NSSA and the American Suffolk Sheep Society) to explore the possibility of merging. The meeting was arranged and held in Las Vegas. Bob chaired the meeting and prepared and presented a proposed merger agreement. The two associations agreed to merge and the result is the USSA.

Although not on the first USSA board, Bob served as a Director of the USSA and as its President for four years. He helped the office computerize its bookkeeping and played a key role in hiring Amanda Everts to be the USSA Executive Secretary.

Today Bob and Jan live on a 6,000 acre ranch in northern Colorado where they raise Charolais cattle and Border Collie stock dogs. Being a part of the Suffolk world, both as a producer and as a provider of genetic testing, has been a major piece of Bob Wagner's life. He feels that it has been both a privilege and an honor to have been part of the development of the USSA, to have been able to breed and raise such beautiful and amazing animals and, most importantly, to have gotten to know and work with so many wonderful people.