

# AS YOU SOW, *so shall you reap*

THE STORY OF JOHN REEN IS NOT THE AVERAGE TALE. IT'S A STORY OF TOUGH TIMES AND OF ALLURING OCCURRENCES THAT SOME MAY CALL LUCK OR FATE. JOHN IS A MAN SHAPED BY HIS HARD EARLY YEARS, WHO IS AFRAID NOT OF RISK NOR OF SUCCESS, AND WHILE QUIETLY SPOKEN, YOU FIND YOURSELF HANGING ON TO HIS EVERY WORD.

WORDS: KATE BOSHAMMER IMAGES: SHOT BY JAKE







**JOHN REEN WAS BORN IN SYDNEY** in 1942 as the second child in a family of five children. His father was a fitter and turner and his mother was a hard-working woman characteristic of her time. In 1955 his family bought 103 acres (42 hectares) to operate a dairy farm beside Sydney's water supply, Prospect Reservoir, just 15 kilometres from the heart of Parramatta.

Going on to start his own trade as a boilermaker, John's training was cut short when his father was tragically killed in a car accident. At a mere 19 years of age with the world at his feet, John made the chivalrous decision to return home to support his family.

In a time of no real income, meals were often bread and grease in the pan, and tomatoes and eggs were shared by neighbours. Sacrifices were made and the goal was clear: to do whatever it took to hang onto the farm and pay that place off. John worked tirelessly to help support his mother and three younger siblings, rearing paddy calves and making do with his only method of transport, a pushbike.

The days continued to be tough with limited scope and exposure to opportunity. However it was a new beginning when John agreed to attend a Holstein sale at Moss Vale with a nearby dairy farmer, Billy Strong, who felt John needed a break.

The break came in more than one sense of the word. While still very green, but not without gut instinct, John's eye was taken at first by a heifer, lot nine, only to be told by Billy not to get his hopes up because in fact he was going to take her home. Not one for dwelling on what might have been, John moved his intuition-driven interest to his second choice, lot four. She was knocked down to her new owner for a sum of \$400, a bank loan John repaid within the year.

John says he's never looked back since that day. His luck had turned around and his new investment was the beginning of a long and successful presence in the dairy industry. The famous "lot four" went on to become one of the few cows in Australia that produced a phenomenal thousand pounds of butterfat annually, over three consecutive years.

She was soon joined by more females, purchases carefully selected by John to continue building his small, quality herd. Over his acclaimed breeding career his cows often featured in *The Land* newspaper's "highest producing cow of the month", and created state and national records for butterfat and milk production, as well as achieving numerous local and royal show wins. Being so close to the city, John made use of the nearby breweries and flour mills, and would source two or three loads of their by-product grain each week to keep his production levels high, and was also able to lease some additional nearby land.

After some time spent reading English and American dairy journals, John knew there were better genetics out there and progress to be made. He wanted to modernise and advance the Australian dairy industry, and so he did. John led the way in importing his choices of outstanding genetics, and carrying out artificial insemination and embryo transfer programs in his herd. This interest took him and his supportive wife Monica to America to cast a critical eye over the offerings.

On one occasion on their trip, during a guided tour of a genetics centre, John slipped away from the crowds to inspect the stock on his own. An older cow caught his eye, and on discussion with the man cleaning her stall, John realised he knew the cow, her breeding and her production from his research reading the journals. The next day, the tour leader took the visitors right past a particular bull pen, rather than pausing to inspect the animal.

There was no stall card with the bull's information and he wasn't in his prime. However, John's instinct and impression of the bull told him differently and he made inquiries. The bull was, in fact, a son of the cow he was impressed by the day earlier. He was privately owned and only in the centre to enable the owners' neighbours to obtain some of his genetics, rather than to be marketed by the company. Once he was collected, his straws would be eligible to export to Australia, and while John didn't have the money to spend, such was his feeling about the bull that he committed to purchase 500 straws at \$10 each, with funds loaned from his brother.

This proved a fortuitous choice well made, resulting in a resounding imprint left on John's herd and offers from other breeders of \$1000 per straw in the bull, 100 times what he paid.

While his dairy herd and reputation were flourishing, additional pressure was being placed on John to support Monica and his growing family of four small children. Although they never had "a lot", John says they always "had enough". Monica would help in the dairy and John spent most of his life barefoot and in a blue singlet and stubbies. They were humble, hard-working people.

However, following the death of his mother, John was advised by her solicitor and accountant that he would need to sell everything, or one day leave the place broken-hearted. The dairy wasn't viable, it was the breeding of cattle that was getting the family through, so things would have to change dramatically in the dairy for them to stay.

With the added pressure from siblings to stay and continue the dairy, John kept this information to himself and carried the load so Monica didn't have to. Though worried immensely about their situation of being between a rock and a hard place, John assured her that everything would be all right and they would just get through the next 12 months.

During this time, a relationship developed between John and fellow dairy farmers from near Dapto, about two hours away. Three brothers, who had achieved great success in the show ring, approached John to partake in an annual female production sale with them. He'd need to present 20 heifers for the sale and get them to Dapto. >

*Right: John with his daughter and son-in-law, Annie and Tony Scott, and their son Riley; age is no boundary for John, who is still actively involved in running the property; the magnificent "Karoo" home was built in 1938.*







As flattering as this offer was, John tossed the idea around in his mind for three weeks. After exasperated consideration over risk, reputation and finances, he agreed, but only for one year. Fortune was with John once again, as prior to the sale the Queensland government announced incentives for farmers to introduce new stud dairy cattle into the state, to improve their industry.

The buyers flocked and the sale exceeded all expectations. John had previously privately sold his heifers for the substantial sum of \$2000 each, and they had recently turned down an offer of \$3000 for one of the females destined for the sale.

The heifer went on to make \$10,500 in the sale, with many others selling for \$8000. Less than two years after being advised of the need to sell, John was back on his feet. Not surprisingly, and despite his initial intention of participating for just one year, the sales continued.

Life was enjoyable at “Monhaven”. Despite the early starts and hard days, John, Monica and their four children – Dan, Pat, Theresa and Annie – relished everything rural life had to offer, and there was never a shortage of excitement just outside their farm gate.

Labelled “Lovers’ Lane” by the locals, the dead-end road provided a secluded spot for engagement in questionable activity away from prying eyes. It was not unusual for a car to be parked on the side of the road at any time of day or night, and while affairs were the regular pursuits, the lane also played host to its share of murders and suicides.

While the visitors rarely gave the locals any trouble, there was an occasion when John, who was game to take on anybody who stood in his way, experienced a close call involving being chased across paddocks by a knife-wielding madman. In another instance, he resorted to pushing a panel van out of his driveway entrance with his tractor when the occupants refused to move the vehicle. Visitors to Lovers’ Lane would take their chance with the local farm children, who’d ride their pushbikes down to spy, play pranks and relieve the occasional tyre of air.

The simplicities of everyday life came to a screeching halt in 1988 when Monica received a phone call from the state planning authority. Their representatives visited the following day to inform John and Monica they were going to build a race track near their property. There would be dust, there would be noise. Farm life would never be the same.

They offered the family the going rate to acquire their property, the amount they’d paid other landholders in the area. The authorities had no price opposition on the land, as the area was zoned part of the green belt around Sydney, and therefore did not hold appeal to investors as it was unable to be developed.

*Above: John and grandson Riley get on famously; three generations – Riley, Annie and John; this man always has his finger on the pulse; Karoo Angus stud heifers in the scenic surrounds of a tidy operation.*

John didn’t accept their offer, but delayed further negotiation until he spoke to his solicitor, who also happened to be from a dairy farming family.

The following week, loud and clear on the pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, were the plans for Eastern Creek Raceway. A third of the track was on “Monhaven”.

The Reen family were settled and happy, they had their roots down and didn’t have any desire to give up their property, cleared by John’s father with a crowbar and axe, nor move one of the highest producing herd of dairy cows in the state. The authorities wanted them out in six weeks, but they weren’t going down without a fight.

The media hounded John for comments, television helicopters hovered and the radio news spoke of the “greedy dairy farmer holding the state to ransom”. The premier and his team paid a visit to John, to try to negotiate a deal. He stood up for himself, and certainly didn’t invite them in for a cuppa.

He had knowledge that while the government couldn’t resume his land, he would not be able to win his fight, so he inspected “Karoo”, a property at Meadow Flat, between Bathurst and Lithgow, a picturesque piece of land he found out about through his local vet. The vet’s secretary had previously lived at Orange and had often driven past “Karoo”, dreaming about the home that bore a striking resemblance to the house in *Gone with the Wind*.

Following countless visits to his solicitor, after daylight hours to avoid the press, John put together the terms on which he would sell “Monhaven”. The day he went to the Crown Solicitor to sell the farm was the day of the “Karoo” auction. Just an hour and a half after finalising the sale of “Monhaven”, John bought “Karoo” in the auction room of Dalgety House in Sydney.

It’s a rare man who can pull off such a feat. The Reen family left “Monhaven” in March 1989, after their last female sale, to make the move west to “Karoo”.

After years of experience with stud dairy cows, John easily turned his hand to the beef cattle industry, with similar success. Over the past 20 years he has built the Karoo Angus stud into a well-reputed operation, with the assistance of his younger daughter Annie Scott, and more

recently, her five-year-old son Riley, who adores his grandfather. The family run 300 stud cows and 800 commercial females on 5200 acres (2100 hectares) of stunning slopes, selling their bulls through their on-property sale in September, as well as privately.

Annie has proven herself as a hard-working and astute member of the “Karoo” team, tackling physical work outdoors with the same finesse she handles the administration and marketing aspects of the business.

She also assists her husband, Tony, with the management of his earth-moving business, and has become John’s right-hand woman since the passing of his beloved Monica in early 2008.

John said that three exceptional women have been instrumental in shaping his life – his mother, wife and daughter – who all share the traits of being constructive, kind and loving. He says he wouldn’t be where he is today without them.

It’s hard not to be drawn to “Karoo” and its custodians. The family has transformed the property into a magnificent spectacle of productive cattle, well-managed pastures and impressive infrastructure. The stately home, built in 1938, boasting 14- and 16-foot ceilings, four bedrooms and three bathrooms, is the jewel in the crown. It’s a peaceful place to bring their family together and is a symbol of John and Monica’s years of toiling and smart decisions to secure their future.

John seems to have a gift of recognising opportunities and assessing character in people. He is a man of few words and the ones he does choose are well considered. After a life of turning lows into highs, they are without a doubt, words worth listening to. [CWL](#)



*Fred Middleton has been part of “Karoo” all his life. He started working there as an enthusiastic 15-year-old and retired 50 years later to the old Cobb and Co homestead at the front of the property. This delightful bushman has just turned 70, and although never married, is known as a handy cook and even better yarn spinner.*