

The Opportunity of a Lifetime

Here's proof that nothing beats good, old-fashioned hard work.

Story by Diane Meyer & Steve Suther, Certified Angus Beef
photos by Steve Suther

As a small boy in a farm town, Travis Sherfick woke at the crack of dawn to deliver the *Hays Daily News* all across WaKeeney, Kan. In junior high, the enterprise shifted to mowing lawns, then, opting out of most high school extracurriculars, he fixed flat tires and finally headed out to the farms on spring afternoons his senior year.

Applying fertilizer and herbicides for Lee Sells of Collyer (Kan.) Crop Protection, you'd think Sherfick would meet some farmers. Heck, he already knew a bunch of them.

"I was always like that — never knew a stranger," he says, amiable as ever. His family ran a trucking company in town, and parents Terry and Angie often visited with friends across Trego County, many with children the same age as their three boys, Travis in the middle.

Folks knew of his work ethic, too. Brad and Margaret Schmitt farmed just a couple miles north of where Angie grew up, west of town, and Travis recalls sleepovers as early as preschool. He went through high school with the Schmitt boys, and he knew cattlemen Steve and Angie Ziegler and boys at nearby Quinter nearly as well.

Steve Ziegler called Sells when most of the work was done in fall 2006, the year Sherfick graduated. He was short-handed with a son off



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to college, and Sells agreed there'd soon be slack time that allowed for cattle chores.

Sherfick loved working with the crossbred cows, feeding, calving, tagging, sorting, anything that came up before spring fieldwork in 2007, and he said he'd be back. By that fall, he could see Schmitt was going to be short-handed for harvest, so he volunteered. A year later he was working his way into a full-time gig there.

"Travis just gets it done," Schmitt says. "He is a fireball of energy."

Something to call your own

Seeing that right away, and



Travis Sherfick

knowing his sons did not plan to farm, Schmitt soon had a serious talk to let the young man know, "If you're interested in farming, I'll be more than happy to get you started."

It sounded good to Sherfick after he saw just how a farm operates at every level, though he wished there were more than the few cows around. That gap kept closing seasonally

because, again, Ziegler needed help in farming's off-season.

"You can tell if someone likes to do cattle, or if they're forced to do cattle," Ziegler says. "I could tell Travis really liked the cattle part of it."

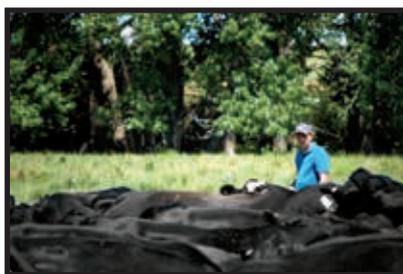
Most operators own their cows, but Ziegler was leasing with payment in replacement heifers put back in to keep up the herd. Like Schmitt, he knew there was nobody in the next generation interested in taking over.

So, after a couple of years of occasional help, in the fall of 2010, Ziegler offered Sherfick the ultimate opportunity: buying his 30 and taking over the lease on another 140 cows.

"At 24, I really did not have a whole lot to call my own," Sherfick said. "When Steve called and offered me the cows, I thought that's probably any 24-year-old's dream, to almost have something you can call your own."

He had to think about it. He

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talked to his girlfriend and now wife, Jessica. He talked to another young cattleman with more experience, Brian Walt of Collyer.

“Brian agreed it could be the opportunity of a lifetime, but only if I could adjust the lease to put my own heifers in and build equity in the herd,” Sherfick says.

The lease holder, being older and ready to help a young stockman, agreed, and Sherfick Cattle Co. had roots. Ziegler would transition into landlord.

“I didn’t know a whole lot about the cattle business, and it scared me some,” he admits, “but I’ve never been too scared. Challenges can be a great thing, and this was a huge challenge for me.”

Of course, he was up for it, drawing on advice from Walt and just about every other cattleman he knew or met. He also drew on his upbringing.

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Chasing the data

He had to be patient, however. Taking stock of the multi-breed cows with Red Angus-sired calves, Sherfick stayed with the plan the first year, but he made a change to registered Angus bulls in 2012.

“The more I studied and talked to others, the more I turned toward the blacks,” he says. “They were quite a bit ahead of all the rest when it comes to data.”

He bought young bulls and asked local Angus breeders if they might have any older bulls to sell at bargain prices. They didn’t, but they knew Sam Hands at Garden City, Kan., had some.

Sherfick and Walt drove down and brought back three older bulls. With the artificial insemination (AI) short course he took, that should cover the herd. Walt bought a load of commercial bred heifers at the Gardiner Angus Ranch customer sale in 2013, and Sherfick followed suit in 2014.

He Aled most of the cows to one Gardiner sire that year, and the heifers calved to another. He weaned and backgrounded the calves, but he lacked the cash to retain ownership on steers and cull heifers.

So, the young cattleman listed them on the Superior Auction video, telling his many contacts, of course. One friend near Colby bought them and said he’d be glad to share carcass data when it came in.

When it did, in April 2015, Sherfick thought it looked good, but wasn’t sure until he got together with Walt.

“Brian said, ‘Well, from what I

see, things went phenomenally, phenomenally well with those cattle.’ The 62 head went 100% Choice or better with 62% *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]), including 34% Prime. I had read about those demonstrations and what you could get from crossbred cows in one generation, but this really proved it to me.”

Sherfick has since bought a load of heifers from Joe Mayer of Guymon, Okla., and used more Gardiner bulls.

What drives him in large part is the “older generation” having the confidence in him and asking him to take on responsibility. What drives him the most is helping to make a future for his young family, wife Jessica, who works in the mental health field in Hays, and their baby daughter, Cora.

Looking to the future

Schmitt recalls Sherfick sleeping in the shop to check on calves during a bad cold snap. He saw no choice, because it was too far back to town.

That changed this past fall when the family bought a 300-acre cattle farm a few miles south of that shop and started building up the cattle facilities.

“All of our [200] cows will winter and calve here,” he says. “In the spring, we’ll take them back out to grass.”

Plans include a 500-head backgrounding yard there.

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Maintaining all ties with Ziegler and Schmitt, he figures the latter will always be his “farming headquarters,” with cattle exclusive to his new home place.

“I never would’ve dreamed as a younger kid that I would live on a farm as a beef producer,” Sherfick says. “Now here I am today with a cow-calf operation, and we bought 25 registered Angus cows and a donor last spring. That’s the core of Sherfick Cattle Company, and I know we can make a lot of progress pretty fast with embryo transfer.”

This year he’s using the GeneMax® Advantage™ test on replacement heifers to find the best of the best.

“We kept all of the AI-sired heifers the last couple years, but now we’ve got so many good-looking heifers, I need more help to find the top half,” Sherfick says. “In my program, we try

to find everything out we possibly can.”

Docility will be high on the list for selection, as it helps with the practicalities of AI and noticeably improves conception rates, he adds.

Sherfick’s college has been the real world, its successful veterans his professors. One of them told him, “Don’t ever quit learning. I’m 70 years old, and I still learn today.”

“Everybody’s got good ideas; it’s not just one person,” Sherfick adds. “I’m more than willing to use everybody’s information to hopefully, in the end, have a good operation myself. In the last two to three years, it has helped me out tremendously, tremendously, well.”

Professors Schmitt and Ziegler are proud of their charge, the former lauding his “best beef in the business.” Ziegler says, “If we can give

a young person an opportunity to do what they like to do, that’s what we should do.”

If not already, Sherfick surely will be a source of wisdom for younger generations. For now, he’s just grateful for the opportunities that have come his way. It’s not as easy as he once thought while slinging newspapers and mowing lawns, but it’s the kind of work for which he was meant.

“I will say that I get to wake up every morning for the last 11 years, and I’m never sick of going to work ... I love what I do,” he says. “Not many people can say that.” **AJ**

Editor’s Note: Steve Suther is senior editor, producer communications, for Certified Angus Beef LLC. Diane Meyer is a producer communications intern for CAB while in a master’s program at Texas Tech University in Lubbock.

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