

# Cornerstone Cattle

*Coffey aims to create Angus that lift the beef industry.*

*Story & photos by Nicole Lane Erceg, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

It's a word traditionally used to describe a foundational block that joins two walls, or a key feature by which others are measured. The word "cornerstone" isn't commonly used to describe cattle type. Then again, James Coffey of Hustonville, Ky., is no conventional Angus breeder.

His family does have deep Angus roots. A dusty bookshelf in the corner of his ranch office overflows with old trophies, faded show banners and backdrop photos that predate color. They tell the story of his mother's and aunt's successful show careers in the 1960s, but his Angus heritage extends to the day his great-great-grandfather joined the American Aberdeen-Angus Association in 1928.



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## Different path

Coffey is the fifth generation to raise Angus cattle at Branch View. The tobacco knife to the right of his desk and show relics are testaments to bygone days. The poster of a ranch-born Payweight bull hanging opposite the vintage mementos

hints to what has happened since.

Coffey always wanted to ranch, but his grandfather discouraged it. The late J.L. Hoskins, Branch View patriarch for more than half a century, built a foundation with his first Angus heifer purchase in 1932. Not seeing financial room for a young partner early on, he pushed his grandson toward a different path.

Getting that message, the

student at the University of Kentucky switched majors from agricultural economics to accounting. The graduated certified public accountant (CPA) began his career with a "big six" accounting firm in Louisville before purchasing his own business, just down the road from the family's ranch.



*"Most people have a horizon of the beef business that stops at weaning their calves," says James Coffey. "We try to have a larger vision, all the way to the CAB brand."*

Under his management, the sporting goods company grew to huge success, supplying major retail chains like Cabela's, Bass Pro, Gander Mountain and more.

Yet Coffey couldn't be kept away from the cattle.

Around his 70th birthday, Hoskins began to consider retirement, finally opening a door to his grandson's lifelong dream.

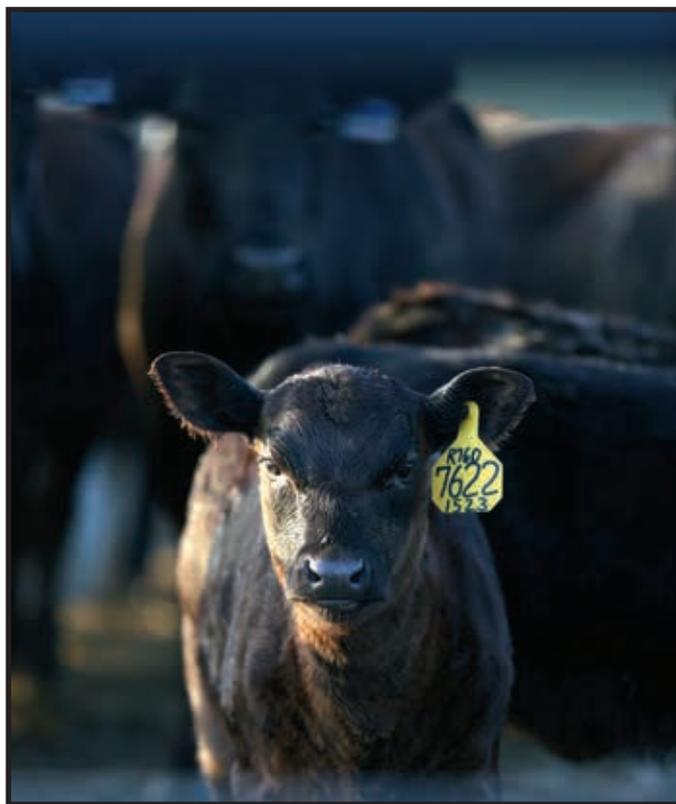
"Twenty years ago, I thought, 'We can do this better. I know we can do this better.' So I bought 20 acres of the place," Coffey says now.

Then, the herd maintained a steady inventory of 100 or more cows, but quality slipped as the aging Hoskins had moved to buying cows at consignment sales rather than keeping replacement heifers.

## Changing pace

The accountant in Coffey became a student again, making use of Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR®), analyzing Angus cattle data and assessing breeding programs he saw on a path that aligned with his goals. Like his grandfather of decades past, he invested in new genetics again, but with clear strategic intent backed by modern tools.

Along with that came an increased focus on artificial insemination (AI)



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as Coffey introduced embryo transfer (ET), ultrasound and performance testing. He built relationships with people he thought were "doing things right" and purchased their genetics to move the herd in a new direction. Coffey's foundation heifers and cows came from Bill Rishel, Doug Stevenson, Gardiner Angus Ranch and Vermilion Ranch.

By 2006, he was ready to launch the Branch View Angus annual production sale, which has grown to the largest Angus sale in Kentucky. To most, that would signal success, but it doesn't say enough for one with a vision to succeed at the highest level for both commercial cattlemen and consumers.

"It's about being the best, and the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand is the best in the business," Coffey says. "When I came back here, I wanted to do things better. I wanted to do things at a high level, and the natural progression was to produce registered cattle that will in turn produce CAB-type progeny."

## Measuring progress

Success metrics became data-driven as goals demanded knowledge. How did those genetics perform once they left the ranch? Did they succeed from gate to plate?

In 2008, Coffey decided to put his cattle to the ultimate test, sending a

load of calves to Pratt Feeders near Pratt, Kan., to find answers.

During the next four years he would send nine loads (both his own and customer calves) to be fed, gathering and analyzing carcass data on each group. The average for those nine loads was 86% Choice or better, with 31% earning CAB, including 3% Prime. When corn reached \$7 per bushel, he stopped feeding cattle, but had the confidence that Branch View genetics could grade.

Today the registered herd numbers 275 cows, producing 100 bulls in the annual production sale, along with about 80 females. It's been seven years since the last load left Branch

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*The most gratifying thing a Branch View customer can tell James Coffey:  
"Boy, that bull I bought from you was way better than my last one."*

View bound for the feedlot, but Coffey is ready to try again.

“I feel like our genetics are miles ahead of where they were then,” he says.

Drawing from his own and customers’ calf crops, Coffey sent four loads of spring 2017 calves to Pratt to obtain “a data set large enough to show people what they did.” The mission is not just to evaluate Branch View genetics, but to open doors for customers.

“If I could show backgrounders and feedlots what the cattle do and how

they gain,” Coffey says, “I can get bids for our customers and help maximize their calf price.” That’s all part of the plan, “looking at the big picture and how we as a seedstock producer can provide value through the whole chain.”

Sire criteria include low birth weight, high growth, moderate mature size and carcass traits that meet CAB specifications “without getting too heavy on one index,” including the beef value (\$B) dollar value index (\$Value).

“It’s a balancing act to find bulls that will do all of those things,” Coffey says. “It’s a challenge to find the right combination.”

The perfect bull is a rare find, but he says a systematic approach perfectly marries maternal and terminal goals.

“Power bulls” that meet those needs produce females with substance and the right mature size. He goes back on those daughters with terminal-type



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bulls, heavier on carcass traits like marbling and ribeye area. From there, it’s just alternating the generations in an attempt to find balance — high-performing females and bulls that generate progeny that grade.

“We want an animal that is going to make CAB, but also a functional female, and that is a balancing act,” says Coffey. “You can’t just focus on one EPD (expected progeny difference) or one measurement; it’s looking across the board. You want cattle that are going to produce bulls that go make a positive difference in commercial herds.”

Coffey’s focus, vision and knack for creating connections is adding to a 90-year heritage built on registered Angus cattle. His accountant side drives constant analysis to decide what’s next, eliminating what doesn’t work and adapting to make room for what does.

“I have a friend who always wants

to know what my best cow is,” he says. “To be honest, I don’t care which one is the best, but I can sure tell you which one is the worst. If you can get rid of the worst ones, then your whole herd is better.”

The foundation for Branch View Angus was laid long ago, but Coffey has acted as a new cornerstone, connecting the hard work before him to the technology and tools of the future. It’s a term he uses to describe ideal cattle, but it fits the breeder, too.

“When I say cornerstone, that’s not a term everybody

uses, but I use it to describe animals that have had a major impact across the breed,” he says. “If you look at his heritage, he’ll be in many, many pedigrees across the entire Angus breed.”

With 3-year-old son David on his hip, Coffey points to a high-performing 10-year-old cow that he can trace back to his original Rishel purchase and says, “Like her, she’s what I would call a cornerstone, the type you can build a program around.”

Investing in cattle like her, sound data, strong partnerships, hard work and value-based decisions make his proven formula for success.

“The goal is to continue doing what we’re doing,” Coffey says, “and try to keep doing it better every single day.”

**AJ**

*Editor’s Note: Nicole Lane Erceg is a producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*