



Royal Treatment

Gavin and Mabel Hamilton recall their day with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

by *Colette Knutson Gjermundson*

It isn't every day that an Angus breeder sits down to a meal with Great Britain's queen mother. But for Gavin and Mabel Hamilton, Belvin Angus, Innisfail, Alberta, Canada, their day at Castle of Mey in northeast Scotland was Aug. 17, 2000.

"You don't just go and visit the Queen Mother whenever you want to," Gavin Hamilton quips. But because the Canadian Angus Association (CAA) presented Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth with a heifer as a gift for her 100th birthday, the Hamiltons were among an elite group who enjoyed lamb and fresh produce from the queen mum's garden.

The Hamiltons were invited to attend the dinner because Belvin Angus bred the heifer

chosen as the gift, and Mabel was then president of the CAA. The heifer was Belvin Blackcap 38'99, later renamed Belvin Canadianna.

The CAA had accepted heifer nominations, and a drawing was held to determine which heifer would be given. Leo Brietzke, Three Hills, Alberta, had purchased the heifer from the Hamiltons.

"He phoned and asked if I'd be disappointed if he put the heifer up for the drawing. I said, 'She's your heifer, you can do whatever you want,'" Gavin explains.

Other Canadian Angus enthusiasts who met with the Queen Mum included: heifer donors Leo and Edna Brietzke; their

daughter, Sandra; and CAA CEO Doug Fee and his wife, Cathy.

"The Queen Mother's been a patron of the Aberdeen Angus Society since 1937," Gavin explains. "And she has a herd of Angus cattle."

Mabel adds, "During my tenure as president we asked her to be a World Angus Secretariat patron. She graciously accepted." That made her a patron of all of the Angus societies in the world.

The group toured the queen's cattle herd and old-fashioned, rock-walled garden before presenting her with the heifer.

"At 100 years old she could talk about anything and everything," Gavin recalls. "She

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► Above: Mabel and Gavin Hamilton (rear center), Belvin Angus, Innisfail, Alberta, were among an elite group of Canadian Angus enthusiasts who presented Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth with a heifer as a gift for her 100th birthday. Also pictured are (from left) herdsman Sandy McCarthy; Leo Brietzke, Three Hills, Alberta; Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth; Canadian Angus Association CEO Doug Fee, Calgary, Alberta; and Sandra and Edna Brietzke, Three Hills, Alberta.



►The Canadian Angus Association presented Belvin Blackcap 38'99, later renamed Belvin Canadiana, to the queen mother in honor of her 100th birthday.



►Gavin and Mabel Hamilton and their children, Quinn and Colton (pictured with their dog, Bailey), breed about 130 purebred Angus females annually on their ranch southeast of Innisfail, Alberta.

walked right up to get her picture taken with the heifer and said, 'What a beautiful female.' She liked the heifer's size and said she was very broody-looking with nice, straight lines. She actually said it was the best gift she had gotten because it was living and ongoing."

The heifer was bred to Belvin Spearhead 12G Fairlad 33/77 "Bandit." She had a heifer calf in January 2001. "They've sent pictures of the calf and are quite pleased with it," he says.

Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, died peacefully in her sleep March 30, 2002, at the age of 101.

On the ranch

The Hamiltons purchased their ranch, which is located southeast of Innisfail, in

1977 and started raising purebred Angus in 1978. They live just four miles from Gavin's home place, where his grandfather settled after emigrating from Scotland in 1892.

Gavin grew up with purebred Shorthorns while Mabel grew up with purebred Hereford cattle. "There are some pretty deep roots in the agriculture industry with her family and mine," he notes. Gavin learned the purebred business from his father and gained further experience by clipping and fitting sale cattle for many different operations.

Belvin Angus — its name created by combining the last three letters from Mabel's and Gavin's names — breeds about 130 females annually, calving from mid-January to late February on their 560-acre operation.

"I have no desire to get any bigger," Gavin

says. "I concentrate on raising some of the very best and getting paid for them."

They raise Angus because of the breed's strong maternal traits and opportunities to market bulls. "They're probably the most trouble-free cow there is," he says, adding appreciation for the breed's quality grade and ability to meet current demand.

During their first 15 years in the business, when the Hamiltons were building their herd, Gavin says they "kept the best and sold the rest, commercially." More recently, most of their females have sold into purebred herds. They host a female sale each December in Calgary, Alberta, in conjunction with five other breeders.

The Hamiltons do some artificial insemination (AI), but they do more embryo collection. They've sold embryos into Argentina, Australia, Austria, Denmark, Germany and the United States. They've also sold live cattle into Brazil, England, Ireland, Mexico and the United States.

Belvin Angus maintains a tightly bred herd. "When you get a bull that works on one cow, he's going to work on them all," Gavin says. "And it doesn't matter if you're selling commercial calves or selling bulls to commercial guys, that uniformity means a lot. Uniformity might add 2¢ to 5¢ a pound on a commercial guy's calves."

Marketing bulls

In the early 1980s, the Hamiltons began marketing bulls in Montana by guest consigning bulls with Ralph Milhaem, Deep Ridge Ranch, Warner, Alberta. After Milhaem retired, the Hamiltons started selling most of their bulls private treaty, a practice that continues today. Gavin cites cost, wanting to handle the bulls and marketing himself, and tailoring bulls to a customer's needs as reasons for choosing private treaty.

Ninety-nine percent of their bulls sell to commercial customers. Repeat customers pick their bulls in the fall or early winter. While a majority of bulls sell into Alberta, British Columbia and Saskatchewan, they also sell into California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

Besides marketing private treaty, Belvin Angus consigns 10 top bulls to the Calgary Bull Sale, held each March in Calgary, Alberta. "The sale celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2000, and we think it's the longest, continually running sale in the world," Gavin says. History researched for the anniversary reveals that the Hamiltons are one of only six families who were involved prior to 1920 and are still involved today.

On the road

Gavin is a former Alberta Cattle Breeders president and has served on the board for about 15 years. He assists in organizing the Calgary Bull Sale and works with the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede (CES), along with being a CES beef committee volunteer.

Still, when it comes to industry organizations, Mabel usually carries the family torch. "I was raised to believe that if you belong to something, you better take part," she says. She's worked through the ranks to become chairperson in many organizations.

"It's gratifying," she says. "There's personal satisfaction, plus I truly believe in our industry. The people I've encountered have been tremendous."

She adds, "I worry about agriculture. Where is it going? How can you encourage kids to stay on a ranch with the way the economic situations are? That's part of the reason I do what I do — I want to try to make it better."

As a former teacher, her involvement was sparked with the Alberta Cattle Commission's (ACC) Agriculture in the Classroom program. "She set up the program and wrote the script," Gavin explains. That led to her becoming the second woman ever to serve on the ACC board.

Eventually, Mabel began working with advertising and promotion as a Beef Information Center director and then chairperson, as well as a Canadian Cattlemen's Association board member. Later, she became the chairperson of the Canadian Beef Breeds Council, and then served as CAA president from June 1999-June 2000. Currently, she is a CAA board member and serves on the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency board.

CAA CEO Doug Fee notes, "Very few people have contributed as much as Mabel [has]. In addition to the major contributions she made as president of the Canadian Angus Association ... she was president of the Canadian Beef Breeds Council for three years, including the year we hosted the Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) convention in Calgary. Her work has enhanced the image of the Angus Association and our breed in Canada."

Noting Gavin's industry involvement, Fee asserts, "Together, they are excellent ambassadors for our breed and the industry."

"Even though I've been into cowboy politics for a long time, this is still a family



►The Queen Mother (second from right) has been a patron of the Aberdeen Angus Society since 1937 and became a World Angus Secretariat patron during Mabel Hamilton's tenure as Canadian Angus Association president in 1999-2000. Also pictured are Gavin and Mabel Hamilton, Leo Brietzke and Doug Fee.



►"We were just standing side by side," Mabel Hamilton says. "She (the Queen Mother) touched my arm and said, 'Come sit here, dear.' I thought, 'Oh my...OH MY!' But we sat down, and she was so easy to visit with it was amazing. It was like sitting and talking to your grandma."

operation and family comes first," Mabel says. "The kids have been wonderful and so has Gavin."

American Angus Association Board Member Ben Eggers, Mexico, Mo., concurs, saying, "It's very much a family Angus operation. Gavin, Mabel and the kids all pitch in. Mabel is certainly one of the good ambassadors that the Canadian Angus Association has had since I've been around. Gavin is a very astute cattleman, absolutely one of the top breeders in Canada."

Across the Atlantic

Twenty-five years in the Angus business and the beef industry has provided the Hamiltons with hundreds of rewarding experiences, but an obvious highlight was meeting Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth.

Recalling the meal inside the Castle of

Mey, Mabel says, "Before we went to eat, protocol was explained. We were shown our seating plan and there was even protocol on how to enter." As CAA president, Mabel was honored to sit at the head of the table opposite the Queen, so the two women marched into the dining room together behind the Queen's pages.

"I tell you, there was certainly 'Pomp and Circumstance,'" she says. "It was absolutely elegant. We had new place settings for every course.

"It was the experience of a lifetime," Mabel concludes. "Gavin sat by the Queen Mum during lunch, and she is so delightful and such a conversationalist that he hardly had time to eat. We left at 3 p.m. and she, a 100-year-old woman, had another reception for 60 people that evening."

