

Certified Visionary

Mick Colvin's legacy revolutionizes beef branding.

BY SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS



Mick Colvin will soon have a special parking spot at the Certified Angus Beef Program headquarters in Wooster, Ohio. Colvin will retire Oct. 1 as the first executive director of the Program.

As a kid growing up on his family's dairy farm in Bedford County, Pa., Louis M. "Mick" Colvin was not a big fan of milking Jersey cows.

"The milking started at 5 a.m., and I had to carry milk in buckets to the milk house," says Colvin, executive director of the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program. "I hated it with a passion."

As an adult, though, Angus cattle have been Colvin's passion, and that passion has led to unprecedented growth and success for the Angus breed. With bull-headed persistence and an uncanny long-range vision, Colvin increased demand for registered Angus cattle by helping make the breed a much sought-after commodity from the pedigree to the plate.

Today the CAB Program, which the American Angus Association began as a one-man operation in January 1978 with Colvin at its helm, has a budget of more than \$10 million and employs more than 70 people. Colvin, 61, who retires this month, attributes the CAB Program's phenomenal success to his colleagues, a view in keeping with his "share-the-credit" style of leadership.

"I'm proud of my staff and of the relationships we've developed as an organization," he says at the CAB Program's headquarters in Wooster, Ohio. "It's attitude, pride and commitment of the people who work here. I just manage growth and people."

Bob VanStavern, who wrote the *Certified Angus Beef*™ specifications 22 years ago, knows Colvin has done much more than just sit back and manage.

"I don't believe there is anyone alive who could have done what he did with this program," VanStavern says.

When the American Angus Association decided to establish its CAB Program two decades ago, many in the industry scoffed at the concept. Beef had been sold generically, not under a brand name. Even Angus breeders doubted one type of beef could be special enough to sell as a brand on its own. Yet restaurants around the world now tout the *Certified Angus Beef* brand in their promotions.

"I worked in the industry and was aware of what people thought," VanStavern says. "Anyone who knew the industry thought it couldn't be done. But Mick didn't know. He didn't know it couldn't be done, so he just kept on doing it. Doggedly."

SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS PHOTO

■ College and career

As a young man, Colvin loved horses as much as he despised carrying milk. When he enrolled at Pennsylvania State University in 1956, he majored in animal husbandry. To make ends meet, he worked at the university's hog farm, cleaning pens, grinding grain and feeding hogs for 80¢/hour.

In his sophomore year he married his high-school sweetheart, Virginia Diehl. The couple lived in a small trailer. In order to help with Mick's college costs and to keep food on the table, Virginia worked at a retail store and sold Avon — lots of Avon. "When her Avon orders came in, the trailer was full of packages!" Colvin remembers fondly.

He graduated in 1960 and was offered a number of opportunities in the swine industry. His livestock judging coach and professor of animal husbandry, Herman Purdy, urged him to consider a career in the purebred Angus industry.

"I was a member of the Penn State livestock judging team and had won three major contests," Colvin recalls. "Although I knew little about the purebred beef industry at that time, Herman apparently had a lot of confidence in me and had given me an excellent recommendation at a major purebred Angus operation."

That summer Colvin visited Mole's Hill Farm, an Angus operation in Sharon, Conn. He was hired as herdsman — and was soon learning everything possible about his new responsibilities.

"We moved to Connecticut with only a magazine rack and card table," Colvin says. He and Virginia settled into their first home without wheels, an old farmhouse. After the trailer, it seemed like a palace. They bought used bedroom and living-room furniture, but they soon needed to furnish a nursery. Their first son, Michael, was born later that year; the second, Scott, arrived three years later.

On the job, Colvin was demonstrating exceptional talent. "I was responsible for the show cattle," he says. "I fed, fitted and showed them. Before I left, Mole's Hill Farm had three International champions and a National Western champion." In 1963 Colvin was honored as the national herdsman of the year, receiving the coveted John B. Brown Memorial trophy.

His success didn't go unnoticed.

"I was offered a job with Herefords that I really didn't want," he says. "But as an incentive to keep me at Mole's Hill, they gave me a cow of my choice each year,



Colvin and members of the Angus Beef Certification Advisory Committee select the organization's logo at the February 1978 meeting. The committee consisted of (front row) Colvin; the late Harold Etling, Marshallville, Ohio; (back row) the late Elliot Frank, Grayslake, Ill.; the late Edward Elliott, Mount Victory, Ohio; and Fred H. Johnson, Summitville, Ohio. (Not pictured: Bob VanStavern, Columbus, Ohio; and Charles Cannon, Flemingsburg, Ky.)



Mick Colvin congratulates the first meat cutter to offer *Certified Angus Beef*™ product to consumers at Renzetti's IGA of Columbus, Ohio. The date — Oct. 18, 1978.

CERTIFIED VISIONARY CONTINUED



SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS PHOTO

“It took us 22 months to sell the first million pounds of product,” recalls Mick Colvin. “Today we sell 1 million pounds every 22 hours.”

which enabled me to start my own Angus herd. When I left, I had four Angus cows.”

The job that finally lured Colvin from Mole’s Hill consisted of managing a 2,000-acre plantation in Aiken, S.C. It wasn’t long before Longleaf Plantation had Angus winners of its own.

“They’d never shown cattle nationally,” Colvin says. “The second year I was there, we had the supreme champion at the All-American Futurity in Lexington, Ky.”

■ **Joining the Association team**

The Colvins stayed at Longleaf for two years. In October 1968 Mick joined the American Angus Association team. It was a move that changed his life and, eventually, the way many consumers around the world buy beef.

As a fieldman initially based in Bedford County, Pa., he was closer to his ancestral roots. He traveled extensively through Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania, doing everything from counseling new breeders to coordinating stock shows. A year later the family bought a century-old farmhouse with 120 acres near West Salem, Ohio, where Mick and Virginia continue to live and raise Angus cattle today.

During his 10 years on the road as a fieldman, Colvin made contacts in every segment of the beef industry, associations that would help him in years to come. He also became better acquainted with Fred Johnson, owner of Summitcrest Farms, who was then president of the Northeast Ohio Angus Association and a man who would greatly influence Colvin’s life.

■ **Laying the CAB Program foundation**

Cattle type changed during the 1970s, with the imported exotic breeds becoming more popular at the expense of the traditional British breeds. The number of cattle registered with the Association dropped from 406,310 in 1968 to 222,608 in 1978.

But the exotic cattle wouldn’t marble like Angus cattle had. To maintain a supply of Choice-grade beef, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1976 lowered its standards for the top grades of beef — Choice and Prime — which made it more difficult for consumers to know the quality of beef they were getting.

Alarmed that lower-quality beef could further erode beef’s market share and consumer demand, two Angus breeders

from northeast Ohio — Johnson and Harold Etling — decided something needed to be done.

“Harold came to me with the idea of wanting to change things,” Johnson recalls. “He was upset about the USDA changes. He wanted to produce quality beef. We wanted to identify our superior product in the marketplace.”

Appointed by the president of the Association’s Board, the two became the nucleus of the soon-to-be Angus Beef Certification Advisory Committee. When Colvin dropped in on a committee meeting, the encounter marked a pivotal point in his career.

“Jerry Morrow, the director of fieldmen, and I were coming home from a show, and he wanted to stop by,” Colvin says. “I had no interest in the meats end of the beef industry. As an innocent bystander at that committee meeting, I asked the question, ‘Can you identify Angus cattle in a high-speed packing plant and maintain identity to the consumer?’ I also asked, ‘If it could be identified, evaluated and segregated, would the consumer pay more for it?’ They asked me to look for answers to those questions, and I agreed to do so.”

Colvin returned with the answers and assumed his responsibilities with the committee were complete. Instead, he was eventually asked to oversee the Association’s new program, the Certified Angus Beef Program. “The committee knew Mick very well,” Johnson says. “We knew that if he agreed to take the job, he’d stick with it. He was a natural to take the job.”

Colvin, though, wasn’t easy to convince. He already had notified the Association president of his plans to resign to do consulting work with Angus breeders and to manage the family farm.

“As hardheaded as I am, it took a group of Association Board members, Angus breeders and friends to talk me out of resigning, and I don’t know to this day how they did it,” he recalls. “I said, ‘OK, I’ll stay two years. I’ll get the Program started. Then I want to go back to the farm.’”

He became the CAB Program’s executive director in January 1978.

■ **David and Goliath**

Energized by the challenge, Colvin set up operations in his cramped, home-based farm office. He met with industry representatives daily and talked with others nationwide about the new branded-beef

Mick's Conestoga wagon wheel

Staff around the Certified Angus Beef (CAB) Program headquarters call them "Mickisms," favorite sayings and stories Mick Colvin uses: "You can't un-ring a bell." ... "Walk a mile in someone else's moccasins." ... "We didn't know it couldn't be done." ... "Stick with the girl who brought you to the dance." ... "I've never seen our staff stronger than it is right now." ... "We've never been in a better position than we are now."

One Mickism, though — the Conestoga wagon wheel — isn't a simple sentence, but rather an analogy of how he believes the Program works and what has enabled it to get where it is today.

"Everyone wanted to be a pioneer until they were asked to take that first step into the Conestoga wagon as part of a wagon train headed west to unknown territory," Mick said in a 1995 Christmas-party talk to his staff. "No one wanted to do that." Much like the canvas-covered wagons that forged ahead to new frontiers, this branded-beef Program carried the Angus breed into unknown and unexplored market areas.

"The CAB Program is symbolic of a wheel on the Conestoga wagon," Colvin explained. "The axle is our consumers because everything revolves around them; and the hub is our licensees. Each spoke is a division of the CAB Program. Employees support the licensees. The outside steel rim, which holds everything together, is the Program's mission statement and the essence of the Program itself."

After his presentation, Colvin, feeling a bit proud of what he thought had been a perfect comparison, was taken aback by an innocent question from a younger audience member.

"Someone asked, 'What's a Conestoga wagon?'" Colvin recalls with a chuckle.

program. Convinced of the Program's potential, Val Decker Packing in Piqua, Ohio, became the first licensed packer, and Renzetti's IGA in Columbus, the first licensed retailer. Ten months after he took the job, the first pound of *Certified Angus Beef* product sold at Renzetti's IGA, with Association officials and even Ohio's governor, Jim Rhodes, joining the celebration.

"We stayed at the cash register and waited for the first pound to sell," Colvin says. "The customer seemed embarrassed by the whole deal, but we got tremendous publicity for our start."

However, the ensuing media coverage backfired. Carol Tucker Foreman, an assistant secretary of agriculture, read a magazine article about the CAB Program, believed it to be misleading to consumers, and ordered it halted. Months of work unraveled in the blink of an eye.

"We objected strenuously and made numerous trips to Washington," Colvin says. "They claimed we hadn't completed the necessary forms. It was like chasing bumblebees. You'd think you had everything covered, and they'd come up with another excuse for withholding approval. It was like David and Goliath to go up against the USDA. It was an extremely frustrating period that worked harder on me than anything else in my life."

"Mick worked 28 hours a day," Johnson recalls. "People with less tenacity would have given up. But he and other people who believed strongly in the Program put pressure on the USDA, and eventually we were back in business."

On April 2, 1979, the USDA re-approved the CAB Program and began a mutually beneficial working relationship that paved the way for nearly 30 beef brands to enter the marketplace.

■ Skeptical supporters

While the CAB Program forged ahead, its financial backer had fallen on hard times. The Association's registrations and transfers were falling. "There was a constant rumble of, 'When are we going to cancel the CAB Program?'" Colvin says. Sure enough, Association Board members, seeking to trim expenses in 1981, required Colvin to make the Program profitable, or at least self-supporting. Though Colvin and his staff worked hard, they fell short.

On his way to the boardroom a year later for the critical vote in October 1982, Colvin

asked Johnson, "What do we do if they don't approve it?" Without hesitation, Johnson replied, "Mick, I'll back you 100% on whatever you decide."

Colvin opened his heart to Board members, urging that they continue the Program. "I practically got down on my knees and begged," he says. "I was passionate. I asked them, 'Can't you see what you have here?'" An 8-7 vote kept the Program alive.

In March 1983, the CAB Program broke even for the first time. Funded by 1¢-7¢/lb. fees paid by licensed meat packers, it then began to make money as more and more consumers bought *Certified Angus Beef* products. In 1987 yearly sales approached 50 million pounds. They nearly tripled within six years. Today the Program markets nearly 500 million pounds annually.

"From January '78 until March '83, when the Program became profitable, the Association invested \$281,276.44 in the CAB Program," Colvin says. "Today that same investment is returned every 58½ hours as demand for Angus cattle is increased through *Certified Angus Beef* promotions and product sales. It took us 22 months to sell the first million pounds of product. Today we sell 1 million pounds every 22 hours."

■ The leader and the man

The CAB Program's success is universally attributed to Colvin. Said simply, he nurtures people. The ways he cares about his staff, both personally and professionally, come forth in the stories they share:

- A staff breakfast every Wednesday morning fosters communication and camaraderie.
- He and Virginia visited a co-worker's home following the death of her grandchild. He often attends funerals of staff family members and staff weddings.
- Realizing that family comes first and not all family matters can be scheduled around work hours, he's flexible with employee schedules.
- The Colvins send each employee a card and ornament at Christmas.
- *Bull's Eye*, the office newsletter, announces birthdays, weddings, new births and employment anniversaries.
- Colvin hires the right person, no matter the individual's age or experience. Many are young people straight out of college

CERTIFIED VISIONARY CONTINUED



The first CAB Program office in Colvin's home now holds mementos of his life, from a family photo to Penn State diploma and paraphernalia to photos of his three International champions.



When Colvin officially retires Oct. 1, he and Virginia hope to catch up on a lot of things that have been on the back burner the past 20 years, especially enjoying more time with family.

who become top-notch employees. "He has a tremendous respect for youth," says Tracey Erickson, 32, an assistant executive director who joined the Program seven years ago. "I never felt like he was talking to a kid. There was always a mutual respect. The information I had was of equal importance."

Mary Ferguson, former CAB Program associate executive director, first met Colvin in 1974 at a stock show in Ohio, where — as a teenager — she was exhibiting her first Angus heifer. She worked with Colvin as a CAB Program employee from 1985 to 1992, and in 1993 she married Colvin's son Mike. From the beginning, Colvin's humble yet confident and sincere personality impressed her.

"There's that special something about Mick that attracts people," she says. "Contrary to what's typically expected from a person of his tremendous accomplishment, he's a remarkably humble man. That 'something' enables him to motivate, inspire and bring out the best in others. It commands respect, admiration and endless loyalty from those of us who've had the good fortune to work with Mick Colvin, the leader," she continues. "He engenders an abiding, ever-growing affection from those of us lucky enough to be near Mick Colvin, the man."

When Oct. 1 arrives, Colvin expects to catch up on a lot of things that have been on the back burner the past 20 years. He and Virginia also would like to reduce the time constraints of their cattle operation, continue discussing plans to build a new home on the farm, spend more time with family and enjoy their granddaughter, Caitlyn, as she grows.

Colvin plans to continue as a special advisor to the Program for a few years, he says. "This role will enable me to stay current with many CAB Program challenges and opportunities and, hopefully, be available to assist the new executive director in leading the CAB Program to greater heights in the years ahead."

Along with all this, he intends to keep his priorities in order by spending more hands-on time studying the "challenges and frustrations of the game of golf."



Editor's note: This article was supplied by the Certified Angus Beef Program.

SHERYL SMITH-RODGERS PHOTOS

What they're saying about Mick Colvin

“Mick hires the person, not the experience. An experienced person says, ‘It can’t be done. I’ve been there, and I know.’ But a person with the right attitude says, ‘Why can’t it be done?’”

— Brent Eichar, assistant executive director and 12-year employee

“I had NEVER worked for a company before where the executive director made it a point to get to know everyone and listen to everyone’s problems and suggestions.”

— Jenny Scalia, food service secretary

“He has always considered us as an extension of his family. He and Virginia opened up their home for parties and picnics.”

— Dawn Finch, information-processing specialist and 10-year employee

“If I could grow up to be half the father he was to me, I would feel very fortunate and happy.”

— Scott Colvin, son, Union, Ky.

“Mick isn’t afraid to let his emotions show. When he gets emotional, he isn’t afraid to let a few tears come forth, as he did many times when long-time employees left the company. To me that shows he has great compassion and humility.”

— Connie Garg, information-processing specialist

“Beyond his tangible accomplishments such as CAB Program growth, the confidence and citizenship Mick instills in younger employees is a legacy for which he should be equally proud.”

— Bill Wylie, food service assistant director and 10-year employee

“My father is a hard-working man who knows the meaning of commitment. He taught me some important life lessons, including that you get out of anything only as much as you put into it and that your word is your bond.”

— Mike Colvin, son, Luray, Kan.

“In life, there are only a handful of people who make a tremendous contribution to an industry, and what Mick has done with the CAB Program fits into that category. The foresight that he and others had to

establish quality criteria, monitoring and licensing is an absolute stroke of brilliance.”

— Larry Corah, assistant executive director, supply development

“In a flat to declining beef market, the CAB Program illustrates that consumers will purchase a branded product if we deliver up to their expectations. And it dramatically shows what can be accomplished if the will and determination are there. Mick will be recognized and known in this industry for as long as the industry is around.”

— Dick Spader, executive vice president, American Angus Association

“I see the *Certified Angus Beef*™ display at the meat counter, and I feel really great because that’s where people line up to buy their beef. It wouldn’t be there without Mick.”

— Fred Johnson, producer and co-founder

“Mick is owed a tremendous debt of gratitude by the American Angus Association because he established *Certified Angus Beef* product as THE premier breed-specific product. He’s done a superb job.”

— Butch Pfaelzer, chairman emeritus, The Bruss Co., licensed distributor since 1982, Chicago, Ill.

“We always said the product would sell itself, but I believe the Program would not have sold itself without Mick Colvin, who embraced the entrepreneurial spirit, vision, desire and passion to drive the CAB Program. The Program will continue to be successful after he retires, but it would never have been successful without this true beef industry pioneer.”

— Alan Waggoner, former associate executive director, Tribune, Kan.

“The demand for Angus bulls has never been greater, and the CAB Program has been the big reason why. . . . The popularity and expansion the Angus breed has seen the past 15 years is the direct result of Mick Colvin’s vision, direction and dedication to the CAB Program.”

— Dick Janssen, producer and former CAB Program Board chairman, Ellsworth, Kan.



Colvin respects his staff for their attitude, pride and commitment. They respect him for his integrity, leadership and inspiration.