

Moving the Beef

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PHOTOS BY FRED MINNICK

First CAB distributor continues to sell the best.

by *Miranda Reiman*

A self-proclaimed “MD” (meat dealer) in 1979 approaches his company president in Boston, Mass., with a magazine article and an idea.

“Here’s a guy who wants to sell these Angus cattle. We could really get on board with this and improve the beef we’re selling.”

That meat dealer was Charlie Robinson, now president of Oxford Trading Co., the first Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed distributor. He came to the business with an MBA (master of business administration), real estate sales experience and a will to work his way to the top.

“At first they weren’t interested,” Robinson recalls, “but I said, ‘Would you just please give him a call and let’s talk?’”

Upper management did phone former CAB Executive Director Mick Colvin, and the two companies started a partnership that is now in its 30th year.

At a time when Oxford was selling Holstein beef, Robinson read the CAB article in a trade publication, and it resonated with him. Colvin explained the specifications and the reasons the brand was created.

“He said they were sick and tired of just letting their cattle go for market, or sometimes even under it, when they knew the Angus cattle had the right genetics,” Robinson says. “Later, I found out how Harold Etling and Fred Johnson were sick and tired of not getting a good steak when they went out.”

“I saw that and said, ‘I’m sick and tired of selling these cows!’”

That June, Oxford signed a licensing agreement and Robinson traded up from the ungraded middle-of-the-road-beef to the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand.

Growing together

The companies have grown with each other the past three decades. It wasn’t until 1980 that CAB sold its first million pounds, and the 2008 fiscal year showed a record 634 million pounds (lb.) sold. Oxford seems to have the same upward momentum, going from \$6 million in business when Robinson took the reins as president in 1993 to \$50 million last year.

“That’s selling almost 10 million pounds of CAB,” Robinson says. “You know why? Because I believe in it.”

Today, Oxford services more than 100 licensed independent and small-chain retailers in New England, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Maryland. Robinson and company have helped grow the brand in the Northeast by identifying other potential licensees and by warehousing product that it sells to every buyer, including other distributors.

“My philosophy is that it’s a partnership. Even though they may be our competitors, if they need product, we sell it,” he says. “We speculate because otherwise we’d always be limited on what we could sell. We would take orders in advance and it would never be enough.”

Oxford also buys all cuts; that forces

its salesmen to sell the whole animal and contributes to an overall ranking among the top five CAB distributors by volume.

A pioneer

The 42,000-square-foot facility exudes Angus influence inside and out, where a large Angus bull sits on the roof. It’s very similar to the small replica that rests on Robinson’s desk as a reminder of one of his most cherished accomplishments with the brand. Colvin presented the bull during an early CAB distributors’ conference in Saint Joseph, Mo., in 1986. There, Robinson met other partners and the rancher members of the CAB Board.

“Those people were the salt of the earth,” he says. The gathering was in the Holiday Inn bar, but Robinson fondly remembers those humble beginnings and receiving the first distributors’ Pioneer Award. “That was the first award I had ever received. That was just an incredible experience,” he says.

Perhaps it’s one of his favorite distinctions because it jibes with his central operating philosophy.

“We’re pioneers, and we always have been. We introduced buffalo to this area when nobody had ever heard of buffalo,” Robinson says. The diverse meat offerings include many specialty lines, like rabbit, venison and game birds. Of course, his heart belongs to the brand.

“Once you meet some of the ranchers and staff, you can’t help but have passion,” he

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says. “Not only do I love selling CAB, but it’s become my life. I feel part of it.” Other awards recognize that fact, and include back-to-back Commitment to Integrity awards in 2006 and 2007.

“Everybody in my company stands behind this program 100%,” he says. “We have even taken people off who were cheating — and we’re talking about our own customers, not somebody else’s.”

Oxford supports 22 families, and several

employees have been there for more than 20 years. Robinson says the key to that, as well as the longevity of accounts, is relationship marketing.

“I’ve never lost a CAB customer who didn’t close a store or pass away. I sell the same people,” he says. That sense of tradition is one commonality the distributor sees between his business and the production community.

“We’re just like the ranchers; we just don’t live on ranches,” he says. “We have the same families and the same values. I consider us partners.”



► The Oxford Trading Co. facility exudes Angus influence inside and out. Robinson received the first distributors’ Pioneer Award.