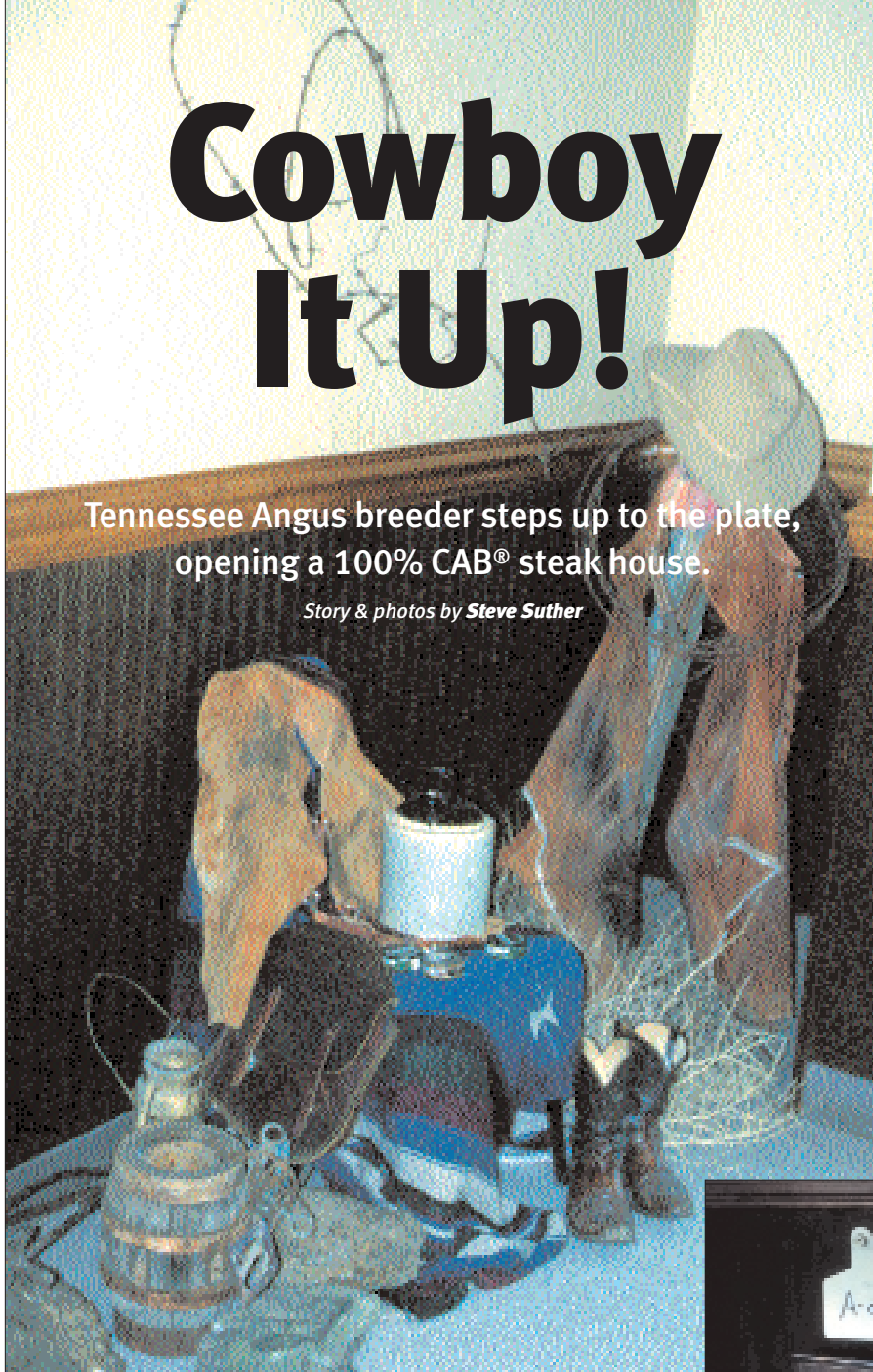


Cowboy It Up!

Tennessee Angus breeder steps up to the plate,
opening a 100% CAB® steak house.

Story & photos by **Steve Suther**

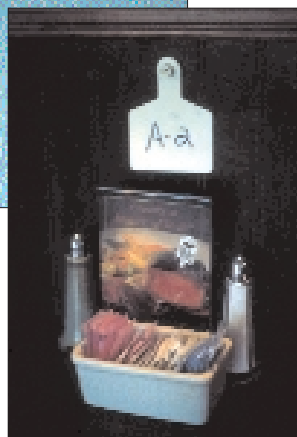


Once, not long ago, in the awakening little town of Atoka, Tenn., just north of Memphis, there was a sleepy little Mom-and-Pop diner. The pork-and-beans buffet had begun to draw a few Angus farm folks as they passed it in their travels along U.S. Highway 51. That's how Dave Turner of Claybrook Farms first came to know the place he would later buy and reawaken.

The diner's new day began last winter when Dave gave up on the red tape required to build a restaurant in his hometown of Covington. He bought the property Jan. 2, 2001, only days after making an offer, and looked forward to riding Atoka's new

suburban boom. He would transform it into Claybrook Steakhouse with two initial moves: the place had to feature 100% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) entrées, and the small-town décor had to go.

"We had to cowboy it up," Dave says, showing saddle-blanketed booth seats, ear-tag-numbered tables and Old West trappings that blend with scores of photographs, banners and other hangings of all things Angus from across the country.



► Above: "We had to cowboy it up," Dave Turner says, showing saddle-blanketed booth seats, ear-tag-numbered tables and Old West trappings that blend with scores of photographs, banners and other hangings of all things Angus from across the country.

"Some of our customers say it's almost like an Angus shrine," he laughs.

Angus heritage

Turner holds a near reverence for the Angus breed, it being a core part of his heritage. "Granddad got into Angus in 1933 with a bull and three heifers from the Ames Plantation," he says. "That herd is still going today, numbering 400 cows, and there are now 13 American Angus Association memberships in four generations of Turners here."

Claybrook Farms started in 1966 as a partnership between Jack Jetton and Carl and Jean Turner, who had been involved in managing the Gore Farms and University of Tennessee Angus herds. The Turners, with sons Mark, Glen, David and Chris, purchased Claybrook outright in 1975 (see sidebar).

Though commercial breeders were always the target customers, the way business was done in those days, a purebred farm had to capture publicity by winning a lot of stock shows. But Dave and longtime herdsman Terry Carter gave the show circuit a last run for the money in the 1980s. "We vetted the popular show bulls," Terry recalls. "We got good at it, but we couldn't get them to work in our environment, when they had to go out on the pasture."

Looking for new blood and new business, the Turners turned toward the West to "cowboy up" their Angus herd. "When we went up to Montana in 1990, folks warned us not to bring back any of 'them little belt-buckle cattle,' but we brought some back that were just as big as we had, only they were more functional," Terry says.

"We changed our program," he says, adding that now you see Traveler influence. Claybrook is co-owner of Ohlde's Gaucho and Traveler 212.

You'll still see Dave and Terry at the shows, but the focus has shifted. "Now we have heifers that calve at 24 months, rebreed and work in our environment — and some of them may win shows,"

Terry says. "The kids like to show, and it fits with all the junior activities and all, but it's not part of our program."

The next generation

The kids, Tennessee Angus Queen Ashlea Turner and her Angus Princess cousin, Katelyn Turner, are Dave's nieces. The younger royalty is a daughter of Susan and Chris Turner, who runs Claybrook's 2,200-acre crop enterprises. Her little sister, Molly, may reign someday, too.

Ashlea's father, Glen, was killed in an automobile accident in 1993. Her mother, Cindy, today has an active interest in Claybrook Steak House. Ashlea, a 17-year-old junior, waits tables there after school, and sister Brooke, a 19-year-old junior-college freshman, has developed an affinity for it to match Ashlea's love of the cattle business. Their younger brother, Philip, also shows more interest in the cattle side.

The average age of 16 employees at the popular establishment is about 20 years, including many high school seniors and new graduates. Dave saw more than 750 job applications last year, many from juniors hoping to get a shot at a job a year later. He admits to developing an affinity for that generation. "Kids even set up laptop computers and research homework on the Internet from here," he says.

They learn a lot more from the work experience, however. Responsibility is lesson No. 1. Dave can be the kindest of mentors, but kids learned early on that when they are on the clock, they have a job to do. He spots leadership talent and has a work-up program in which employees can advance after successfully training a replacement, for mopping and dishwashing on up.

Buying the steak house

Dave briefed Terry in 2000 about his plans to open a steak house, saying it would take him away for "a couple of hours a day for about a year." In fact, it grew to a nearly unbearable load by last summer, after a successful opening Feb. 1. Doing whatever it took to get the job done, Dave sometimes found himself exhausted and crashing in an office recliner with a "Do not knock" note on the door.

"I had talked with [fellow CAB licensees] Edd Hendee at Houston's Taste of Texas Steak House and Russ Loub at the Little Apple Brewery in Manhattan, Kan., before taking this on," Dave recalls. "They helped me prepare and get organized, but producers can't know what it's like without actually doing it."

Now, the labor load is under control. The sparse lunch crowd wasn't paying for the hours, so Claybrook began opening at 4 p.m. last fall. The cutback helped Dave clear his head for big farm decisions on embryo



► Claybrook Steak House is a family-run business. Sister-in-law Cindy Turner (left) has an active interest in the steak house Dave Turner (right) purchased in January. Cindy's daughters, Ashlea and Brooke, help, too.



► Greg Morris and Thax Turner, with Claybrook's foodservice supplier Hardin's Sysco of Memphis, say Dave Turner (left) never complains when the price of beef goes up, but chicken is another matter.

transplant (ET) flushes and the November female sale.

"I still eat here every day, sort of quality control," he says. "And this is the closest connection I get with commercial breeders. They come in, sit down and eat, and we talk."

Dave enjoys educating nonfarm customers about his family's and the Angus breed's heritage as well as sharing details

about Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB).

"Most producers don't even realize how it all works, although it's their program," Dave says. "But we talk, and they appreciate the brand assurance records and the fact that some of their beef is in the system and becomes CAB product. They like that, being able to get the best steak in a local town, owned and operated by a producer."

Customer approval

Harbert Thornton, whose father was in the Angus business before the Turners, is a tireless promoter for Claybrook, proud to have an Angus producer in the business.

"He and [wife] Hayden come in and tell us they'll need 100 of our handout menus," Dave marvels. "Mr. Harbert gets up and walks the tables and visits. Customers want to know when he's going to be back — he knows so much about the families. He brings us old pictures, advertisements, new ideas even."

Greg Morris and Thax Turner (no relation), with Claybrook's foodservice supplier Hardin's Sysco of Memphis, say the restaurant owner never complains when the price of beef goes up, but chicken is another matter.

"When beef prices are going up and it's legitimate, that's OK, I'm on both sides," Dave says. "Greg finds us every deal he can find; there just aren't any on CAB, because it's a premium product."

"We were getting in packaged precut steaks, but had to devote more than one full-time person to cutting the packs open on busy nights," Dave recalled from an early lesson. Now he has a full-time meat cutter and the chef can access trays of six in the kitchen cooler. Creative menu planning with soup and grinds means no waste with wholesale loins, ribeyes, strips and sirloin butts.

Such close contact with the product makes this producer keenly aware that some cuts contain seam fat. "We never have a problem with quality, but if we get one of those ribeye strips with seam fat, we can get complaints," Dave says. That's not a reason to back away from the brand, he adds, but it is a reason for producers to pay more attention to percent retail product (PRP) in their selection programs.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 54

Cowboy It Up! CONTINUED FROM PAGE 53

“There are way too many negative PRP bulls out there,” he says. “By chasing one trait or another, you get in trouble; you need balance. He looks to a Claybrook sire with “generations of structured sire testing on both sides and the largest ribeye we ever measured, over 14 inches — and he’s positive in every trait. We’re going for bulls positive in every trait,” he says. “Like the seam fat on that steak, we’ve got to straighten that out.”



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The farm connection

“Claybrook Farm’s goal was always to produce bulls for the commercial cattle industry,” owner Carl Turner explains. “These bulls had to be trouble-free and had to sire profit for their commercial breeders. We used Angus Herd Improvement Records (AHIR) from the beginning.”

Ten years ago, the Turners recognized the need for information on the herd beyond weaning calves. “There were no retained ownership programs in our area, so Angus breeders generally did not know the feedlot or carcass value of their cattle,” Carl says. “We tried to improve on that.”

Claybrook was a pioneer in ultrasound testing. “We had six calf crops — bulls and heifers, fall and spring — over three years when we started working with Iowa State University in developing AAACUP (American Angus Association Centralized Ultrasound Processing) in the early ‘90s,” herdsman Terry Carter says. “We wanted structure, not just isolated reports.”

“Now,” Dave Turner says, “we’ve accumulated ultrasound records on more than 1,000 progeny.”

In 1994 the Angus farm began to purchase and feed calves sired by Claybrook bulls. The results indicated a profit in retained ownership, so the Turners began partnering with customers on their calves, first in Illinois, then more recently in Kansas and Nebraska.

It started partly out of a desire to help customers stay profitable when buyers pulled out of the local market, Dave says. “The calf market went to pieces; we had no competitive bidding.”

As Claybrook got into the feeding business, he adds, they got an education.

“Five years ago we would have anywhere from 750 to 1,200 steers on feed. Trying to keep up with that level and the cow herd was driving us nuts,” Dave says. “We wanted to find out something about the feedyards, and then move on to just letting the commercial breeder sell to the feedyard or retain ownership.”

That plan was finally working, until the economic effects of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After being on the side for most

of the year, Claybrook came back into the market to help customers realize the added value in their high-quality Angus calves by partnering with CAB licensed feedlots on individually identified customer calves.

Claybrook customers cover the range of herd sizes from 10 cows to several hundred head, Carl explains, so there is no single program that will work for all. “We coordinate putting calves into load lots for the feedlots. Sometimes there may be six or eight of

our customers’ cattle on one load, and then we have our larger commercial breeders that retain or sell their own truckloads.”

Other customers sell calves on video and through Internet auctions. “It’s whatever works for the individuals to get them to where they want to go with their cattle,” Carl says. “We naturally advise and work with them to get their herds and calves on the best management and vaccination programs for selling or retaining ownership. Either way, the most profit is in a healthy group of calves.”

Claybrook’s main sales avenue since the late 1990s has been “replacing non-Angus, black-hided bulls with the real thing,” Dave says. “The Simmental, Chianina and other black Continental bulls had been dumped here, the Southeast being a notorious dumping ground for genetics no longer in favor in big cattle country.”

Use of Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) records incorporating ultrasound and progeny records on cow families makes further genetic progress possible. “You’d be surprised how those cow families breed true,” Terry says. “One line has no marbling to them at all, another will do it on the marbling end of it, but has smaller ribeyes.”

“It won’t matter what bulls you use on a lot of those cows, their genetic stamp is on the offspring. On the other side, some bulls will suck all the marbling out of a cow family in one cross,” he adds. Through records, Claybrook has been able to identify those cattle that respond to the continual coaxing toward balance.



► “You’ve got to be a botanist before you can be a cowboy,” Terry Carter (left) says. “A cow can’t be any better than the grass she stands on.” Carter is shown with Dave Turner.