

A Pen of Primes

Brothers from Detroit succeed with their own ideas.

Story and photos by Laura Conaway, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It was meant to be a brief exchange on a visit last fall.

A Missouri farmer who'd ordered a roller mill made small talk with the salesman who delivered it. In passing, he mentioned his pen of steers that made nearly all USDA Prime.

The farmer retells the story:

"He asks me, he says, 'There's been people at this way longer than you. How come they're not getting the percentages you are? You're only the first generation trying it.'"

The question was legitimate, the salesman late to a long line of already-inquiring minds.

"I says, 'I don't know but I could take a guess.'"

That's when Bill Boyer shrugs his

shoulders, laces his fingers and starts from the top.

At his kitchen table near Perryville, Mo., the 64-year-old finds clemency from the cold outside. He's at home here, in the big white house his father helped build.

But a few "yuns" and "I says" give him up in a hurry; he's not native to this Missouri land.

"We talk different than most people around here," he says, including his older brother Jack in this. "Any time we would start speaking, they'd start guessing."

City grown

The Boyer boys were born in Detroit, Mich., the second and fourth

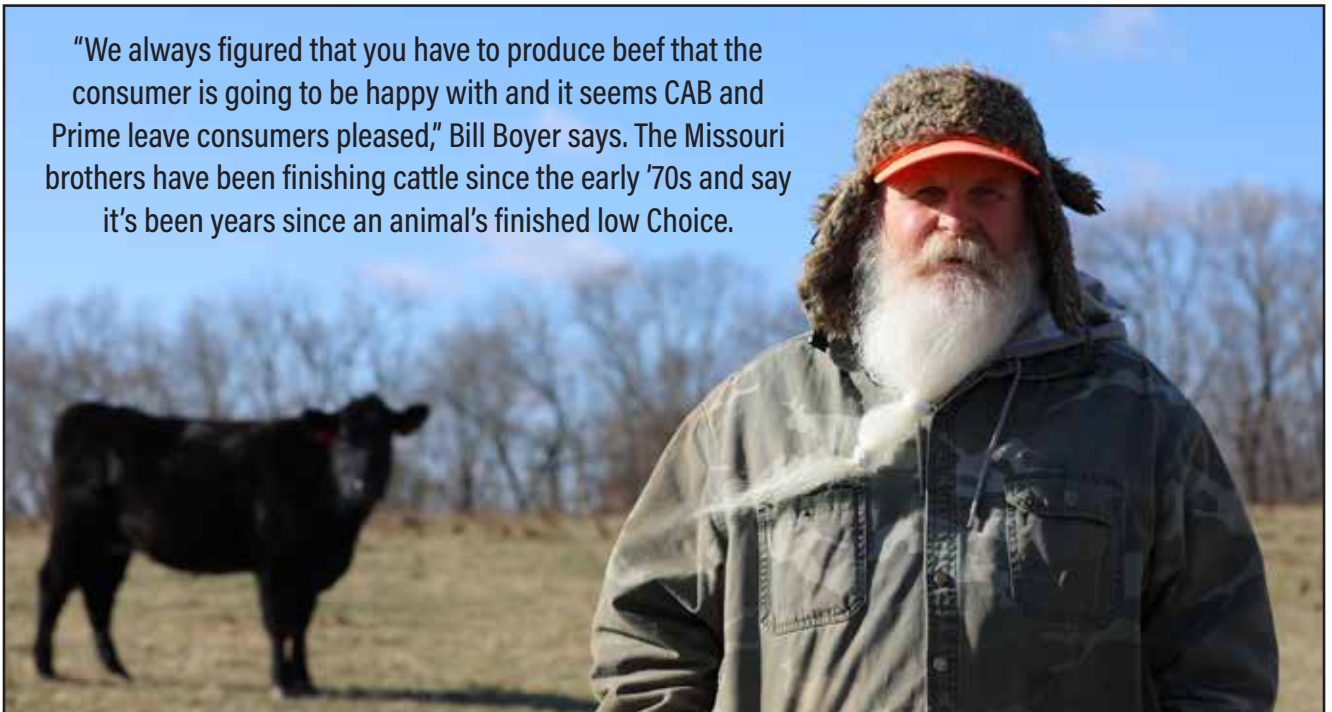
out of five, Jack six years Bill's senior.

They had an aunt and uncle with a little hobby farm in southeast Missouri where the family would visit and the kids would take baths in the creek. No indoor toilet or running water, but the air was clean and the sky showed them every shade of blue.

Their father made a good living in the automobile industry and offered Jack a job, but the late 1960s were no picnic in Motor City, where riots would not relent.

"I saw a friend get stabbed at work and that was it," Jack says. Leaving that job for those Mississippi Valley blue skies, he headed south for good to a farm his folks helped buy.

"We always figured that you have to produce beef that the consumer is going to be happy with and it seems CAB and Prime leave consumers pleased," Bill Boyer says. The Missouri brothers have been finishing cattle since the early '70s and say it's been years since an animal's finished low Choice.



Two weeks after turning his tassel, 18-year-old Bill reported for work there. That was 46 years ago, his red beard now mostly white.

It was tough, a stark contrast to the modern home where the boys grew up in suburban Detroit, but their parents “were always supportive,” he says. On vacations and once retired, their father helped them expand the living quarters of what was then just a cabin. They even added a second story. That homestead sits close by the cattle the brothers feed.

“We earned every dollar the hard way,” Bill says. Each lesson learned the same way.

“Growing up, we didn’t know which end of the cow was what,” a fact made glaringly obvious after their inaugural purchase of 15 Hereford heifers.

“And ’course, we weren’t smart enough to think we needed better fencing. Soon as we got them here, they just took off,” he says. “Straight through the fences and ended up about five miles away.”

A neighbor helped corral them, “and we started fixing fence,” Bill says, perhaps just getting around to forgiving himself for the blunder from decades ago.

“We were greenhorns. We didn’t know what we were doing.”

So maybe that’s why it worked like it did — that’s one of the reasons Bill considers. Success rode in on the shoulders of naivety, and what felt like common sense bore victory.

Whatever the recipe, as financial woes sent many farmers packing, the Boyers met them on the way out, hungry for a life the polar opposite of their city roots.

Innovators from the start, they

installed 16-foot gates back when the standard was 10, steel fence posts when most went for wood, before pushing boundaries with the cattle, too.

“If you want to really increase the demand of beef in this country, you have to increase the quality of beef you produce; the consumer has to have an enjoyable eating experience when he sits down. If he does, he’ll want more of it.” — Jack Boyer

Angus foundation

They came to Angus almost by accident, an alternative.

With 15 Herefords as their base, the brothers looked to expand with more red-and-whites.

“We had one neighbor who had Angus, and all the Hereford people made fun of him because they were real short,” Bill says.

Regardless of commercial popularity at the time, seedstock sources were scarce, he recalls. “It seemed like nobody wanted to sell any, so we thought, okay, we’re going to try Angus then.”

An Alton, Mo., breeder by the name of Uel Tusher, Stone Briar Angus, gets credit for the genetics that solidified the starter herd. He sold the out-of-town 20 registered Angus heifers and the Boyers built on them from there.

“They made some wonderful crosses until the Angus just naturally took over,” Bill says. He smiles at memories of a black baldy cow.

The brothers dabbled in some three-way crosses for more pounds on the rail, throwing Charolais into the mix, but then-Extension agent Roger Eakins pointed out a premium program called *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®), “and we figured we could get

paid a little more.”

Jack figured they should double down on Angus to hit that target.

They were already achieving Prime in some finished loads, having bought a Rishel New Design 036 son from the University of Missouri sale, when growth bulls were selling for significantly more than sires known for marbling.

With carcass already on their minds, it seemed only fitting to make a trip to southwest Kansas.

Having read about Gardiner Angus Ranch in cattle magazines, “I thought I’d just like to try them,” Bill says, “and see what they’re like.”

With stronger fences set, it still seemed like any time the brothers would go anywhere, they’d get home to an unwelcome fact.

“We’d have cattle walking down the road or something, so I got the job of buying bulls,” Bill says.

He’d called Henry Gardiner days ahead, and then he and a girlfriend packed a truck and headed west.

“I started late in the afternoon, drove most of the night,” Bill says. He had his picks circled in the sale book on the back seat.

Mark Gardiner, now president of the seedstock supplier, was a young man when Boyer first showed up to his family’s place near Ashland, Kan.

“We didn’t know what to think except that this guy looked like Santa Claus” — Bill prefers a ZZ Top reference — “and was interesting to visit with.”

“I’d try to find something that looked good but most of his bulls looked good,” Bill says, “so you’d have to rely on the numbers.”

He would get there early, like three days before the sale, to look around,

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take his time with the cattle and prove the numbers in the book right.

Right up there with marbling, disposition was an equal priority.

“It doesn’t matter how many Primes you get if you’re laying in a hospital bed,” Bill says.

So the Boyers aim for one with an expected progeny difference (EPD) for docility in the 30s with a marbling EPD no lower than the 0.80s. They want at least average ribeye and feed conversion, and to avoid yield grade (YG) 4s, they shop for negative back fat EPDs.

The rest, they do at home.

With no hired hands nor outside income, the brothers have managed to carry out their dream and, frankly, the dream of plenty of others.

When they achieved 90% Prime on a load, Bill thought, “Well, we gotta do a little better. We’ll just keep at it, keep going. Just keep marching along.”



Most calves are born in the winter months, with a wider calving season than some to accommodate finished cattle hitting the market several times through the year.

Cadence of quality

It’s a perpetual drumbeat, obvious the moment you set foot on their place. The Boyers keep their heads down and hands anything but idle.

To secure the champion spot in the CAB Angus Value Discovery contest, their best load of finished steers went 100% CAB with all but one Prime; 76.9% went YG 3 or lower. That lone calf wasn’t a disappointment but it keeps them hungry.

“I think it would be neat to hit 100% Prime,” Bill says, “but my goodness, a person has to be tickled to death to get 39 out of 40 on a load.”

That visiting salesman knows plenty who have fallen far short while trying.

“I think the thing that’s unique about them is they don’t view this as an unattainable goal,” Gardiner says.

His family sells 2,600 registered Angus bulls each year to customers aiming for genetics that include superior marbling. It’s one thing to say it’s a part of your program, a whole other to do something about it.

In a statement that could be applied to life beyond good cattle, Gardiner says, “Oftentimes we go through the motions but we don’t do the things that actually matter the most.”

The Kansas seedstock giant says quality in a cow herd deserves top billing, that it makes no sense to not pursue marbling for the sake of other goals while ignoring the consumer’s desires.

“It’s not brain surgery,” Gardiner

says. “We’re talking about a trait that is 40% or higher heritable. Marbling can be free.”

The Boyers prove it’s profitable. So what is their secret, if there is one?

Maybe it’s because they started as greenhorns, not filled with conventional wisdom.

Bill will tell you it’s probably a little of that, but he credits that Stone Briar foundation more for stellar results in what grew to a closed herd of 300. Then there’s the added nutrition cows get in their third trimester, carrying calves from those marbling-rich Gardiner bulls.

“The Boyers take their husbandry, take their feeding program, take their study of genetics to make cattle better,” Gardiner says.

It’s the meticulous selection, then providing the environment to allow them to succeed that he attributes to his customers’ winning ways.

“Those cattle are healthy, comfortable and never have had a bad day.”

So, was winning that carcass contest part of a plan?

If it was, it wasn’t for bragging rights. Candidly, the brothers prefer to be left alone and get the job done.

“We just came down here with different ideas,” Bill says, his tone dismissing adulation.

It seems like the perfect recipe, but it’s not the only way to go, they’ll readily concede.

Rather Jack and Bill Boyer were just two guys from Detroit who didn’t know any better than to try, and it worked.

Big time. 