



Sand in Your Shoes

The Sawyers' longtime commitment to the breed and the next generation earns recognition as a 2022 Angus Heritage Foundation inductee.

by Briley Richard, American Angus Association

An orange Nebraskan sunrise peeks over the Sandhills as the Sawyer family prepares for a long day's work. Leather squeaks as Adam Sawyer hoists the saddle over a seasoned bay mare's back, and his son, Augustus, hurries closer to be tossed onto his trusty steed for the day.

With a cow herd consisting of 600 registered and commercial Angus cows, Adam and his family — mother, Becky; wife, Jenessa; and sister, Jessica — work diligently each day to sustain their generational operation, A&B Cattle. The operation's roots were first started by Becky and her late husband, Arlen.

The Sawyers place priority on thrifty, maintenance-free cattle bred to thrive under the Nebraska Sandhills range conditions. The A&B cow herd evolved in this gritty ranch environment and flourish on the forages nature provides.

Driven by their tenacity, commitment and focus on continuous improvement, the family continues to create a prosperous future for both the beef industry and the next generation of cattlemen.

Way back

Arlen and Becky found each other at South Dakota State University. Freshly graduated, the duo had lofty goals grounded in the cattle industry.

Becky chuckles as she recalls their youthful mindset.

"Arlen and I both grew up with

Angus families. We met in college and then decided we're going to strike out on our own," Becky says. "We were both smart kids who just got out of college, so we of course knew everything."

A&B Cattle started as a side hustle for the couple, new to the area of Bassett, Neb. As young pups in the industry, they built their operation little by little while Arlen worked for another Angus operation. Eventually, they made the leap to transition their business to full-time.

"We moved down here in 1976, and Arlen went to work for a fledgling Angus outfit," Becky says. "We liked the area, so we planted some roots and eventually got completely independent of any other organizations and just had our own A&B Cattle."

Over many decades in business, they watched the industry ebb and flow, regularly adopting innovative practices. Becky credits their success to being open-minded and adopting new practices — knowing change and a willingness to adapt was the only way to get better.

"We were willing to try things, and Arlen was always interested in being abreast of all the latest bloodlines and latest technology," she says. "One of Arlen's favorite sayings was, 'When I get up every morning and look in the mirror, I've got to think I'm going to get better today and do a better job than the day before.'"

When the going gets tough

Watching his parents build their operation from the ground up, Adam always yearned to one day work on the ranch after getting an education. Much to his surprise, he shucked his cap and gown and donned a three-piece suit.

"I always had a really strong passion for coming back and being a part of what my folks had built for us here," Adam says. "After [college], I worked in banking for about seven years, and even during that time, I came home quite a bit."

In 2019 Adam decided he had been away long enough, and began toying with the idea of working full-time for A&B.

"My folks and I sat down and discussed the opportunity of doing so and for me, it was really a dream come true," Adam says. "It was a big step — I went from having a 9-to-5 job and plenty of leeway to embracing two families on an operation."

Adam received a winter welcome back to life on the ranch in the Sandhills, but he grins with pride as he describes the peace it brought to be back home.

"I walked out of a banker's uniform right into a set of muck boots for about the next five months, because we had one of the wettest springs we'd ever had," Adam says. "There was never a question in my mind where I wanted to be. There's a

saying in this part of the world, when you get sand in your shoes, you never really can get it out.”

As Adam began to get a feel for his new role, the family suffered the loss of Arlen later that same year.

Adam quickly accepted more responsibility, and despite the loss, he realized he was exactly where he needed to be.

“When my father passed away, I had the advice of a really good friend who said, ‘It’s going to be tough, but you stick your head down, keep going and you’ll get through it just fine,’” Adam explains. “There was never a doubt in my mind of what I wanted to be doing, that I wasn’t doing what I needed to or that I wasn’t where I needed to be.”

What’s next?

As he’s taken on the management role, Adam looks to the future with great optimism. With rapidly rising input costs, he relies on the same mentality as his parents did all those years ago — an open mind to adopting new technology.

“We’re reaching a point in time where input costs and everything else are at levels that really make it a challenge to operate,” Adam says. “We always have to look for the new technologies and all the tools available to us, not only as Angus breeders, but as cattlemen in general.”

Adam’s pride in his family operation stems from the lessons his parents instilled in him at an early age — lessons of determination, grit and working with the future in mind. He and his wife try to foster those same lessons in their children, Augustus and Truett.

“No road’s going to be easy, but I think people just need to keep moving forward,” Adam says. “We all talk about legacy and heritage, but to continue those things, I think everybody has to light a fire in the next generation.”

Continued on page 136



“I always had a really strong passion for coming back and being a part of what my folks had built for us here.”

— Adam Sawyer

The key to generational success? Adam says it's utilizing provided tools to continue forward progress.

"Not every tool that comes down the road is going to fit everybody," Adam says. "We always have to be really conscientious of what we can utilize in all of our own operations to keep things moving forward at a steady pace."

Becky says she holds no doubt the future of A&B lies in good hands with her children, grandchildren and generations to come.

"They need to find their own way and make their own successes, and I'm confident that they will," she says.



From left are Brian Slingsby, Jessica (Sawyer) Slingsby, Becky Sawyer, Adam Sawyer, Augustus Sawyer, Jenessa Sawyer, and Truett Sawyer.

What it means

What started as newlyweds paving their own path in the Angus breed blossomed into a multigenerational way of life. For Becky, tears convey what her heart felt: overwhelming gratitude at the opportunity for Arlen and her to join the ranks of the decades of Angus Heritage Foundation inductees before them.

"I was just so humbled and honored by it — it's just really a blessing," Becky says. "I always looked at the people that are in the [Heritage] Foundation as being the elite of the breed, the movers and the

shakers, the great breeders — so it's quite humbling."

Adam, sharing this sentiment, describes his father's admirable vision for the future and how it's at the core of their operation.

"When you talk about families that are five generations deep in this breed, it's doing everything with future generations in mind and how the decisions you make today affect people 15 or 20 years down the road," Adam says. "I really believe my father embraced that and on top of everything, he wanted there to be an American Angus Association and

Angus cattle around for his grandsons to be able to raise and sell as well."

Becky and the late Arlen Sawyer built their operation from the ground up with a clear vision for innovation and consistent focus on Angus generations to come, making them the epitome of an Angus Heritage Foundation inductee.

As for Augustus, his family's commitment to the Angus legacy promises a hopeful future, no matter what path he chooses in life. For now, he'll just worry about checking out the herd on that old mare. **AJ**

