



Growing Dreams

Suther inducted into the LPC Hall of Fame.

Story & photos by Miranda Reiman, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Credit a change in vision, or call it divine intervention — either way, this is the story of talent that nearly went untapped.

At age 18, Steve Suther's career path seemed pretty solid.

"I loved the farm, and it wasn't a thing of being in FFA or 4-H," he says. "We were just working on the farm, but we knew the family didn't have money if it didn't come from the farm. I was very much into understanding everything about commercial agriculture."

He planned to earn an animal

science degree from Kansas State University (K-State) and use it on his family's operation near Blaine, Kan.

It was just before his junior year when Suther learned that wasn't to be. Implausibly, the news revolved around his older brother Ron's need for glasses, ending his pilot track with the Air Force ROTC.

"He came back to the farm, and there was only room for one son there, so I had to look at what else I was going to do," Suther says. "That's when I switched to ag journalism."

Today, the senior editor of Certified

Angus Beef LLC (CAB) looks toward full-time retirement from four decades as one of the most experienced wordsmiths in the cattle business.

For his ability to disseminate acutely relevant information to cattlemen, Suther became the 30th annual inductee into the Livestock Publications Council (LPC) Hall of Fame. The organization honored individuals at the Ag Media Summit, in Scottsdale, Ariz., this year.

His ag journalism degree is stamped December 1976. The big opportunities were in cities like

Above: Career coaches might not tell Suther to take the path he did, but, "It turns out what I did was the ideal job because I was able to stay close to home, marry my childhood sweetheart and get this farm," he says. Suther went into part-time retirement last summer, but still serves as senior editor for CAB.

Minneapolis, Des Moines and Kansas City, with jobs that might take him across the United States or even to the Soviet Union.

“My girlfriend, and future wife, wasn’t too excited about the idea of me going over to Moscow and traveling like that all the time, or living in the city. Both of us liked living in the country,” Suther says.

So instead, he started as a reporter at *Grass & Grain*, based out of Manhattan, Kan.

Telling agriculture’s story

“I wanted to tell agriculture’s story, but I wanted to share the stories with other people in the industry, what was working for people, writing stories about how to make life easier and more profitable,” Suther says.

He quickly became editor and vice president of Ag Press publishing, but not before marrying Anne (Heptig) in 1978. They met at her eighth grade graduation commencement.

“We bought this place in 1980, and ever since then, I had to look at how to get operating credit,” Suther says, talking from the basement office of

a four-story 1878 stone house that is the heart of the place they dubbed Rockytop. “Ron introduced me to this cool spreadsheet tool, the cash flow. He said, ‘Well, this is a dream sheet, and you can do them on into the future.’”

So he did.

“They are totally science fiction by the time you’re looking 10 years out, but I always enjoyed doing that. In a sense, these early cash flows were like a projection of, ‘How soon can I be a full-time farmer?’” Suther says.

Earning a K-State master’s degree in journalism in 1984, Steve resigned from his first full-time job four years later. Freelancing for *Farm Journal* magazines and farming went hand-in-hand.

“Any time I was out on a story, I was picking their brains,” he says. “I bring a natural producer’s curiosity to the story site. I’m able to write about it in such a way that it’s going to help other people that are at this fork in the road or trying to decide what to do next, how to add quality and profit.”

Story stops helped him decide to end his own swine enterprise and

start using better bulls. Every mile logged also made that “dream sheet” look a little better.

“There’s so many odd things, like I wasn’t a good mechanic, but there I was trying to farm with pretty well-worn-out machinery because that’s all I could afford,” he says. “If something would break down, I’d go, ‘Alright, well that’s going to be at least \$1,000 so I better go write a story to pay the mechanic.’”

On it went, until life demanded more stability.

Daughter Shea was born in 1983, with congenital heart defects requiring multiple surgeries from the time she was 3 months old until her teenage years. Daughter Frankie came along in 1989 and Tom in 1992. He is deaf and autistic.

“One of the things that motivated me to work toward basing out of our home was the kids,” Suther says. He’d see them on and off the school bus and had flexibility for doctors’ appointments and follow-ups.

Suther’s main freelance client, *Beef Today*, hired him first as managing

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A cattleman’s perspective can be hard to get, unless you are one. Shortly after starting with the brand, Suther began orienting his herd toward earning CAB premiums on a grid, getting as high as 80% acceptance in recent years.

editor in 1995 before he advanced to editor of the national publication. Just as that career path seemed uncertain, the phone rang.

Serving the industry

"I've had many incidents of divine intervention. Larry Corah's phone call was certainly one of them," he says.

Corah, then-vice president of CAB, wanted to talk to Suther about a new opportunity.

"I, like most journalists then and some even today, thought CAB is just a marketing program. What more do you need to know?" Suther recalls.

Lunch with Corah changed his mind about that.

"I said, 'I can't do PR. I'm just motivated to write about the things that I know and love using the best possible words to explain and help other producers. He said, 'I believe there won't be any problem then.'"

Suther became director of the new Industry Information Division in 1998 and built the program that now includes three full-time employees and has hosted more than 40 writing interns over the years.

"Steve sincerely cares about people first, and I believe he gets great satisfaction out of helping others

All about the words

Steve Suther's mom introduced him to a dictionary at age 6, and by high school he was the FFA reporter and yearbook editor, but the farm boy saw writing as more of a fun hobby than a career option.

Today, he still edits nearly every piece of published information intended for a producer audience from CAB.

"I've always been interested in words and their meanings and word selection — why people use certain words," Suther says.

The storytelling mediums are changing, with more ways than ever to tell a tale, from print and video to social media.

"The important thing is that you still need good writing and you have to engage with the reader. You have to actually say something that's worth reading," he says.

As Suther coaches young writers to avoid repetition and use active voice, he's hopeful.

"I'm encouraged most by this continuing stream of young people coming in that not only understand all the dynamics of social media, but they also understand what resonates with the commercial producer," he says. "They understand how it all fits together. It gives me more confidence for the future that we'll be able to tell these stories effectively and help generations of producers down the road."

years. He won the Beef Improvement Federation's Ambassador Award in 2005.

"You've probably read his work for years, likely been touched by someone he has mentored — yet you might not know Steve Suther's impact unless you dig for it," his nomination letter reads. "That's because he's spent the last four decades quietly serving readers in various livestock publication roles. It's never about him, always about the producer."

It's clear that in Suther's case,

those childhood dreams gave way to something better.

improve and grow in their careers," says Bill Miller, former editor at *Beef Today* and then U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). "What better legacy than to have helped others develop and contribute to their profession?"

A long-time member of LPC, Suther earned the 2003 and 2004 LPC Diamond Award for outstanding writer, along with first-place writing awards in the critique contest for 10 consecutive

those childhood dreams gave way to something better.

"I know that I would not have been as fulfilled, as happy, or as well-off financially," Suther says.

Sometimes things have a way of working out just as they're meant to. **A**

Editor's Note: Miranda Reiman is director of producer communications for Certified Angus Beef LLC.



A lot of good stories have come from a four-story limestone farmhouse, just off Victory Road, near Onaga, Kan. Suther has spent most of his career writing from the basement of the 1878 structure.