

# A Recipe for Success

When participating in the Auxiliary-sponsored All-American Certified Angus Beef® Cook-Off, Indiana's Wilson family proves they have the ingredients.

Story & photos by Lance Ziesch

"Just sit right back,  
and you'll hear a tale  
Of Certified Angus Beef®,

The meal that you  
can count on ...  
A juicy, tasty treat ..."

**R**emember the theme song to the old TV show *Gilligan's Island*? Good. Now keep the tune in your head and read the lines above again. Now you've got a taste of how this year's Black Kettle Award winners opened their Cook-Off skit.

Sung by Indiana juniors playing the parts of Gilligan, the skipper, the professor, Mary Ann, Ginger and Mrs. Howell, the skit opens with Gilligan finding a crate marked "CAB" on the beach. He mistakenly identifies it as something to do with a cab — as in a taxicab — that just might take the castaways off CAB Isle for good. Of course, his friends soon set him straight with many interesting facts about Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) product.

Welcome to the creative world

of junior advisors Loran and Kathy Wilson of Orleans, Ind. When it comes to the Cook-Off, the Wilsons take it seriously. They'll tell you unashamedly that it's their favorite event at the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

"They're crazy. They're Cook-Off junkies," says Anne Patton Schubert, Cook-Off coordinator. "They really exemplify the level to which these kids can aspire and attain. I really admire them."

## Starting out

"We really got initiated into the national show when it was in Indianapolis in 1998," Kathy says. "We had no idea what to expect. We had no idea what equipment was provided, what to take with us, or anything."

To get some ideas, they got out their *Angus Journal* from the year before and looked at the Cook-Off pictures from 1997 to get an idea of what people did.

"The kids worked out what they wanted to do, and somebody came up with a

recipe, and we went in totally blind," Kathy says. "It was a disaster! An absolute disaster."

But, she adds, that was the best thing that could have happened. "We learned so much, and it made us want to win that much more."

"That year was when there was the big rift between the Texas Cattlemen's Association and Oprah Winfrey," Kathy says. "Our skit was a takeoff on that." Brian Howell dressed up as Oprah.

"I'll take credit for that one," Loran says with a chuckle. "That was kind of my idea. I said, 'We have got to get a *guy* to play Oprah.'"

So Howell dressed up with black makeup, a black wig, a dress, panty hose and fake fingernails.

"You can still go through the barn today and talk with people who were there at that Cook-Off, and they will remember that," Kathy says.

Describing that first year, Loran likens their preparedness

to that of a first-year 4-H member arriving at the NJAS. They were about that inexperienced, he says. "We saw people with all these special dressings on their tables, and ours looked kind of plain."

"We kind of wanted to hide under it," says Kathy, adding that the experience taught them a lot. "We absorbed everything. We just looked around at all this, and we watched other kids. We saw what people did with their tables. And, the next year, we came prepared. We had a skit, and the kids knew their lines."

In fact, in 1999 they did so well that their team received perfect scores in showmanship and in recipe at the NJAS in Tulsa, Okla.

"Indiana caught the fever," Kathy says. "All the younger kids were in the room when that team did their Cook-Off, and they just nailed it. Everybody in the room erupted in applause."

The next year younger kids in the state wanted to do a Cook-Off skit because it was so much fun. In Des Moines last year, Indiana had three Cook-Off teams. This year they had four.

With the additional teams, other Indiana adults have stepped forward to shepherd Cook-Off teams. This year, the Wilsons competed in the adult division for the first time. By doing so, Schubert says they showed their confidence in the senior team's ability.

"As opposed to standing there holding their breaths with every word the kids uttered, the kids were on their own," Schubert says. "This was their deal, and yet the parents had time to do a skit almost simultaneously with the senior team."

Loran says the adult team enjoyed themselves. One of the team members had never been



► Gilligan's Island comes to life CAB® style. Kristi Wilson (far left) and Kara Wilson (far right), as Mrs. Howell and Mary Ann, respectively, are currently involved with the Cook-Off contest. Their younger sister, Katelyn, will more than likely join the tradition. Also pictured are (from left) Brian Howell, Chad Haag, Jon Leeper and Kara Claeys.



► Above: Indiana's adult team won third place overall for a skit playing off Noah's ark. "I was thinking about Angus being God's chosen cattle," Loran Wilson says, explaining the origin of the skit. "You know, the elite breed."

► Right: "We write the parts around each of their strengths, so each one of them gets to shine in their own way," Kathy Wilson (right) says. "When it comes together, there is just such a feeling inside of me that I can't stop smiling." Also pictured are her daughter, Kristi, and her husband, Loran.



to a Cook-Off before and didn't know what to expect. When he expressed hesitation at getting into costume, Loran told him, "everybody's making fun of everybody else — that's what it's all about. You're supposed to make them laugh."

"Once we walked outside, people started laughing and winking at us and giving us a thumbs-up. He had a ball," Loran says. "The main reason we wanted to do it was to let the kids know that the adults can have fun, too."

### A winning formula

"I guess we're in 'Cook-Off mode' year-round," Kathy says. "Old TV shows have worked for us so far. We've done a *Gilligan's Island* takeoff this year, and we did an *I Love Lucy* takeoff last year. ... We just look for things that we think might work."

Their theme song in Tulsa was from *The Beverly Hillbillies*.

"We wanted to do filets," Kathy explains. "And, since the filet is the most elite cut, we referred to that as the 'black gold' of the industry."

"We have some kids on our team who love to sing. That's one of their strengths," Kathy says. "By rewriting a song and incorporating the CAB facts, it really catches the judges immediately."

"For the audience to say, 'Aw, wasn't that cute and fun?' is

nice," Schubert says. "However, you really have to understand how much time, effort, perseverance and real direction this group has had for the last year to perfect something like this. I would say [the *Gilligan's Island* skit] was perfect. It had everything."

This year, in their first attempt at the adult competition, the Wilsons presented a spoof on Noah's ark. Their team placed third overall in the fresh-meat division.

Commenting on the source of his creative inspiration, Loran says he was in the feedlot looking at the cattle while the batch mixer was blending. "I was thinking about Angus being God's chosen cattle — you know, the elite breed. Then I thought about Noah's ark and God saying, 'These are My chosen cattle. We need to save My chosen. I don't know where it came from; it just came to mind.'"

"We already have an idea for next year," Kathy says. "We're just always in Cook-Off mode. When something clicks, we just kind of put that on the back burner until we see how we can work with it. We'll work for an entire year toward the next contest."

### Learning, laughing

"Adults learn as well, and it's a great education for kids," Loran says, referring to the value of

participating in the Cook-Off. "It's educational. They learn to go out and promote their product. In the showing, it's all about who places first, second or third. With this, you learn more about your end product that you are trying to sell to the general public."

He admits the adults learn, too. Members of their adult team had been unaware that CAB accounted for more than 60% of all branded beef.

"We were going through literature from the CAB (Certified Angus Beef LLC) office beforehand, trying to get our facts all straight," he says, adding that only 18% of eligible cattle meet the standards.

Participants also learn teamwork skills, Kathy says.

"The kids learn to work together," she says, adding that several of the senior team members have been working together for three or four years. "We know the personalities, and we know what each one can bring to the skit. They just have such a bonding with one another."

One of the young men, who has been on the team for three years, used to be very shy. He didn't want to get up and do it. But other team members kept encouraging him and telling him they wanted him to be a part of the team.

"Now, he is as instrumental to

the team as any of the others. Building that camaraderie, building that teamwork, encouraging one another along with the educational end, I just think it is a truly valuable experience," Kathy says.

"When I was watching our senior team yesterday, I couldn't stop smiling. I was just so proud of them," Kathy says. "To me the reward is watching those kids be successful."

"We write the parts around each of their strengths, so each one of them gets to shine in their own way," Kathy says. "When it comes together, there is just such a feeling inside of me that I can't stop smiling."

"It's not a dog-eat-dog cattle show where everybody has to come out on top," Loran says. "They can learn and they can have a bunch of fun. ... It brings the kids together to work. It's not just *my* calf or *your* calf, it's *our* team effort."

"We've learned many things since that first year," Kathy says. "Even though the kids were not prepared and the recipe was not competitive, it was probably the best thing to happen to us because we learned so much from our mistakes. ... Now, when we come to Cook-Off, Indiana is a name that other states fear."

With good reason.

