

Where They're Going, Where They've Been

Focus, commitment and work pay off for Belvin Angus.

Story by Miranda Reiman, photos by Abbie Burnett, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Sometimes there is no formal succession plan. There are no conversations about what might come to be.

Sometimes there are just little clues as to what the future might hold.

When Gavin and Mabel Hamilton's children grew up and left their ranch near Innisfail, Alta., Canada, the couple were on their own for daily chores. Still, Colton would jump on a plane from Vancouver to Calgary and then drive north another hour just to help with processing calves or clipping bulls.

During busy seasons, their firstborn was home more weekends than he was in the city where he worked in finance but spent nights wondering what was going on at the ranch. Would he come back for more than weekends?

"I don't think we ever really talked about it because I never wanted to make them feel like they had to," Mabel says.

Colton and younger sister Quinn grew up in the cattle business, first showing alongside their parents and later blazing their own path as members of the Canadian Junior Angus Association. Each went off to college and started their careers and volunteered time back in the industry.

There were no formal discussions or meetings with a lawyer.

"It just sort of happened," Colton says. But sometimes the heart knows before anyone even speaks it out loud.

After it sort of happened, Colton's boss told Gavin, "I looked in his fridge once and I knew that kid wasn't sticking around."

Quinn admits that her

homemaking wasn't much better than her brother's.

She enjoyed her work as an ag lender but says, "I never put down roots anywhere. You just get sick of being in an office every day."

Eight years after Colton made the move, Quinn — then engaged and now married to Brendyn Elliot — returned home.

After their August 2018 wedding, they likely became some of the very few who can claim Whitman, Neb., as their honeymoon destination.

"We wanted to go to Connealy's and we'd never been," Quinn says.

A well-known bull sale, in a remote corner of the Beef State seems fitting for a couple whose work and recreation both often revolve around the ranch.

"Colton and Quinn have always gotten along so well, and now Brendyn fits right in," Mabel says. "Those three are really lucky to have each other."

They make up the next generation at Belvin Angus. That's the beginning of Chapter 2, the one being written right now.

Shorthorn + Hereford = Angus legacy

The first part of the ranch's tale starts four decades earlier when the son of a Shorthorn breeder asked for the phone number of a Hereford girl who had caught his eye. Her brothers wouldn't give it out.

So Gavin tried again.



Gavin and Mabel Hamilton

With a keen ear for numbers and a solid memory, he caught what she flippantly rattled off, which led to the phone call ending with a first date. Their courtship was one of cattle shows — Gavin was quite the fitter — and rodeos — Mabel running barrels. They were married in 1975. Mabel earned her degree in elementary education and began teaching while Gavin worked on his uncle's ranch.

After a few years, it was time to get their own place and stock it with their own cattle. Angus cattle.

"We had to find some common ground," Gavin laughs. "But I'd always liked Angus."

The maternal function, the docility and the end-product merit all in one package — it was an easy choice, Gavin says. He's not too proud to admit they dabbled in exotics in the early years, noting "they were hit and miss," but they always came back to Angus.

"They were the best," he says.

In 1978, the couple bought their original farmyard and a quarter-section of ground. Next came three Angus heifers they registered in 1979. This year they're celebrating 40 years with the breed.

The last syllables of their first names blended together gave them a business name; while connections from their show ring experience gave them customers.

"It was a good way to get our name out there," Gavin says.

In the converted dairy barn that served as their sale barn, there's a wall that still shows evidence of success on the shavings. Seventeen Calgary Bull Sale banners either read "Grand Champion" or "Reserve," more than any other ranch in the history of the program.

They've been members of the American Angus Association for

decades, partnering with breeders in the U.S. who run in similar conditions.

"We've sold a lot of bulls, sight unseen," Gavin says.

One longtime buyer called 28 years ago, and Gavin asked when he'd like to look at the bulls.

The answer? "You just sell me three bulls that will make me want to buy more," Gavin retells. The next year that same cattleman bought 10. "He's never bought bulls anywhere else since."

Uniformity has always been important. "If he was going to like one, he was going to like them all," he says.

Today, what makes a bull stand out is his ability to move the program forward while still fitting in.

"Feet and structure is No. 1, but we're always trying to improve carcass quality without sacrificing anything we need," Brendyn says.

So they research new genetics that complement the herd that traces back to some of their original lines of Lady Blossoms and Boardwalks.

They recently purchased a bull in the top 1% for marbling as well as beef value (\$B) in the American Angus Association registry, noting their genetics also have to work in "big country."

"We want the commercial guys to be profitable," Colton says.

Belvin Angus wins CAB Commitment to Excellence Award

The Hamilton family has a business card and a standing invitation from a steakhouse owner in Vancouver. They've gotten a personal tour of a sushi restaurant in Calgary. On their ranch near Innisfail, Alta., Canada, they've shared meals with a fishmonger turned meat salesman and some of the most renowned chefs in the country.

There are perhaps no better *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand ambassadors in Canada than Gavin and Mabel Hamilton, says CAB president John Stika.

"They've always been willing to open up their gates and share their hospitality with people from all over the beef production chain," Stika says. "Those firsthand experiences are critical to giving these guys the knowledge they need to sell more beef."

For their involvement with the brand, along with their focus on producing quality cattle that work for their commercial customers, Belvin Angus recently received the CAB Canadian Commitment to Excellence award.

"We like to host the people CAB brings because it's a way of telling our story," Mabel Hamilton says, "and with any luck, getting rid of some of the misconceptions that are out there about what we do."



Growing into the market

Their customer base has changed. In the late 1970s, Angus was not the breed of choice and registrations were on a downtrend.

"We were discounted at market. It was not a popular breed," Mabel says, noting she was on the board when that reversed. "It was a celebration when Angus was on top."

For many of those early years, they consigned bulls to sales in the western U.S. as well as to the Calgary Bull

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Sale, drawing more than just national attention to their herd.

Today, they hold a production sale on the ranch each March. They'll get customers who plan to sell at weaning, but about half background them for some period or retain ownership through feeding.

"Our customers are keen on the value-added, so that means they'd like to have a branded-type product they can get a premium for," Mabel says.

There isn't a big market locally, so they draw producers from hundreds of miles away. If they've created cattle that work both in their fertile farming area and in the wide-open ranges of British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan, then surely they've succeeded.

"There's some tough range so they've got to be efficient, and structure and calving ease is huge, but growth is obviously still important as well," Colton says. Calving pastures are measured in sections. In acres, the summer pastures alone stretch up to half a million.

"When you go to a branding and you see hundreds of calves out of your bulls and when you see the

people that use your genetics do well, that's what you want," Brendyn says.

Longtime bull buyer Larry Sears, Stavely, Alta., relies on the Hamiltons' judgement to help him reach his end-product goals.

"They do the research and they're aggressive" in moving ahead, says the rancher who has retained ownership for the past two decades. Profitability can be "hit or miss" without carcass premiums, Sears notes. "But selling on the grid has been lucrative enough to entice us to feeding more often."

Recent carcass data reports show 90.9% AAA (USDA Choice equivalent) and above.

"We're all in this together, so the consumer, at the end of the day, gets a product they're happy with," Mabel says.

Beyond being in the black

That all-in approach is not only how the Hamiltons look at the wider beef industry, but also how they relate to their family business. Each one knows their strengths and each one contributes.

There are still no formal meetings, but they often gather at the main

house for Mabel's home cooking at lunch. They discuss the tasks of the day and who is going where when.

Maybe every so often they get a chance to reflect on how far they've come since the beginning.

"The bank told me I'd never be able to pay for it," Gavin says with a smile.

He now runs cattle on a two-thousand-acre land base, and also plants canola, barley and wheat. The business supports three families, and includes the farm his grandfather homesteaded in 1892.

But the new sale barn and the house that sits next door, the cattle that gain national and international attention ... they didn't just happen. They represent a lot of hard work.

"We waited a long time for this," Gavin says as Colton quickly adds, "Now we've got to work to keep moving forward." **AJ**

Pictured are Colton Hamilton (below), Brendyn and Quinn Elliot (right).

