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Through His Own Eyes

Kentucky cattleman who was there when CAB got started reflects on the business then and now.

Story by Laura Conaway, photos by Certified Angus Beef LLC

Charles Cannon suffered a horse blunder a few years back. It was no major thing, but enough for a physician to suggest the farmer retire his saddle.

"I'll ride tomorrow," Cannon said with controlled ease as he squared things up and headed home.

"He was on his horse the next day," Victoria Cannon says. It's spoken with just a hint of concern for her uncle, the rest with admiration and a nod that she should've known better.

Cannon's done his own thing for a while now, formed his own opinions and at times proposed the narrower route. But his family says he's always been in it as a participant first and while he leads.

If he's suggesting genetics in cattle, better believe he's tried 'em in his own herd. That path less traveled? He'll be walking it beside you.

Still, the Kentucky cowman isn't one to boast; he'd prefer to spend a serene morning horseback than discussing the work he's done or the positions

he's held and the successes under his guiding hand.

Yet open up the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand history book and you'll see his name and face next to founding notables like Mick Colvin, Harold Etling and Fred Johnson. Flanked by some more seasoned in age and wisdom, the farmer from Flemingsburg, Ky., held his own as a voice for the cow-calf producer, because he was one.

Of course what's now the world's largest beef brand wasn't always so mighty. And it's Cannon, an 80-year-old who rides a green gelding, who offers a rare perspective on what it was like before the brand did, in fact, change beef.

Leader by request

"I didn't really seek the job," Cannon says of joining the Angus inner circle. "I was asked to do it and I did it, and I hope I did a good job."

The 36-year-old was elected to the American

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Angus Association's Board of Directors in 1974 before being appointed to what was then the Angus Beef Certification Committee (later CAB) around '77. He would culminate his service as Association president in '82.

Those around him say he did a good job indeed.

"The needs of the membership are not always more and more programs, or more anything," Cannon says, "but they're real needs. Oftentimes they're few, but they need to be respected, need to be addressed."

Contrary to today's cattle forecast where Angus reign as king, the '70s outlook was more dreary. It seemed everybody was promoting leaner beef and consumers gave it a try, only to later turn away in a 25-year decrease in demand.

While Angus registered cow numbers held on compared to competitors, "most people wanted a bull of a different breed," Cannon says. Slowly but surely Continental cattle and even Herefords pulled power away from Angus. The Association,

registrations, transfers, membership dues and so forth were all in a downward spiral.

"It was tough," Cannon says, charged with the interests of thousands of struggling cattlemen. He recalls the net worth of the Association then was just a tiny fraction of what it is today, "and we lost \$100,000 a year there for a few years. You just can't go on that way very long."

Something had to give, and about that time Johnson and Etling walked in the door.

"As far as we knew, these things had been tried before and failed," Cannon says of the Board's understanding of the proposal for an Angus branded beef program. So forming that committee, putting forth tight dollars was "somewhat of a risky deal," he says, but people believed in the idea and its backers enough to try.

"These were top-flight businessmen," suggesting it would work, Cannon says.

"We knew it was a long shot — or at least we felt like it was — but it was also a risk worth taking."

It was during Charles Cannon's tenure that the *Angus Journal* was purchased and the National Sire Evaluation was put in place, in addition to the birth of CAB.

As the story goes, it was an uphill climb with Colvin as the tenacious guide. Cannon recalls years of what seemed like a discussion at every board meeting over whether to continue the program or shut it down. As president of the Board, it was his table that saw the legendary 8-7 vote cast in favor that it stay and grow. He voted aye.

Then to now

To have even been a spectator, Cannon is one of the very few who can tell of the air in the room, the comments both official and in passing. His memory unlocks pages of CAB history, fresh as if it were but a short time ago.

"I think everybody realized how meaningful it would be if it ever took off," he says. What he can't particularly recall is whether the majority foresaw what it would become. "I mean you talk about worldwide and a billion pounds. I don't think that ever crossed anybody's mind. I'm sure it didn't cross mine."

It didn't take prescience to recognize there was significant potential, and it's no surprise Cannon saw that without making wild predictions. He's as quiet a leader now as he was then, committed to the task at hand and underwhelmed by trends or rhetoric. He just wants the Angus cow-calf producer to make a living.

So to him it was simple: "the Board realized CAB could make a real difference because when people enjoy a great eating experience, that's going to filter right back to our farms and others."

The Cannons are proof of those premiums all these years.

"CAB has increased demand for Angus cattle to such a degree that it's just phenomenal," he says.

That's the goal — for the industry and for him, as it should be, he says. If any Angus breeder doesn't think it's important, he urges them to imagine the envy of registered breeders across the aisle.

"Goodness gracious, we're on top of the hill now!"

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It's a wide-angle view that is his and his alone.

"It was one of the great experiences of my life," Cannon musters, "having had the opportunity to serve on the Association Board."

To relive it is to revel in the joy a second time over.

"This is just a lifetime of work from our family," he says of the cattle they raise and the people they educate. He doesn't know what the younger generations will do with the legacy he'll leave, "but

if I could live my life over I wouldn't do too many things differently.

"Might have another horse or two or maybe wouldn't have bought a few that I bought. But, that would be about all the differences I would make." **AJ**

Editor's note: Laura Conaway is a freelance writer from De Leon Springs, Fla.

The Cannon boys

To see Charles Cannon as a leader is to have a tough time distinguishing the man from his role. That was his method when he took on official business for the American Angus Association in 1982 as it was and in the decades that followed, when he was a cattleman and farmer.

His part in the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand's history was a natural fit, for he's been Angus long before it came calling.

"Jere and I started with one heifer that we paid \$80 for in 1952," Charles says. When government price support for tobacco went by the wayside cold turkey, it was strictly cattle for the northeast Kentucky brothers.

At Stone Gate Farms, near Flemingsburg, Ky., Charles and Jere, along with their wives Frances and Mary Jayne, turned one animal into a registered herd of hundreds.

But the 450 pairs between them aren't just any cattle; they're Angus all the way back to the beginning.

"A local farmer told me the other day that back in the '70s and '80s there were a lot of Charolais in this part of the country," Victoria Cannon, Jere's daughter, says. "He said, 'but then once the Cannon boys came in, they turned it to Angus country.'"

It's a move they'd do over and again — promote what they believed

and knew to be the best no matter the trend at the time.

"I don't think there's any breed on the face of the Earth that compares with Angus cattle," Charles says with experience to back it. "They just have these God-given traits that we can't attribute to man."

They can and do help them along through genetic selection, artificial insemination (AI) and genomic tests to obtain more information on commercial sires quicker.

"The carcass qualities are one thing," Charles says, "but the mothering ability, fertility and so forth just makes them a breed set apart."

Jere agrees with the same conviction as his older brother. What could seem like a challenging situation to work side-by-side with family, they've found to be only a blessing. The two and their own extended families — Charles has six grandchildren who are the fifth generation on the land — run their own herds next to each other where they benefit from the ability to call somebody to help work cows or mend a fence.

While there's always work to be done, "we like to have a good time," Jere says, typical of the younger sibling. "We cut up and horse around and enjoy when we're working the cattle through the chutes and all. Plus there's always a good meal at the end of the day."

The men select keepers for their spring and fall sales, in March and October, respectively. They use ultrasound technology to get a closer look at marbling and select bulls based on above-average marbling.

"Add on high fertility, out of a good momma cow with a nice udder. If it's the right kind of calf, you're ready to go," Jere says. "It's awful hard to avoid a beautiful looking animal," he says of selecting on phenotype, too, "so I guess I have a weakness for a good calf."

If so, it's a family trait.

"We feel very privileged," Victoria says. "Our family has a history with CAB through my Uncle Charles, and we're honored to be able to combine our heritage with theirs."

The Cannon family (from left) are Frances, Charles, Jere, Mary Jayne and Victoria. Today Angus cattle are common in their part of Kentucky, but they were the outliers for the area when the family first started promoting the breed.

