

# Making It Better

*One family's journey from town to the peak of premium beef production earns the CAB Sustainability Award for Wharton 3C Cattle.*

*by Nicole Lane Erceg, Certified Angus Beef*

Most sane folks don't choose to go into business with Mother Nature — she's a fickle and unpredictable partner. So, how did two people with zero agricultural background, no generational land, wealth or genetics carve a profitable partnership with her in Southwest Kansas?

"Shannon is the brains, and I'm the brawn," Rusty Wharton jokes.

The real answer is a little more nuanced.

## Oasis on the plains

The view of Wharton 3C Ranch, near Syracuse, Kan., in the summer of 2023 is so green Shannon and Rusty might have better luck convincing people it is a slice of heaven rather than the harsh, drought-ridden environment locals know. The cattle will tell you, however, it isn't always this pleasant.

In fact, a few years ago, there wasn't a cow in these pastures. Lack

of rain left the soil unable to produce much more than dust.

The commercial outfit is made up of about 600 head spread across more than 35,000 acres, most of that a Western Association of Fish and Wildlife conservation easement. A 1,000-head grow yard prepares calves for finishing. Rusty and Shannon have been managing it for various owners since 2005.

"We either had enough money to buy the land or to buy the cattle, never both," Rusty says.

The last time the yard changed hands in 2017, the Whartons made the numbers work, purchasing the cattle and a little land, leasing the rest.

A mix of puzzle pieces built over time made the unlikely a reality for



**WHARTON 3C CATTLE**  
Shannon and Rusty Wharton



this military service veteran and a horse girl from Pennsylvania. Over time, the duo carved out their own place in the cattle business.

## Becoming experts

The Wharton family story started in Kentucky where the couple met and married. Rusty fell into commercial ranching via a rodeo friend; Shannon found her passion for cattle through Block and Bridle at Penn State.

After receiving her master's degree in cattle breeding and genetics from the University of Kentucky, Shannon wanted to go west to Montana. Texas was calling Rusty's name.

They split the difference when the only job opportunity that made sense was a position for Shannon at Grant County Feeders in Ulysses, Kan.

"My dad thought I was crazy," she says. "He asked what in the world I was doing with that master's degree. I was driving a feedtruck and chasing dreams."

The decision to learn the feeding business was strategic. Already familiar with the commercial ranching, they decided making it in the cattle business would mean learning all the sectors.

Their family mission statement then is a bit fuzzy now, but it boiled down to working together to make the cattle industry better.

Humble, willing to work hard, listen and learn, the path to their

own operation took them across the Midwest managing ranches and working in feedyards. Their teachers read like a cattle industry hall of fame, including Mark Gardiner, Sam Hands, Minnie Lou Bradley and Larry Corah, among others.

"There were a lot of opportunities that opened up for us because of our willingness to work hard, but also because of our open, business-focused, progressive way of thinking," Shannon explains.

Decades of raising all types of cattle in diverse environments under different philosophies provided a list of lessons that would direct what to do (and not to do) if they ever had full control of the reins.

"What we thought were setbacks at the time were actually learning opportunities that made us better," Shannon says.

At Wharton 3C Cattle, if you want to know the details of the land, grass, wildlife and irrigation, Rusty has forgotten more than most will ever know. When it comes to genetics, data-based decision-making and running the balance sheet, Shannon is the expert. Together, they're equal partners with a shared passion for the cattle.

"We each have our areas of expertise, and they don't overlap except for the cows," Shannon explains.

"If she passed tomorrow, I'd be so out of luck," Rusty admits.

"I don't even know how to open QuickBooks®."

Shannon rolls her eyes with a smile, sharing she'd also be up a creek without a paddle if he weren't by her side.

## A better way

Unburdened by tradition that sometimes saddles generational ranches, the Whartons' mindset is business first. Follow the science and data in selection and management, then work to get better every day.

"We have our goal towards quality, not only quality in the meat we produce, but also quality of the land," Shannon says. "What's the point of doing it if you're not striving to be the best you can be?"

Involved in retained ownership since the 1990s, the couple tracks everything from conception to carcass data. A recent load of cattle were 100% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB), including 92% Prime. They achieved 87% or higher CAB and Prime across all their 2021 fed cattle. Premiums on those cattle add some extra black ink to the bottom line.

But it's about more than data and dollars.

People and an industry-wide vision drive them to build not only their section of the cattle business, but the entire industry.

"We all need each other," Shannon

*Continued on page 100*



explains. “Without the cow-calf producer, restaurants don’t have great beef to serve; without the packer, our product doesn’t get to those restaurants and consumers don’t have access to it. And commercial producers need someone to feed and finish those cattle. So, it’s very important that we all work together and realize in the end, we’re all producing the same product.”

This thought process for greater industry engagement led Shannon to get involved in the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef (USRSB).

“It’s such a neat organization where we can have the whole supply chain sit down together and say, OK, from the producer all the way to the retailer, we’re producing this beef. Let’s do it to the best of our ability. Let’s make sure we’re not impacting the environment negatively. Let’s ensure we’re taking care of the animals and our employees.”

The USRSB framework aligns with the Whartons’ mindset on management.

“We have to be sustainable to be in this business,” Rusty says. “If we don’t do the right thing with the grazing management plan, if we don’t take care of the cattle properly and if we fail to bring together our customer base, then we’re not going to be in business.”

Rusty admits he’s been one to store cattle or grazing data in his head or scribbles in a dashboard notebook. However, discipline to keep records and technology to sort data allow him to run their cattle operation like any other business. That recorded and analyzed information enables good decisions, workable drought plans and meeting the requirements of take 1/3, leave 2/3 when grazing the conservation easement.

“It helps you stay focused when

you need to make a move,” Rusty says.

The most valuable takeaway for the couple’s USRSB involvement has been opening new avenues of communication. Shannon has firsthand experience in how simple management tools like Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certification and written grazing management plans can align values across the beef supply chain.

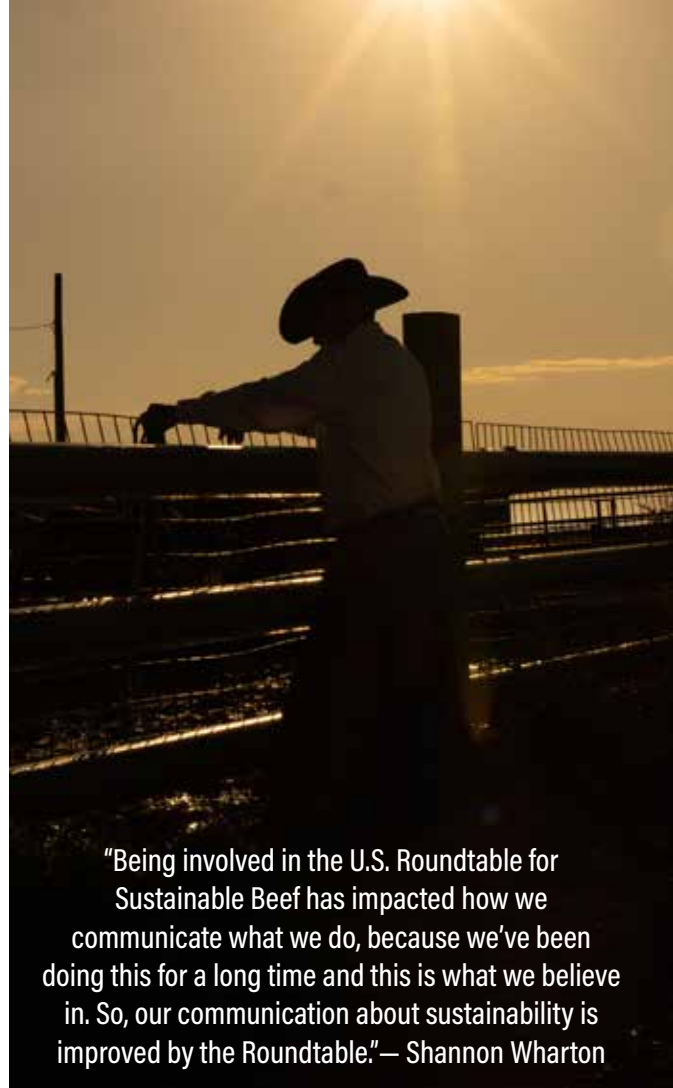
“Being involved in the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef has impacted how we communicate what we do, because we’ve been doing this for a long time and this is what we believe in,” Shannon says. “So, our communication about sustainability is improved by the Roundtable.”

## Building for the future

Rusty and Shannon’s children, the three C’s of Wharton 3C Cattle, Catie, Clayton and Cara, have taken the lessons learned growing up on ranches and memories of crawling around feedyard offices and riding in feedtrucks into their own careers.

All went to college to study agriculture. Catie works for Plains Cotton Growers in Lubbock, Texas. Cara is finishing her degree in agriculture economics with plans to farm with her fiancé in Nebraska, and Clayton just moved home to Syracuse to join the family business and teach high school agriculture at the local school.

“You maybe aren’t going to be a millionaire working in agriculture, but money’s not everything,”



“Being involved in the U.S. Roundtable for Sustainable Beef has impacted how we communicate what we do, because we’ve been doing this for a long time and this is what we believe in. So, our communication about sustainability is improved by the Roundtable.” — Shannon Wharton

Shannon says. “And if you go to work every day and you’re passionate about what you do and you love what you do, then it’s not work. Then it’s just fun.”

The balance of pure joy from the hard work of doing something they love and riding out the rough storms along the way turned two first-generation cattle ranchers into legacy builders.

Honored with the CAB Sustainability Award in September at the brand’s annual conference in Las Vegas, Nev., the Whartons embody progress and demonstrate leaving things better than they found them.

“I hope the legacy of our ranch is quality,” Rusty says. <sup>AJ</sup>

**SCAN FOR MORE**  
on Making It Better or visit  
[www.angusjournal.net](http://www.angusjournal.net)

