

One Million and Going Strong

by Ann Gooding

It didn't look as if it could be done. There was simply no way a beef animal's breed identification could be maintained from feedlot to meat counter.

But the American Angus Assn.'s Certified Angus Beef program managed to do just that. And on Sept. 8 the millionth pound of Certified Angus Beef (CAB) was sold. Association officials and others involved in the program were on hand when the football team at University of Missouri, Columbia, accepted a side of CAB, part of which was the millionth pound.

Considering the nation's total beef pro-

duction, a million pounds is merely a drop in the bucket. But the program behind it is important. It has the potential of making Angus breeders' economic futures a whole lot brighter.

Less Than Two Years

It's been less than two years since the first pound of CAB-marked beef was sold. The program has met its share of difficulties and has had to cut through its share of red tape—but it is working. And it's only just begun.

Plans for the program date to 1975 when the president of the American Angus Assn.

appointed a committee to study the feasibility of establishing a program to identify Angus beef, then maintain that identity through the packing plant and into the meat counter. The original committee was made up of Chairman Gilman Stewart, Greensburg, Ind., and members Edward Elliott, Mt. Victory, Ohio; Fred Johnson, Summitville, Ohio; Harold Etling, Marshallville, Ohio; and Keith Evans, association director of public relations.

The February 1976 change in USDA meat grading standards was a justification for the concept.

Quality End Product

Probably one of the most important traits of Angus cattle is their ability to produce a quality end product, and at one time that quality was recognized and rewarded by USDA meat grading standards. However, those standards were becoming so relaxed that by 1976 nearly 85% of all beef being graded was earning the choice classification. And quality beef was becoming a likely candidate for someone's endangered species list.

Granted, good beef could still be had, but its selection was a hit and miss proposition. Quality beef was losing its identity and in so doing was losing its value.

And quality beef wasn't the only thing suffering. So were consumers. USDA may have lowered its standards, but many consumers hadn't. All someone needed to do was identify, then merchandise quality beef. The market was there.

So came the idea for Certified Angus Beef.

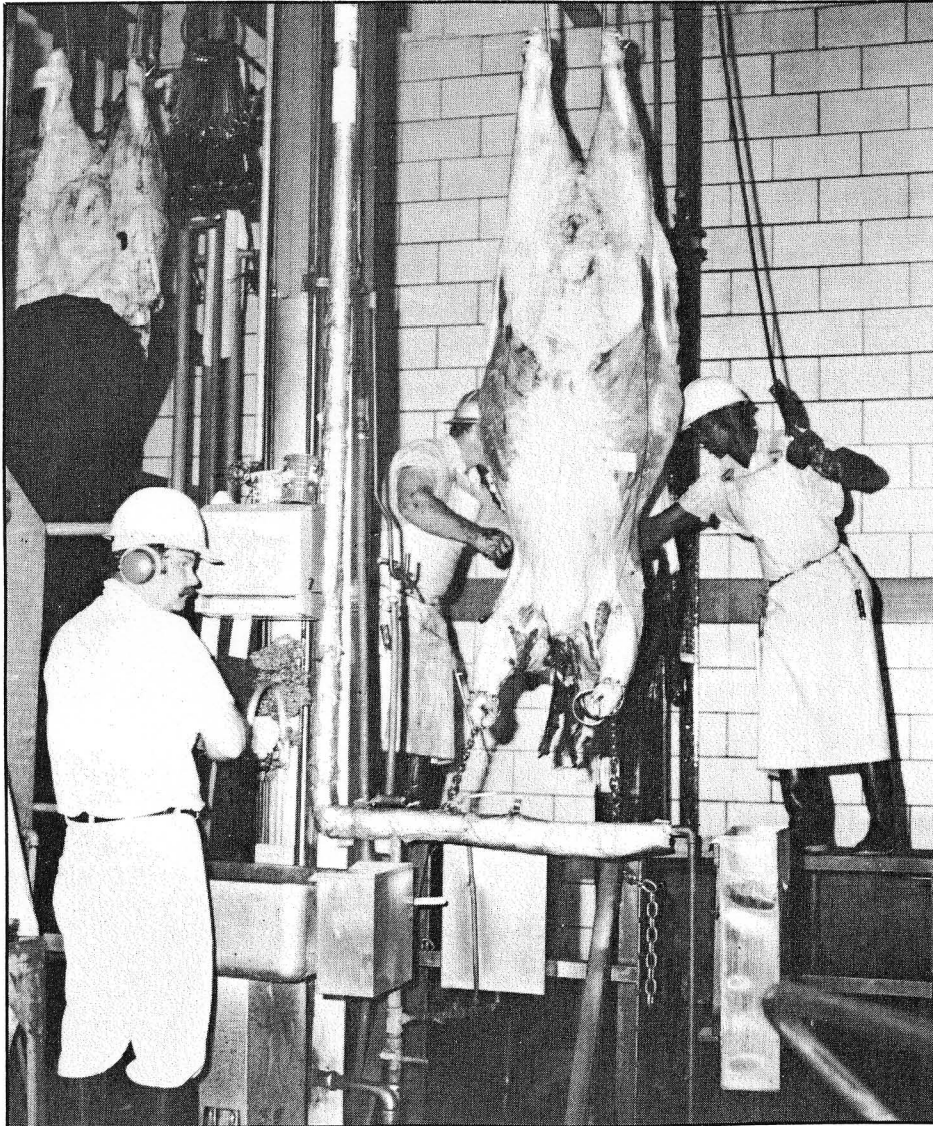
Program Development

In August 1977 the association committee asked Mick Colvin, West Salem, Ohio, then an association regional manager, to study consumer reception and mechanics of identification.

Three months later Colvin reported his findings to the association board, and the board approved what was to become the CAB program. Colvin was subsequently hired as executive director.

Setting up the whole thing wasn't easy. For the next six months Colvin, CAB committee members, two university meat scientists, management personnel from three major meat packers and four large retail chains developed quality standards, evaluation and identification procedures, acquired legal approval for agreements with packers and retailers, set up a carcass evaluation

Certified Angus Beef on the rail.



program with USDA and designed promotional material.

Then came the task of coordinating supplies of Angus on the hoof with packing plants and retailers. There was hesitancy to pioneer, Colvin recalls, but by Oct. 19, 1978, two Renzetti IGAs in Columbus, Ohio, supplied by Val-Decker Packing Co., Piqua, Ohio, were selling Certified Angus Beef. The program was launched. Everything went smoothly. For about two weeks.

USDA Interference

On Nov. 2 the USDA Inspection Service put a stop to the whole thing—it seems the program had not yet received that governmental body's approval. Finally, after CAB officials made several Washington pilgrimages for numerous meetings, the program was given the go-ahead and the Renzetti stores were back in business with an identified CAB product. That was April 2, 1979.

Fifteen days later Eastgate IGA and Diggs Packing Co., Columbia, Mo., entered the program. On July 18 Fricks Market, Union, Mo., and Central Market, Sullivan, Mo., joined the CAB ranks, followed in December by three Hedges & Hafer stores in St. Louis and St. Charles, Mo.

The next March two St. Louis Del Monte stores started selling CAB. And four more St. Louis stores—three Lou Stecher Markets and the Southtown BiRite—followed suit in June. About a month later Tripple H Farms, Baldwin, Mo., joined the group. And in February 1980 the first load of CAB-marked boxed beef left Lorenz International, Montgomery, Ala., via Boston's Oxford Trading Co. for eight CAB retailers in New England.

Since its beginning, the program has grown steadily: 29,528 lb. were sold in April, May and June of 1979 compared to 327,696 lb. for the same three months in 1980.

As the mechanics are worked out, other packers and retailers are expected to handle CAB and, according to director Colvin, restaurant outlets are on the horizon.

No Simple Task

Although it's off to a good start, the program's scope is still far from national. Lining up producers, packers and retailers is not simple. Nor is the process beef itself undergoes to arrive in the meat counter carrying a CAB label. CAB doesn't just mean beef is Angus, it means the meat has met rigid quality and value standards to assure consumers a dependable product.

First, while still on the hoof, it must be identified as either Angus or as indistinguishable in appearance from purebred Angus, a task that falls to a packing plant employee trained and certified by the American Angus Assn. After identification, the fresh carcass is marked with the CAB seal, which alerts the plant's USDA grader that he or she must evaluate the carcass not by USDA grade standards but under a stricter USDA acceptance program approved by the American Angus Assn.

Flavor, tenderness and juiciness—all

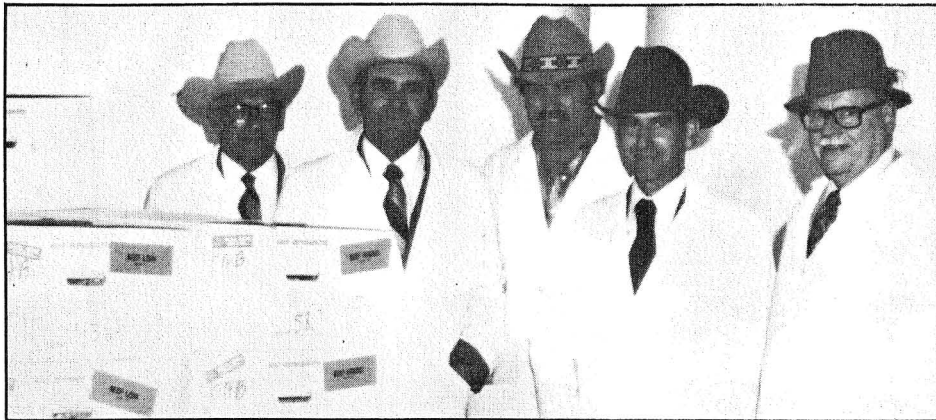
those things that make a delicious steak delicious—depend on a wide variety of factors, and the American Angus Assn. has set up quality guidelines with this in mind.

The first two criteria concern taste. One, modest marbling, refers to the amount of marbling required for a carcass to grade mid-point choice; and the second, maturity range, insures the meat comes from a young animal. The third standard deals with cutability, insuring less outside waste

the American Angus Assn. Never in the history of U.S. beef producers has a breed association attempted to identify and sell its breed to the consuming public. Never has an association attempted to reward its producers for the value of their product at the consumer level.

Which brings us to phase two.

Phase one is the part of the program already in operation. Phase two will follow and is designed to insure—in fact, to



Current CAB Committee members, from left, are Fred Johnson, Summitville, Ohio; Ray Adams, Tahoka, Texas; Joe Reznicek, Hettick, Ill.; Charles Cannon, Flemingsburg, Ky.; and Dr. Arthur Bartenslager, Churchville, Va.

fat and higher over-all carcass value—CAB must measure yield grade 3 (YG3) or better to rank prime and no higher than mid-YG3 for choice.

Remaining Criteria

The remaining four criteria are aimed especially at insuring consumer appeal. Lean meat must be fine-textured; marbling texture must be fine to medium, i.e., well distributed throughout the muscle; meat must be moderately firm, with no indication of softness; and the lean portion must be slightly dark red or lighter.

It is important to remember that qualifying carcasses are evaluated by USDA grading service personnel, not by packing plant or American Angus Assn. employees.

Once a carcass earns USDA acceptance as determined by association quality standards, a grader stamps it with a "USDA Accepted as Specified" shield, the packer marks it with a special CAB roll and the beef moves to a licensed CAB distributor, who then identifies, promotes and sells it.

And in just this manner, in less than two years, a million pounds of Certified Angus Beef have passed into consumers' hands. And consumers choose to pay a premium.

Packers in turn pay the American Angus Assn. 1¢ for every pound they invoice in carcass form, 2¢ per lb. for boxed or fabricated beef. This money pays for program administration, promotion and merchandising.

Association Role

Although it oversees the entire program, the Angus association at no time owns the Certified Angus Beef or the animals destined to become so marked.

Incidentally, this program is unique to

increase—the commercial beef industry's demand for good purebred Angus bulls. And that hinges on just one thing—greater economic returns for those producers using high quality Angus bulls.

The existing CAB program has shown that, once at the retail level, quality beef can bring a premium. But to insure demand for quality Angus, economic benefits must be realized at each level of beef production, from seed stock producer to commercial breeder to feeder to packer to retailer.

Phase Two

The CAB phase already in operation deals with market development and mechanics at the packer and retailer levels. Phase two will deal with the others. It is intended to identify Angus-sired calves in commercial herds, then follow them through the feedlot and into the processing plants.

Again, not simple. But once established, phase two will have far-reaching effects. By rewarding those producing high quality Angus beef, it will create a stronger market for quality Angus seed stock.

And there's more. Phase two, by making available complete carcass cut-out data on all CAB carcasses, will provide product evaluation based on economic value, an important tool for commercial producers. And by evaluating production, the program will identify superior sires, an aid for seed stock producers.

Ambitious? Yes. Complex? No doubt. But expansion of the CAB program has vast potential.

By the way, yet another relaxing or modification of USDA beef grading standards is in the wind.