

Looking Into the

“I give advice, but I’m not the boss,” claims Henry Gardiner.

That’s how the patriarch of Gardiner Angus Ranch describes his current role in the family business. Gardiner says management of the well-known Ashland, Kan., seedstock operation is shared by his three sons.

“And some of their best decisions were made against my advice,” he grins.

If you ask Greg, Mark and Garth Gardiner, they’ll say Dad’s advice carries a lot of weight. It should, for Henry has set a good example. He has been called one of the most progressive of cattle producers — the kind who demonstrate how innovation and creativity can be applied to production, marketing and resource management.

That kind of talent and foresight was recognized when Gardiner received the 2004 Beef Industry Vision Award, presented by the National Cattlemen’s Foundation (NCF) and sponsored by Ford Motor Co. at the 2004 Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show in Phoenix, Ariz. Nominees for the award were evaluated for their application of production technology, optimum resource utilization, effective marketing and beneficial effect on the beef industry.

Gardiner initiated and still lends advice to his family’s progressive management and aggressive merchandising strategies. Planned use of ranch resources and extensive use of artificial insemination (AI), embryo transfer (ET) and ultrasound evaluation rank the operation among the most technologically advanced. Close to 2,000 females are bred each year, and an annual production sale features almost 1,000 animals. Gardiners also facilitate marketing opportunities for their customers.

Pioneer spirit

The pursuit of his vision might be likened to the pioneer spirit that brought Gardiner’s forebears to southwest Kansas more than a century ago. They came to Clark County in 1885, by covered wagon, to stake a 160-acre claim. While he never knew his homesteader grandfather, Gardiner’s grandmother shared memories of those early years on the plains — living in a dugout, running a few cattle and trying to coax crops from sandy soil ill-suited to farming.

After a few tough years, the homesteaders

Beef Industry Vision Award Winner Henry Gardiner has taken his family’s Angus operation into the age of technology through his vision of the future.

by Troy Smith

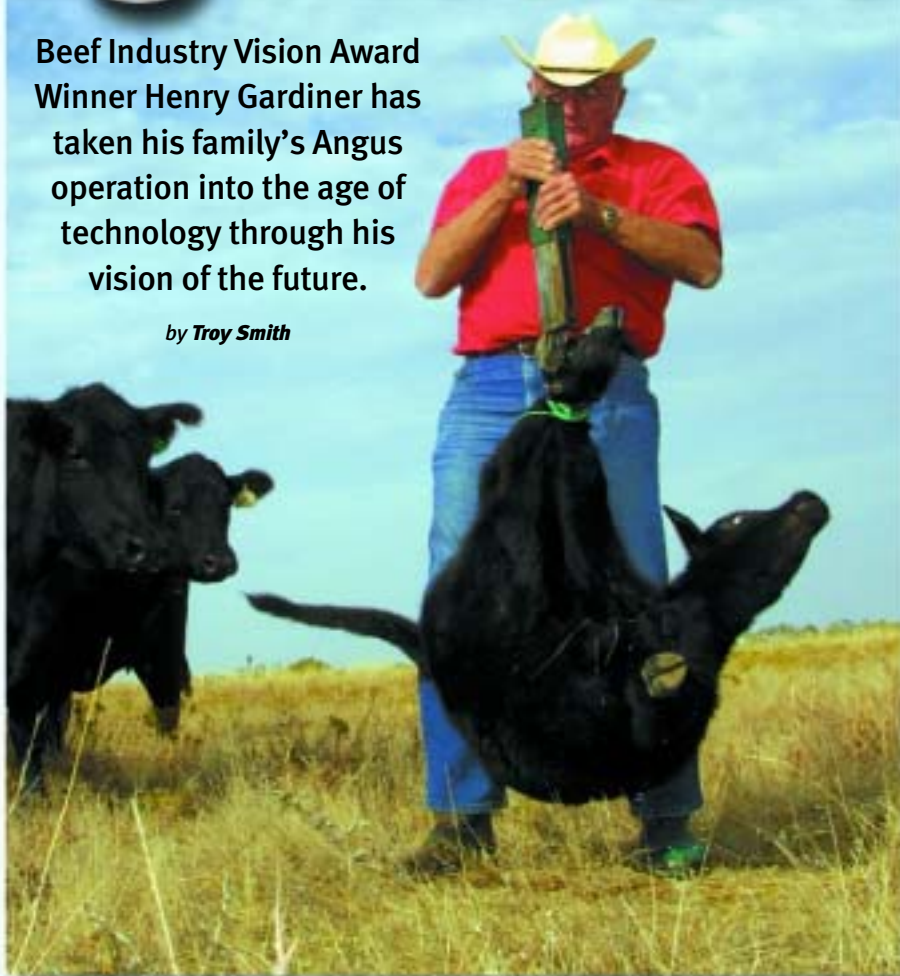


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temporarily relocated to the northeastern part of Kansas. They returned to Ashland and a more fertile piece of land.

“They had a few more cattle then, and my grandfather put up hay. For extra money, he drove a freight wagon back and forth to Fort Supply, in Indian Territory (Oklahoma),” Gardiner says. “I don’t think freighting was very profitable, because my grandmother said she made about as much money selling cream and eggs.”

Gardiner’s father, Ralph, was born in 1889. He attended law school and, though admitted to the bar, never practiced that profession. Instead, he returned to Ashland and his agricultural roots. During the 1920s he began putting together the land that is the basis of the present-day ranch.

“Dad didn’t marry until he was 41 years old, about the same time that the Great Depression hit,” Gardiner recalls. “He and my mother had a lot of sheep, probably 2,000 ewes, fewer than 100 head of cattle and lots

of debt. I arrived in 1931, along with the 10-year drought.”

Gardiner says 1937 brought a turning point in the ranch’s focus. Having lost part of their land, his parents relocated to the current headquarters site. Cashing in the sheep, they purchased a set of commercial Angus heifers. The following year, they bought more, determined to be in the cattle business.

As a youth, in the 1940s, Gardiner showed home-raised calves and led one to a reserve championship at Denver’s National Western Stock Show (NWSS). The next year, the same steer was named grand champion of the Kansas State Fair, earning Gardiner a \$100 credit toward a purchase at the state Angus sale. He ended up buying two registered heifers. Soon after, a set of registered cows was purchased through a Wyoming dispersal.

When Gardiner and his father started to develop their registered herd, they sought the

Future

best Angus bulls they could find. In retrospect, Gardiner says, the cattle really weren't very good. Wanting to make them better, and do it faster, he started using AI in 1964 and bought interests in some well-known herd sires.

"The cattle still weren't very good," Gardiner claims. "We really didn't start to make significant improvement until 1980, when the [American] Angus Association came out with its *Sire Evaluation Report*."

Data-driven

While serving on the American Angus Association's Beef Improvement Committee, and on its Board of Directors (1977-1983), Gardiner lobbied for development of better tools for genetic selection. He was a strong advocate of Richard Willham of Iowa State University (ISU), who developed an accurate system of genetic evaluation for Angus cattle.

With expected progeny differences (EPDs) as the basis for comparing the economically important traits for sires, multiple-trait selection brought real progress in cattle performance and efficiency at Gardiner Angus Ranch. Also involved with the feeding of their home-raised steers, the ranch conducted progeny tests, adding data to the evaluation process.

In Gardiner's opinion, ultrasound technology has dramatically advanced selection for carcass merit.

"During the last five years, ultrasound has provided us with useful carcass information," Gardiner explains. "Now we can take ultrasound measurements (for ribeye area, marbling and backfat) on all of our yearling bulls and registered heifers. We can get the data back in a week or less."

Gardiner says one of the best decisions he never made was to calve in the fall. He gives the credit to his father. At the time, purposely planning for fall-born calves was a rarity in the area. Nearly as unusual was the grazing of cow-calf pairs, rather than stocker cattle, on winter wheat pastures. Both practices complement the operation today.

"We calve in August and September, and sell bulls and bred heifers that are 18 to 20 months old. That's a more useful age for many of our customers. An 18-month-old bull may bring up to \$1,000 more than a bull that's 12 months old," Gardiner offers.

"And we still depend on wheat pasture for



► Henry Gardiner (seated, right), pictured with his family, was recognized with the 2004 Beef Industry Vision Award.

PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

wintering pairs. It provides ample protein, and we generally offer supplemental feed only when the weather is bad. We can graze half of our wheat ground until late March and still be able to harvest a grain crop. The other half is used only for grazing. As forage, wheat is relatively dependable, cheap feed."

Along with about 3,800 total acres of dryland wheat, Gardiners raise 850 acres of alfalfa and another 700 acres of native Bluestem hay. The majority of the ranch — some 16,000 acres — consists of native range for summer and early fall pasture. A rotational grazing scheme targets optimum use of both cool- and warm-season forage species.

By November, a 20-acre breeding facility becomes the center of activity. Constructed in 1992, it consists of three large octagonal corrals divided, like pies, into 36 pens. All are connected with a primary alley leading to the AI barn. Gardiner says the centralized facility is more efficient than when cattle were spread out among the several small working areas that were used previously. The facility also enhances ET work.

Multiplier effect

Since its introduction 20 years ago, the Gardiner ET program has grown to the point that it yields nearly 70% of the ranch's registered calves. Each year, about 2,000 embryos are harvested from among 60 of the best registered cows. Gardiner says approximately 900 embryos are transferred to recipients from the ranch's commercial cow herd. The remainder will go into cows owned by other ranchers in various locations. From the owners of these "cooperator herds," Gardiner Angus Ranch later buys the resulting calves at market price plus a bonus.

"Hopefully, we are picking the very best cows as donors, and the heifer calves should be better than their mothers," Gardiner explains. "So we replace about 25% of our registered herd each year. That means cows are offered for sale by the time they are 5 or 6 years old. They can contribute several more productive years to a buyer's program."

Gardiner Angus Ranch also helps longtime bull customers merchandise cattle by organizing and promoting consignment sales featuring the customers' replacement-quality commercial females. And while Gardiner Angus Ranch markets fewer fed cattle than before, there is opportunity for customers to benefit from ties to U.S. Premium Beef (USPB). Gardiner Angus Ranch bought into the marketing cooperative early on, and Gardiner's son Mark serves on its board of directors.

"We own shares and the rights to supply finished cattle, but we've reached the point where we don't 'steer' many bull calves. We let customers use those rights to market their cattle. The premiums for high-quality cattle have been good, providing further incentive for participants to improve their genetics," Gardiner says.

"Just a few years ago, one average price would buy all of the cattle. Now, with grid marketing, producers can get paid for the value of individual animals. That's helping the whole industry produce a better product," he adds.

Gardiner's vision has been to develop breeding stock that will help customers increase their profit potential and deliver a high-quality product to consumers — a vision for improving the beef business as well as the bottom line.

