

Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award

# Anatomy of a Brand

by *Steve Suther*

**H**enry Gardiner gets a kick out of seeing the Gardiner Angus Ranch brand on cattle far from his Ashland, Kan., home. “You’re in another state admiring cows and wondering about the genetics,” he says, setting the scene. “Then you see a bull and that double-G brand and you know those aren’t just black cattle. It’s a good feeling.”

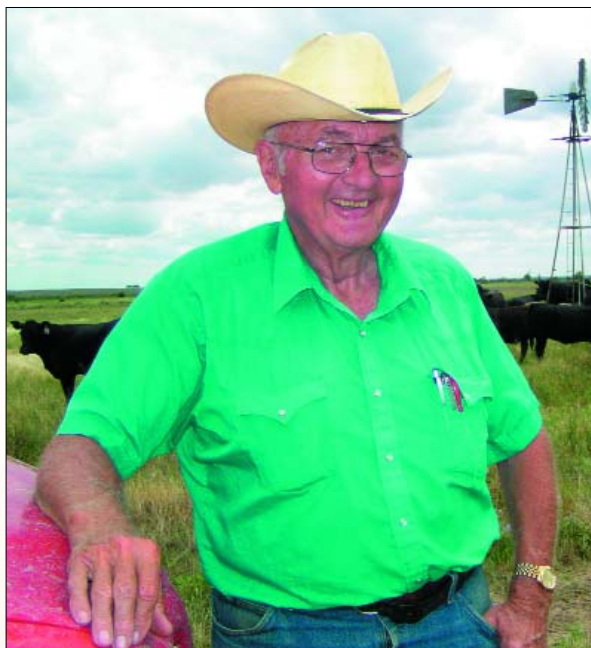
Most Angus producers have that same feeling if they own cattle with the Gardiner brand. Since 1885, says a brochure tagline, the family has built the brand by keeping promises. They communicate core values by choosing such names as “Precision” and “Integrity” for the bulls they produce.

Considering that focus on high quality, Angus and branding, it was fitting that Gardiner and his wife, Nan, accepted the 2004 Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award Sept. 11, at the CAB annual conference in San Antonio, Texas.

The Gardiners, with sons Greg, Mark and Garth and their wives and children, follow a tradition of science over fashion or fad. Science led them, 40 years ago, to base their Angus herd entirely on artificial insemination (AI). Frustrated by a lack of unbiased information on bulls, Gardiner weighed and measured everything he could, and sent progeny data to the American Angus Association for all the world to see.

“When the industry was concentrating on growth and leanness, Henry pioneered the use of carcass data to focus on the consumer in making genetic decisions,” says Larry Corah, CAB vice president. “His foresight helped lead the Association to its position as industry leader in carcass EPDs (expected progeny differences).”

Science led Gardiner to ignore show-winning bulls when they had never been



► CAB 2004 Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award winner Henry Gardiner, Ashland, Kan., understands the value of branding.

PHOTO BY STEVE SUTHER

evaluated for real-world performance or for beef quality. He wanted practical information that went more than skin deep. “When other producers were questioning the value of EPDs, Gardiner based breeding decisions primarily on those numbers,” Corah says.

Another Gardiner brand tagline heralds, “Genetic progress through research.” The ranch was a “virtual off-site experiment station for scientists from many universities,” says Corah, who served 25 years as a Kansas State University (K-State) Extension beef specialist. “Henry’s vision told him data was only valuable if shared, and that’s why he has been a tireless speaker at cattle conferences around the world,” he adds.

Along with doing everything it takes to develop elite performance and carcass genetics, the Gardiners built their brand. “It used to be all family members had their own

brands, but now we’re a corporation, and we use the brand that Greg had,” Gardiner explains. Two mirror-image letters share a spine in this “clean mark that calls to mind the Gardiner name” on all registered cattle, including 800 cows, he says.

The 1,000 commercial cows wear an older family brand, the diamond-bar. Both brands are registered, but with the state of Kansas rather than the Federal Trade Commission. Those marks are freeze-branded on yearlings, along with individual identification (ID) numbers. If cattle get lost or stolen, Gardiner can tell his at a glance, and records tell him exactly which animals are in question.

Many producers automatically connect the brand symbols with Gardiner Angus Ranch. “It’s been around and on a lot of cattle for 20 years, so people know it,” Gardiner says. “It’s a walking advertisement; it adds value.”

## Gardiner influence

Other than the family, no one has seen more Gardiner-influence cattle than Sam Hands, manager of Triangle H Grain & Cattle Co., Garden City, Kan. The 4,000-head CAB-licensed feedlot nominated its customer for the award.

“I’ve fed thousands of excellent cattle for a lot of Gardiner customers,” Hands says. “But, sometimes I get offers to look at cattle of ‘Gardiner influence’ that really aren’t — or maybe they were just across the fence from Gardiner cattle. People want to claim a connection to that brand, but the impact depends on how wide and deep they get into those genetics. The more commitment and generations we see, the more dependable the cattle performance.”

The Gardiner Ranch became more brand-conscious 20 years ago, when scientific selection for quality was beginning

to pay off. “We added the 1885 line when we had been at it for 100 years,” Gardiner says, “but the slogan we are most known for is ‘Quality in Quantity.’ It speaks to our technical ability to mass-produce the best quality Angus.” That simple phrase has never been trademarked, and perhaps it cannot be. “Somebody else can use it, too,” he says. However, the words, like a brand, imply a promise that must be backed.

Technology, such as ultrasound, helps keep the promise and invites others to respond to market demand. Gardiner saw the rise of value-based marketing through U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) in 1997 and responded with greater selection pressure on carcass traits. “We increased our marbling, with ultrasound-measured %IMF (intramuscular fat) moving from 3.09 to 5.39 in just three years,” he says. Ribeye size increased at the same time.

Gardiner imagines what applied technology can do, combined with grid premiums and discounts. The growing incentive of \$50 million paid for CAB-accepted carcasses last year should help propel acceptance rates to new levels. He wrote in the Gardiner 25th Anniversary Sale catalog last April, “Five years from now, the CAB rate of acceptance will be two or three times greater than it is now.”

It won’t happen because of single-trait selection, of course. Besides slogans and cattle brands, the Gardiners’ company logo represents this broad vision. “It’s a balance scale with an image of a carcass on one side and a semen ampule on the other, weighing carcass against fertility traits — and, if you look closely, you will see the fertility traits have slightly more weight,” Gardiner says. “We think it tells our story, that we are taking

measurements all the way from conception to carcass.”

### Data-driven

Gardiner stands for the scientific approach, as opposed to other schools of thought. “We tried the old way — the so-called eye of the master, where a really good cattleman was supposed to be able to look at an animal and tell if it was going to be calving ease and have growth and carcass,” he says. “We couldn’t make purple-ribbon genetics work. But where traits are highly heritable, we can make rapid progress, record it generation after generation and make decisions based on data.”

Conventional wisdom is short-lived in the Gardiner tradition, because “a lot of it originated without benefit of data.” The industry used to assume all Angus bulls were calving-ease bulls, Gardiner notes. “When we believed that, we pulled 60% of calves from heifers. Now that we know better, we assist maybe 5%, and we did that while making progress in growth and carcass traits as well.”

Naturally, Gardiner customers are similarly data-driven, consumer-focused and willing to work cooperatively.

Triangle H began its alliance with the

Gardiners 10 years ago. That’s when a discussion on progeny testing expanded to include sire performance testing, feeding for bull customers and embryo transfers (ET) to the Hands cow herd. “We put 250 Gardiner eggs in our cows this year,” Hands says.

Two-thirds of the Gardiners’ annual registered Angus calves come from the eggs of 60 top registered cows through ET pregnancies, in their own commercial cows and in those of several customers.

Hands feeds approximately 700 yearling Gardiner bulls on efficiency and performance tests each year, and some customers who buy the top bulls send progeny back to Triangle H. “They have been good in referring customers,” he says. “It has been a real mainstay for our yard.”

Those data-driven customers, “are students of the numbers who have learned a lot from the Gardiners,” Hands says, including himself. Triangle H, both a USPB and CAB feedlot, is a proving ground for the numbers, and Hands enjoys seeing customers adjust and move forward.

“Improvements are pretty rapid, especially at the beginning,” he says. “Then the bell curve kind of slows down. But the Gardiners don’t stand still; they keep moving the curve toward more improvement.”

The Gardiners bring science to bear on every production problem as soon as possible, but that must be balanced with the risk of falling off the cutting edge. “We look at new ideas all the time, and experiment with them enough to look for advantages in predictability and quality,” Gardiner says. “Until we see those advantages, new technology has no value for us.”

And when those advantages appear, no brand will employ new technology more aggressively.



PHOTO BY JESSICA HALSEY

►Part of building a brand is positioning. Among Gardiner’s chosen links are Angus cattle, horses, USPB, BIF and CAB.

