



A Different Breed of Stars

California Angus family is 2016 CAB Ambassador honoree.

Story & photos by **Laura Conaway**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It was pillow talk, really. Newlyweds with a past, more interested in the future.

“What’s your favorite number?” he asked his bride.

“Five,” she said. “Five’s always been my lucky number.”

“That’s perfect. There’s five of us,” he agreed, three children tucked in down the hall.

“Let’s add a star,” she said. “People think quality when they think five stars.”

The year was 1984, the conversation one of many late-night chats as Mark and Abbie Nelson would iron out the specifics of their merged families and lifestyles.

They had a brand, and with it a fresh name and a fresh start.

“Five Star Land and Livestock” the barn reads. Yes, to the curious eyes that travel 30 miles south of Sacramento to Wilton, Calif., to see the ranch, they’re met with the name that started it all.

Details matter

“Do you think it’s too bright?” Abbie asks of the chosen shade of new red paint



Ambassador Award



► Mark and Abbie Nelson are never too busy to stop and answer a question or two. For this diligence and a continued commitment to open their gates to consumers, the CAB® brand honored Five Star Land and Livestock with the 2016 CAB Ambassador Award.

that surrounds the white block letters of text. It’s just right, but even so, it will surely fade under the California sun.

To Abbie, these things matter. If not for her, then for those who venture down the bumpy gravel driveway and make a right at the red barn — the consumers.

In charter and school buses, loafers and uniforms, these are the outsiders — the ones with no ties to cattle shows or farm chores

— who allow Abbie and Mark that bedside dream.

The goal, simply, is to gain trust, specifically, in the love of family, the care and improvement of cattle, and the sustainability of land.

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If it reads a bit like a romance novel, well, it certainly could be. He was a city guy, surfer from Los Angeles with land on the market ready to sell. She was an Angus poster child with fourth-generation cattle ranching running through her veins. When they met at the California State Fair in 1984, both showing Angus cattle in the open show, Abbie was living in Reno for school, Mark in Sacramento for real estate.

“Every class I was in, I was last. Every class she was in, she was first,” Mark says. What followed were a few unsuccessful attempts to catch the attention of his crush through the only means logical at the time — cattle.

“I went to a production sale later on and he was there,” Abbie says. “The pair was sold as a split lot, lot A and lot B. I bought this heifer calf that I was really interested in.”

“And I bought the cow,” Mark interjects with a mischievous chuckle.

“The guy running the sale said, ‘If somebody buys the cow, maybe they’ll let you keep the calf on the cow for a while.’ I didn’t know anything so I thought, at least

she’ll have to come get the calf. It didn’t work.”

It was the next step, when Mark wrote Abbie a letter expressing interest in 10 bred heifers.

“She called me the next day.” With that, Abbie cracks a smile herself.

It’s almost too picturesque — driving around the circle, past the barn and “Welcome” sign to the United States and California flags twirling in the breeze. It can be difficult to imagine actual work taking place before and after the tour buses leave. Yet, it’s a lone gate beginning to drag, a calf bawling in the distance that demands attention. It’s a few loose straws of hay that escaped this morning’s feeding and now lay strewn across the manicured lawn that give it away. It’s real, the rolling hills and golden grasses, the grape vineyards of zinfandel and petite sirah. All of it, the way California should look.

Maintaining transparency

“Well, we’re a small operation. Typical of small breeders, we have about 100 registered cows,” Abbie says, downplaying the 300 acres she convinced Mark to keep and where she raised their family. The 1,700 acres they lease down the road is a necessary blessing, she adds.

Transparent, the Nelsons don’t shy away from the existing constraints of raising cattle in an environment where rule makers know more about Rodeo Drive than they do the American cowboy’s traditional Friday and Saturday night pastime. Issues of dust

or truck length, water rights or taxes — it seems it would be a relief to move to a more secluded spot, build fences high and lock the gates. Instead, the Nelsons stay in the middle of it all.

“You just have to work with them and stay above it,” Abbie says of the growing list of rules and regulations. “We have a big job to do and that’s to gain the trust of the end consumer, to make sure they know we have a safe product.”

That’s the great responsibility, one that parallels nicely with the CAB brand and leads the Nelsons to match every request with a, “Yes, absolutely, we’d be happy to host.”

“Some of the very first events we ever did were at Five Star Land and Livestock,” says CAB Vice President of Production Mark McCully, recounting the now-familiar days of taking distributor groups or media out to ranches to show the real faces of the brand in action. “Their location is ideal, and Mark and Abbie have just gone above and beyond what it means to be a host.”

“We’ve literally had our chefs in their kitchen cooking dinner,” McCully says, recalling a 2014 group of bloggers who spent a day on the ranch touring and asking questions. As the sun went down, hospitality continued on the Nelsons’ back deck.

Mary McMillen, CAB strategic partnerships, remembers another time when the family welcomed an entire TV crew for scouting and a 13-hour production shoot of the CBS award-winning cooking show,

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► At Five Star Land and Livestock the answer is always “yes.” Hosting media, international travelers, customer groups and more, the Nelsons know their role carries on well past sale day. Visitors leave with an understanding of the industry and a family that embodies it, as son Ryan (right) and grandson Jhett (center) often join Abbie (left) and Mark in hosting guests. Countless groups have and will continue to benefit from their open-gate policy. Digital readers, click the photo above to view a short video featuring CAB’s 2016 Ambassador award winner.



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Recipe Rehab. Television may look glamorous, McMillen says, but it's tedious and very hard work: "To be fully engaged and do on-camera interviews for over 12 hours, Abbie is just the epitome of gracious western hospitality."

"I wasn't nominated for some kind of Emmy," Nelson jokes of her TV debut, "but it was an honor to represent CAB. We enjoy people and the opportunity to directly relate our industry to our consumer," whoever they may be.

State legislators and lobbyists, journalists or Rotary members, eighth graders, politicians and friends leave Five Star Land & Livestock with an understanding of the industry and a family that embodies it. That shouldering of responsibility, the someone-has-to-do-it-so-I'll-step-up attitude keeps the requests pretty constant. Or maybe it's the fact that Abbie's had TV producers rifle through her closet, only to call the experience "fun" that makes the family an easy target.

Whatever the reason, on top of the typical requirements that come with life — growing the herd, maintaining a business and keeping a family together that includes nine grandchildren and is growing — the Nelsons are never too busy to stop and answer a question or two.

"There was an international group here a few years ago," Abbie says, "and they were interviewing everybody while the cattle were up around some hay. One gentleman comes over and asks, 'Ok, so can you turn the cattle around for a picture?' We thought that was pretty funny."

"We've had Polish and Chinese. There was just a Japanese group in September," Abbie rattles off. Not to mention the couple's time spent off the land with past and present leadership roles in the California Cattlemen's Association, California Angus Association, California Beef Cattle Improvement Federation, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, American Angus Association and the Angus Board of Directors, to name a few.

"I love cattle. They are in my heart," Abbie says. "I have a passion for taking care of them, for breeding them, the decision making and the genetics."

There's more to life though, of course. "The legacy of my children and how they've grown. I think it's a good, strong legacy," she says of her greatest contribution. A five star one at that.

Angus royalty

At one time, Abbie Nelson wanted a career in fashion. In fact, at the University of Nevada–Reno, she majored in marketing with a specialization in clothing and retail. Plans soon changed, however, as it became apparent the young Californian had no desire for city life.

"I love clothing, I love jewelry, but I missed my cattle," she says, and the lifestyle that came with them.

Perhaps there were ties to the Angus breed too strong to let her go.

It was the early 1800s when Nelson's great-grandfather Thomas Ryan emigrated from Ireland to Iowa, where he became an order buyer, purchasing cattle along the railway to ship to Omaha. His son Earl, alongside business partner and brother-in-law Charles Escher Jr. (Escher and Ryan), would build one of the most influential Angus herds of the time, marked by legendary bull Earl Marshall, "The King of Sires."

The young, untested bull was included in the purchase of the W.A. McHenry herd from Denison, Iowa. Also in the acquisition was another, perhaps more promising bull, Bar Marshall.

"Earl Marshall hadn't been the class winner or the champion, but my grandfather was adamant. That one would be the breeding bull," Nelson says, retelling history.

Ryan's instinct proved true as Earl Marshall progeny led to an unprecedented seven straight grand champion carloads and five straight sire champions — a record that each year goes unmatched.

The 1930s brought The Great Depression. Escher and Ryan dispersed the herd that at one time included 1,000 head across 3,100 acres of Iowa land. History had been set, though. Angus demand had been established, along with greater prominence for carcass quality and production sales, raising the bar for all Angus producers at the time.

Nelson was 4 years old when Earl Ryan

passed away (at the time her only living grandparent), but she remembers her "grandpa" well.

"His legend surrounded him and, even at my young age, I understood," she says. Growing up, Nelson held on to memories of her grandfather reading stories and taking pictures with a "big camera with a hood." Later, she would cherish the many stories cattlemen would share about the man.

You could say she carried the torch for the Angus breed long before blacks were the way to go.

"In grammar school, I would get on the bus at 10 minutes to seven," Nelson says. "There were about 10 Hereford breeders on there, and I was the only Angus. Every morning I would write 'Angus' on the window and all of them would write 'Hereford.'"

"That definitely changed as time went on."

Visit Five Star Land and Livestock today and you'll notice subtle testimonials to the Earl Ryan legacy, yet none more



► Abbie Nelson has roots in the Angus business tracing back to the Escher and Ryan herd started by her grandfather Earl Ryan and his brother-in-law Charles Escher. They would build one of the most influential Angus herds of the time, marked by legendary bull Earl Marshall.

notable than Mark and Abbie's son, Ryan, the self-proclaimed "sixth and shiniest star."

Youngest by nine years to siblings Andra (who together with her husband manages 400 head of commercial Angus), Adam and Katie, Ryan is married with his own two boys and set of commercial cows 30 miles down the road. That doesn't keep him from being his mom's "first unpaid volunteer," when she inevitably says "yes" to another gig.

"As a kid, it was pretty cool not always meeting somebody in a cowboy hat," he says. "You get to see somebody in tennis shoes trying to learn about beef."

He also got to see a woman leading in agriculture.

"This place is special in that it's run by my mother," he says. "I always joke with my buddies and say, 'Let me go ask my mom about that,' but I think it's pretty awesome that a woman can run a successful purebred operation."

Editor's Note: Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for Certified Angus Beef LLC.

