

Heritage Helps to Shape Innovation

Grandsons continue
1995 CAB Annual
Conference Award
winner's focus
on quality.

by *Morgan Slaven,*
Certified Angus Beef LLC

If you could find the exact spot where tradition and innovation meet, odds are you would find yourself at the front door of Bridges Angus Farm, a few miles south of Lexington, Ga.

As fourth-generation cattle producers, brothers Alan and Phillip Bridges have a strong connection to this spot and their family's farming legacy, especially ties to their land.

"It became apparent to us growing up that as long as you take care of the land, it will take care of you," Alan Bridges says.

Stewardship became a primary focus then, and the brothers now define their cattle business success in those terms.

"Our management practices make us grass farmers, and we market our product in pounds of beef," he said.

Old meets new

The brothers bought the farm from their grandparents in 2005 and made a few



PHOTOS COURTESY OF AMERICAN ANGUS ASSOCIATION

► In the hunt for cutting costs, Alan and Phillip Bridges reduced cow numbers by outsourcing, decreasing from a 400-head herd to a steady 35 recipients and 16 donor cows, reducing feed costs dramatically.

changes, still based on lessons learned from grandfather Ralph Bridges, a Georgia Angus Association Hall of Famer and 1996 president of the American Angus Association board. He was also on the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) board and won the brand's 1995 CAB Seedstock Commitment to Excellence Award.

"He taught us to be open to new technology and to not be afraid to use the science behind it," Bridges says. Those lessons were taken literally.

First, the farm utilized new genetic technology in breeding management,

converting to a total artificial insemination (AI) program. Then they transformed a traditional cow herd to a 99% embryo-transfer herd. They sold off the mature cows and now maintain only a small number of donor and recipient cows. The brothers then outsourced embryos to a network of commercial producers and purchase back the resulting calves at weaning.

Bull calves are now sent to Gardiner Angus Ranch near Ashland, Kan., to be marketed, and donor females are chosen from the heifers, which will remain in their home herd for two to three years before being sold in their production sale.

Even with all of these changes, one thing has remained constant: the farm's commitment to quality, carefully instilled through the family connection.

"Our grandfather taught us that it doesn't cost any more money to raise animals that will target the CAB brand vs. the animals that miss the mark. In all actuality, those animals cost more to raise," Bridges says.

The farm continued its traditional annual production sale of 80 to 90 high-quality and proven females. April 2013 marked 69 years of the "Passion for Progress" sale.

Managing risk

Change does not come without obstacles, and the Bridges knew trial and error would

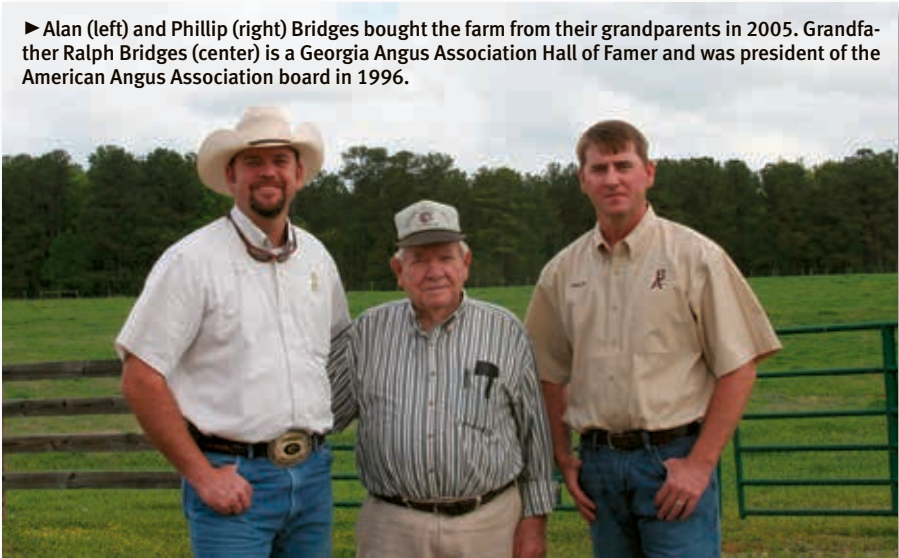


PHOTO COURTESY BRIDGES ANGUS FARM

► Alan (left) and Phillip (right) Bridges bought the farm from their grandparents in 2005. Grandfather Ralph Bridges (center) is a Georgia Angus Association Hall of Famer and was president of the American Angus Association board in 1996.

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test the profitability of these new ventures.

“We make mistakes all the time, but it took us about four years to find that this system is the way to go,” he says.

Shortly after the Bridges Angus Farm ownership transition, the economic recession created a number of issues for the new owners. Weather conditions, governmental regulations and tighter lending made the list, but Bridges points to dramatically high input costs as the greatest hurdle.

“While we are experiencing historically high calf prices, we are also experiencing historically high input costs,” he says. “If we could reduce the input costs by 10%, calf prices would go even higher.”

However, the brothers have managed to reduce risk by spreading production out to multiple cooperative herds, simultaneously reducing the number of cattle they have on hand and the associated risk.

In the hunt for cutting costs, they found a chain reaction: reducing cow numbers by outsourcing from a 400-head herd to a steady 35 recipients and 16 donor cows, the cost of feed was cut dramatically.



► “He taught us to be open to new technology and to not be afraid to use the science behind it,” Alan says of his grandfather Ralph Bridges. Those lessons were taken literally.

“One of the most expensive things we had to do on the farm in any given year is to bale hay,” Bridges says, “and now of course we need less.”

Cattle now graze year-round, and the hay they would have consumed is sold as a new profit center for extra income.

Bridges Angus Farm has even stepped outside the box to get some value from high-quality genetics that would have been culled. Females that don’t breed are fattened for freezer beef through Phillip’s personal business venture, the Georgia Beef Co., accessed from a tab on the farm’s website.

“We realized that if we took our product to a local sale barn, we were leaving money on the table,” Bridges said of his brother’s business.

A bright future

With generations of experience behind it, Bridges Angus Farm looks forward to a bright future. Emerging local markets and expanding export opportunities point the way to new roads.

“More forward-thinking cattlemen will have the opportunity to seize the market share and be in the driver’s seat,” Bridges says.

He’s confident in the beef industry’s ability to supply consumers with what they want, because it’s all very simple.

“They want a quality product that is



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healthy and wholesome, that has value and tastes good,” Bridges says. “When consumers find a product like that, they will pay for it.”

Angus producers have a special advantage in being able to market a product that meets these needs, he adds. Targeting the CAB brand is the proven way to fulfill their purpose as cattle

producers: “Angus breeders have a product that fits that description, and it’s our job to sell it to the people that want to buy it.”

Bridges says he believes keeping the focus on consumers is the key for a successful future.

“We will continue to evolve all of our programs to meet industry and consumer demand,” he says. “Ultimately that determines our success — or failure — and quite frankly, we don’t plan on failing.”



Editor’s Note: Morgan Slaven is the spring industry information intern with Certified Angus Beef LLC.