



# Doing Right From the Start

Montana ranch earns CAB honors.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**, Certified Angus Beef LLC

It's hard to pinpoint when the transformation began, but on the Christensen family's western ranch, it's evident that it happened: a commitment to excellence.

The views of the Rocky Mountains and flat grasslands that nestle between the foothills look much the same as they did when Grandpa Karl homesteaded near Hot Springs, Mont., a century ago.

That original site is now simply marked by a few outbuildings, while just down the road, third-generation rancher Shawn Christensen and wife Jen raise their two daughters.

Ranch talk might center around the same challenges then and now, from lack of moisture to grasshoppers, but a quick glance at stacks of artificial insemination (AI) records and carcass data provides a clear distinction. The diversified crop and livestock farm that once housed milk cows and chickens is not the same as the commercial Angus ranch the family operates today.

Perhaps the defining moment came when Christensen first learned how to AI, or a decade before that when 4-H carcass shows first gave him a glimpse of what's under the hide.

Maybe it was still earlier.

### Changing for quality

Like many in the area, the herd was straight Herefords up until the 1960s when Shawn's dad, Bill, brought down Angus bulls from Canada.

"There were a lot of Heinz 57 herds out there," Christensen says, describing his dad's

reasoning. "I think it was that he wanted something that had some distinction to it."

Unlike many others, by the 1970s the family decided to stick with one breed: Angus.

There might not be one central event, but there's evidence of the fruits of that commitment. It includes loads that reach up to 100% Choice and Prime, individual animal ID that is correlated back to those records and a longtime relationship with a cattle feeder 1,200 miles away.

"They've just been good-gaining and good-converting cattle," says Ryan Loseke of Columbus, Neb. He's bought the family's cattle for most of the last 20 years. "It's been neat to see how he has done a good job of maximizing carcass quality, but not getting poorer-performing cattle."

That's due to Christensen's level of detail — one that is so intense, everybody notices.

"Even through the years, different truck drivers, they all comment on how nice he

**Commercial  
Commitment to  
Excellence**

## Meet me in Montana

Horses brought Jen Christensen back to her Montana roots each summer; a cattleman made her stay.

The Helena, Mont., native taught school in Arizona, but during the break, she'd return to ride horses for a local trainer. That's whom Jen credits as the connection between herself and future husband Shawn Christensen. When the pair met, she started spending more time back under the Big Sky.

"After May of 2001, I didn't go back to teach," Jen says. The couple wed in 2002, securing her position as full-time rancher.

"It was a pretty good learning curve. I hadn't been around cows much at all," she says. "It's a lot of fun to go out and watch that newborn shake its head and take its first breath and then go see them out in the pasture and watch them."

They also get to live out the "it's a great place to raise kids" adage.

The couple is starting to rely on daughters Katelyn (12) and Kara (8) more and more.

"They're able to help a lot," Jen says, "learning that what you put into it is what we're going to get out of it. I think they're old enough now to realize that."

This spring, daughter Kara was sorting cattle and Shawn joked that there was one question she was never going to have to ask him any more.

"What's that?" she asked.

"You're never going to have to ask, 'Dad, when can I help?'" he laughs. "She's pretty much hired now."

The couple is glad to share their work with the next generation.

"I do feel like we are one link in a chain of events that has to happen for that premium product to reach the consumer," Jen says. "It's fun that we're the first link, with the calves born. We can't do it by ourselves, and the feedlot can't and the restaurant can't. When it all works together, we get a real premium product for the consumer."



keeps his place," Loseke says. "That's reflected in his cattle."

Loseke markets around 7,000 head of cattle each year, but he specifically remembers the pen that went 100% Choice and Prime. It also made 65% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, and gained more than 4 pounds (lb.) per day.

Such cattle and other evidence caught CAB staff attention, too. Shawn and Jen Christensen's Springvale Ranch was recently named the brand's 2016 Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award honoree.

"He's always thinking and always evaluating and looking for ways to improve his genetics and his management, too," says Ben Eggers, manager of Sydenstricker Genetics, Mexico, Mo. "Kind of a student of the Angus breed, really."

## Starting young

For Christensen, the award is gratifying, a validation of the vocation that he's made his life's work.

"When I was 3 years old, I wanted to be an airplane pilot," he says. "It was pretty obvious I was ready to want to be a rancher when I was probably 4 years old. I think ever since I haven't really changed my mind."

Christensen got an early start at it, helping his dad do everything from watch gates to rake hay. As a teenager he started making business decisions, as his dad focused quite a bit of time and energy growing an irrigation business.

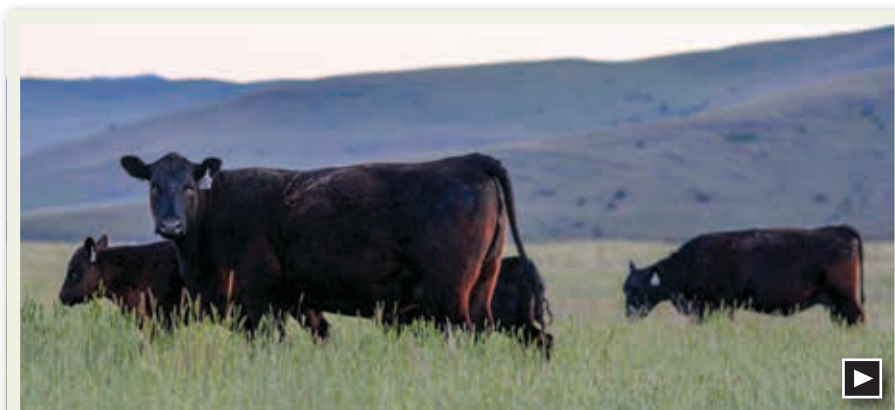
"He kind of says, 'Okay, you're going to build this program,'" the son recalls. "It's been

great. It's just one of those things you look forward to."

At first he studied sale books and sent his dad to the sale with a wish list. Then he was making decisions himself, but his dad's influence remained.

"That's how we were raised. Whatever

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► The Christensen family is a shining example of how to forge relationships in the cattle community and then use feedback from partners to make herd improvements. Shawn knows his cows and individually matches each one to the best possible sire to satisfy demand from cattle feeder to consumer. Digital readers, click the photo to view a short video featuring CAB's 2016 Commercial Commitment to Excellence award winner.



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you are doing, you want a product that the consumer wants,” Christensen says. “We are raisers of beef, but you still have to raise cattle that can calve out on the range, get bred back during a drought, and go on to the feedlot and have a feedlot want to come back and purchase your cattle.”

So he went to work making sure his cattle were just that. When he became an AI tech in 1983, it was for a twofold purpose: tightening calving season while individually assigning specific sires to certain cows.

Christensen is 95% done in the first 35 days of a calving season, one that’s moved from February to the first of March.

“It’s always easier to feed a non-lactating cow compared to a lactating cow,” he says. “I’ll save pastures for that spring turnout, and then once those cattle come onto the pasture, they won’t get used again until the following year.”

This year the AI breeding season wrapped up on June 11. By June 16 Christensen was working to match up next year’s matings.

### Female emphasis

“We’ve always raised our own replacements,” Christensen starts, as Jen continues, “He knows the cow herd many generations back. To look at an AI bull, he knows what that cow’s milk or marbling has done for many generations. It’s not that he just sees the cow’s numbers on paper.”

Jen says she doesn’t catch her husband reading the latest best seller. Instead, free time is devoted to researching genetics.

“He spends a lot of time perfecting that,” Jen says, more with admiration than annoyance. She then hand-enters all records so he can study the Excel spreadsheets and compare.

“If you don’t know who the good one is or the poor one is, how do you make changes?” Christensen asks.

The females carry evidence of that commitment at least as much as the steers. Eggers says one of his most frequently asked questions proves it.

“I’ve got a whole group of past buyers of his bred heifers that ask — I mean anytime I see them — they’ll say, ‘Shawn bringing any more of those heifers?’” says the Missouri breeder.

Local buyers purchased the smaller numbers that Christensen sold the past few years, but Eggers would welcome them back to the SydGen-influenced sale, even though Montana and Missouri aren’t exactly neighboring states.

“It was always a bit of a trick, and then it

still wasn’t cheap, but Shawn made it work several years there,” he says. It was worth his effort of arranging trucking, including rest breaks and back hauls.

It probably also gave the pair a chance to exchange a few more phone calls, too, talking cattle and life at the same time. Christensen and Eggers might trade stories or talk about how a certain sire’s progeny look in their own herds.

The focus on producing the best has only grown.

“It seems like you can make it happen in a few years, but it takes time,” Christensen says.

It also takes information exchange, and that took time, too. The 4-H carcass contest was the gateway that showed Christensen he wanted more.

“At the time, that was the only way you kind of knew what was going on,” he says.

Then the family got connected with the Loseke family and the ability to get individual tag-transfer data.

“That’s when I was able to really see what sires are doing and what the cow herd’s doing and trying to make small adjustments,” Christensen says, while trying to ensure he’s being “budget-minded and dollar-driven for everybody in the industry.”

Loseke tries to buy the straight-Angus cattle every year. They gain and grade and, “disposition-wise,” there’s hardly any better. “Because of that, they wean well,” he says.

Fifteen years ago the cattle reached 71% Choice, with 25% CAB acceptance. Today very few miss the Choice mark, and 65% of them meet the brand’s 10 specifications. Carcass weights have improved 73 lb., with a younger calf crop, while mature cow weight has gone unchanged.

Yet, the rancher still calls Loseke a handful of times during the feeding phase to check on how the cattle are doing for the feeder. He’ll ask about specific numbers and can describe an animal in detail that hasn’t been on his ranch for months. They might talk about the kids’ sports or 4-H projects, too.

It’s another friendship, built around cattle, and one that flourishes because of mutual respect.

That thread runs through the producer’s life.

“He’s a commercial guy that’s pretty rare, really, that believes in turning in the data to improve the accuracy on the bulls he buys,” Eggers says. “Shawn’s one of those guys who believes in doing things right.”

Maybe the best way to describe the herd’s change through the years is more of a natural progression. The cattle are simply an expression of who Shawn Christensen is at the core.

**Editor’s Note:** *Miranda Reiman is assistant director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*



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