

GENERATIONS

Supported by roots that go way back,
they look forward to a future
with Angus cattle.

Story & photos by **Meg Drake**



Although the sun is about to set in Missouri, for 7-year-old Charles Henke the day isn't quite over. It's time to feed the 14 steers his father bought specifically for him to tend.

Lugging partial buckets of feed to a 1x12 board atop the fence above the bunk, the second-grader shows ingenuity that makes his folks, Ron and Debby, take notice. Rather than entering the pen and trying to contend with hungry calves, mud and the heavy loads, Charles rolls each bucket along the board and watches as the feed evenly enters the trough. The steers seem to appreciate it.

That scene from the mid-1980s was a defining moment for a family that has been in farming and ranching for five — going on six — generations. It's evident that hard work, dedication and responsibility are

qualities the Henke family takes seriously, because they are handed down through those many years.

The lessons and sharing start as soon as children begin to babble about tractors and cows and typically lead to a transition, a handing over of reins — or at least a share of control — when the next manager is in his 20s.

For example, Raymond Henke made sure his son, Ron, grew up knowing everything about the farm. That became more important as the older man began to work part-time for the U.S. Postal Service

“After going into business together with my father right out of high school, I was given the option at age 28 to take over when he decided to become a full-time mail carrier,” says Ron. “So, much like my father and I, ever since Charles was old enough, we've run the farm as a father-son partnership.”

Successful venture

That kind of syndicate has worked well for the Henkes, who operate 2,000 acres along U.S. Highway 24 just east of Salisbury, Mo.

Their business is split between farming and caring for 250 Angus cows.

Integrating the dual focus has proven a profitable management strategy, Ron says.

“After corn harvest, we'll run cows out on the stalks; that way we're able to maintain our females and get more out of the crop.”

Throughout the years since Charles joined the business, he and his father have focused on building up the registered side of their Angus herd to where it now stands at about 80% registered females.

Grazing that many cows is truly a family affair. Charles' wife, Robyn, often plays a key role in checking for the later spring-born calves.

“Charles is highly allergic to fescue, of all things,” she says. “So I take the four-wheeler out when the grass starts to get tall.”

They adjusted by moving the spring calving season up a month. About half the herd calves in the fall, and that balance continues as they downsize the grade cows.

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► **Above:** Though modern technology has become increasingly important for the farm, the Henke family retains past traditions, such as managing the farm as a father-son partnership.

► **Right:** The Henkes have finished some of their cattle and sold to packers licensed to produce for the CAB brand. Three years ago a set of 50 steers went 100% Choice or better and 70% CAB.

Still, they know that side as well as they know their land, and they've set their goals high when it comes to feeding out their own cattle. In the 1990s, they had a load of commercial steers go 73% Choice with 72% Yield Grade (YG) 1s and 2s. Those numbers would satisfy many, but Ron saw them as an opportunity to set the bar even higher.

"After that, we set a goal of 100% Choice," he says. Through a stringent AI program and management techniques, they met that after a set of 50 steers three years ago went 100% Choice or better with 70% qualifying for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand.

That's one aspect of the value that comes with placing some selection pressure on carcass traits as well as all the other traits commercial herds need for profit. Many customers of Henke Angus Farms sell calves at weaning, but some retain ownership on yearlings.

Paul Smith, Lucerne, Mo., has been purchasing Henke bulls for more than six years.

"One of our goals as an operation is to keep our cow herd black," he says, noting that is not just because he likes the color. "We really like the performance and longevity that their Angus bulls are able to supply."

Throughout the years, the Henkes noticed greater interest in their annual bull sales,

which now feature 70 head that meet goals for the breeder and their customers.

"As an added bonus we've had the opportunity to meet some of the best people in the heartland of the Midwest," Ron says, "Angus breeders."

Outside of growth and carcass traits, the Henkes say convenience categories such as calving ease, birth weight and docility are always important to customers.

Ron recalls a time before the Internet when he selected sires based on sheets of printed out EPDs (expected progeny differences).

"When we first started that, the breed had something like four EPDs, where now we have 30," so greater precision is possible, he says.

Carrying on the tradition

Modern technology has become increasingly important for the farm, with sire data searches that take only seconds to complete. But the Henke family retains traditions from the past, too.

When deciding to get back into the registered Angus business — he knew his grandfather Benjamin had dispersed a herd in 1967 — Charles thought it best to apply for a lifetime membership in the American Angus Association. Upon finding that was only possible by taking over a membership

from a past family member, he looked up the details.

"Lucky for me we still had his number on hand," says Charles. He and Robyn hope one day to pass on the farm and cattle tradition to their sons, Colin, 2, and another one due this year.

For one so young, Colin's interest and enthusiasm in his dad and grandfather's business is impressive. From farming the family dining-room floor with toy tractor implements to pointing out which heifer is his in the pasture, it's obvious that apple didn't fall too far from the tree.

To Grandpa Ron it's a beautiful sight to behold.

"He's been out there with us since he could walk," he says. "He's being raised the way his daddy was raised."

Like his dad, who bought his first heifer with the money he made off those 14 head of steers, the passion was sparked at a young age for Colin.

Angus bull customers are among the first to point out just how tightknit this family operates. "They're a great father-son team," says Smith, "with another generation on the way." 47

Editor's Note: *Meg Drake is an industry information intern with CAB's Supply Development team.*