



Finding a Better Way

Lifelong cattleman turns to quality focus.

Story & photos by **Katrina Huffstutler**, for Certified Angus Beef LLC

As he flips through the meticulously arranged scrapbook documenting the last 60 years of his life, it feels like Glenn Cantrell is reciting a movie plot. Yet this is a true story, and it's all his.

There's the time he pulled a flag off a ship and used it to rope a stray heifer in downtown Lisbon, Portugal.

"She was mad and fighting. Everybody — including the police — was trying to get her captured, so I jumped off the truck and she ran at me. I roped as she went by, and

several sailors and policemen got hold of the rope. That's what this is right here," he says, pointing at the lead photo in a Portuguese newspaper clipping.

Then there was the time he delivered 350 feeder calves to Greece. The men who came to pick them up just outside of Athens arrived in dump trucks with no sideboards.

"I said, 'Guys, this is not going to work,'" Cantrell recalls with a chuckle. "We had to take apart pallets and built sideboards on the spot."

You could say the cattleman has always been a problem solver. While life's a little quieter these days at home on his cow-calf operation in Lone Grove, Okla., the 82-year-old is still at the top of his game.

The man for the job

Cantrell humbly says he's no better equipped to raise quality cattle than anyone else, but his résumé begs to differ.

A 1956 graduate of Oklahoma State University, he competed on national and



► Glenn Cantrell flips through a scrapbook documenting his career as a cattle buyer, feeder and raiser. He's worn many hats in the industry, but today his sole focus is raising quality cattle with the consumer in mind.

Portugal, Italy and Spain. Other highlights included sending feeder cattle to the American Farm School in Thessaloniki (ancient Thessalonica), Greece, and exporting bulls to Angola and Mozambique.

"That went on for a while," Cantrell says, describing his time as a buyer for international clients.

Next, he went into cattle feeding, first under Ladd Hitch at Hitch Feedyard, and then at Master Feeders, which he built up to an 85,000-head yard as manager. He also worked for a feedyard in Garden City, Kan., and then for Schultz Cattle Co., which had 25,000 cows scattered from Montana to Florida and eventually fed 231,000 cattle per year.

Throughout his travels and career changes, he always had a cow-calf operation (and, for a time, a backgrounding operation) back home. Eventually, he returned to it, full-time. He now owns about 350 cows, split between land in Rush Springs and Lone Grove, Okla.

Choosing quality over quantity

Cantrell admits he didn't get the right start with his cow herd.

"We've definitely evolved," he says. "We started out with crossbreds and some Angus, and now we're almost exclusively Angus. We started out focusing on weaning weights and yearling weights and just shipping our cattle to the stockyards in Oklahoma City or El Reno."

Despite producing good calves, they

weren't getting paid accordingly. The eternal problem solver knew there had to be a better way.

"We just were not getting them marketed properly," Cantrell says. "Marketing is a huge problem for us, and I'd guess, for a lot of cattlemen. It's hard to get back what you put into them."

That's when he decided to target quality over pounds.

"We decided we would try to improve our cow herd, but didn't get on the right track or follow the right advice immediately," Cantrell says. "Finally, I nailed down a good friend of mine, Jarold Callahan from Express Ranches, and told him what I wanted to do. I told him I wanted to improve our herd to the point where our calves graded well and I

could get as many premiums as I could with them. He then told me the parameters and the EPDs (expected progeny differences) we would need to achieve our goal."

He's set strict criteria for bulls and females both.

"We don't want any bulls now that don't have at least a 150 dollar beef index (\$B)," Cantrell says. "We want the dollar weaning (\$W) to be over 70 and dollar grid (\$G) over 70. Weaning weight EPD should be a plus 60 to 65, yearling at least 125 or 130, and still try to keep our calving ease in there — not over a plus 1 or 2 birth weight. We've really emphasized the marbling, too, and want a

"It's hard to get back what you put into them."

— Glenn Cantrell

international champion meats and livestock judging teams as a Cowboy. After graduation, he spent time in the U.S. Army before taking a job as a cattle buyer for W.H. May in the Oklahoma City Stockyards.

From there, he joined the Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation as a livestock management specialist. Next, he went to the Oklahoma Beef Institute, an entity designed to promote feeder cattle in the state. While employed there, he attended an international trade fair in Verona, Italy, with the National Cattlemen's Association and created a side business where he'd send bred heifers overseas.

Cantrell made the biggest export deal at the time, sending 5,000 bred heifers to

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0.80-plus EPD. We don't want any bulls that don't have at least a 15-inch or better ribeye on ultrasound and a 0.80 on up for the ribeye EPD."

Cantrell knows that's only part of the premium puzzle.

"I don't think we can accomplish the percentage of CAB we're trying to get by just improving our bulls," he says. "I think we really have to improve our cows. We must know the genetics, and they must have good EPDs, but that's not enough. They have to produce, or they're gone."

"Obviously, she has to have a calf, and it has to live. After that, we look at calf growth. If her calf doesn't weigh 750 or 800 pounds (lb.) at weaning, we don't keep her."

He also wants his heifers to weigh at least 900 lb. at breeding and 1,100 lb. when they calve. Additionally, he keeps track of which females have to be assisted at calving time.

"Just improving bulls is easy," Cantrell says. "You can go buy bulls that will move things along quicker, but there's more to it with heifers. That's why this year we're going to try to DNA-test all of our heifers and do genomic testing on all of our existing replacement heifers, and do that each year until we know what they're doing."

The former judge admits phenotype is still important in all of his cattle, and one more piece in deciding if one is a good fit for his operation or not.

Selling to the feeder

Once Cantrell shifted his focus, he knew he needed to fix the marketing aspect of the business. That's when he started selling private treaty to Pratt Feeders.

"It's been great working with Dave Latta," Cantrell says. "Some years he's bought them

a little cheap, and some years we got the best end of the deal, depending on the market's fluctuations. It's averaged out pretty good for us, though, and they've performed good for him."

Last year's calves went 86% Choice and 42% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand. He also knows they stayed healthy and grew well, thanks to frequent check-ins throughout the feeding period. They averaged a profit of about \$67 per head through premiums.

However, there's always room for improvement. He's got his sights set on 96% Choice and 75% CAB.

"We can get to the 96% Choice a lot easier than we can get to the 75% *Certified Angus Beef*," he says matter-of-factly.

Just because it's hard doesn't mean it's not worth doing.

"We think that's the only way to go, really, in the future. We've got so much competition anymore from pork

► Glenn and Mary Cantrell focus on quality at their Oklahoma ranch, with a goal of reaching 75% CAB.

and poultry. If people don't have a pleasant experience when they eat beef, they're gone," he says. "It can't just be tender; it also has to have the flavor to go with it. It's got to be a good experience or they're not going to spend the money that it takes to buy it."

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Editor's Note: Katrina Huffstutler is a freelance writer based in Electra, Texas.

