

Quality Down the Tracks



Alabama Angus family is 2015 CAB Commercial Commitment to Excellence honoree.

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

Jimmy Collins pays no mind to the freight train.

Faint in the distance, then all at once overpowering, it demands attention as it bursts through his family's land several times a day. Sometimes even the cows take notice.

Way back in the 1850s, long before his family turned a 680-acre cotton farm into a cattle operation, the train was there. Every day since, it serves as a reminder of life beyond the cattle and comfort of home.

The roads weren't paved, the land in row crops and highly eroded, but James Smart Collins II wanted cows. Beef cattle, to be specific. From Montgomery, Ala., he and his family operated J.S. Collins Dairy through the Great Depression and came to know the land 75 miles northeast of him that had no flowing water but nearly 40 natural springs.

"My grandfather bought the farm in '44," James (Jimmy) Collins IV says, recounting a



short phone conversation with the family his forebearers had come to know. "He got the call that Dr. Haralson had died and said, 'I'll get with you after the funeral.' But things would move faster than that. They said: 'If you want

the farm, come on today.' So he got on the train, signed the contract, and went back for the funeral a few days later."

In the 71 years since, generations of Collinses have raised even more generations of Angus cattle on ground near Cusseta, Ala., that's sustained them both.

The family was presented the 2015 Certified Angus Beef® (CAB®) brand Commercial Commitment to Excellence Award for their dedication to developing the best merits of the breed.

Gaze across a Collins pasture and it may seem as if Angus cattle have been the only kind to graze it, but the Collinses tried a bit of everything before they settled on the breed that gained them recognition.

New ground

Jimmy, now the patriarch, was just a boy when his parents and grandparents took over

the Haralson land. Together, they learned and lived as one in “the big house” on the property.

“I didn’t notice a great big change [from Montgomery] except that there was mud everywhere,” he recalls. “Here, all the land was raw and there wasn’t a lot of grass. You tracked red mud in on everything.”

That mud, a staple of what’s known as the Piedmont region, meant the land’s forage situation was in dire need of a revival. The family took to drilling grass immediately.

All the while, the dairy industry had been undergoing changes that led farmers to mate low-end dairy cows to beef bulls. The Collinses dabbled in the idea, even bringing those cattle to Cusseta, but it wasn’t long before they gave way to the expanding beef herd and the family stepped out of the dairy business altogether.

“It was about improving quality, building numbers to start with, and then improving the quality of the herd,” Jimmy says. “It’s been a continuous process since then.”

Having “showed many a Hereford steer through high school,” Jimmy switched to Angus his senior year and, soon after, the herd followed suit.

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Those early calculations proved true, and it wasn’t long before the cattlemen were managing a purebred operation from 10 bred heifers purchased in 1959, eventually selling close to 100 bulls a year.



► The whole family is involved in improving quality. Pictured here are (front row, from left) Era Claire Collins, Mary Collins, Jay Collins, Jennifer Collins, herdsman Jim Lane, (back row, from left) Meredyth Brown, Jimmy Collins, Jim Collins and Taylor Brown.

With the farm not large enough to support all the families, Jimmy took a position with Farm Credit Services upon graduation from Auburn University. Decades later, when he transitioned to a real-estate business, he advised the family to transition to a commercial herd.

Finding their place

Living on the farm and commuting to town each day, mornings and late afternoons were spent tending to cattle while workdays went to financing crops, cattle and

equipment for neighboring ranchers and later real-estate sales. Five decades later, the Collins family is a case study of how each person can find their niche in the world and on the farm, all the while supplementing the cattle enterprise with outside income.

“If you characterize all of us, my granddad [James] was the consummate agronomist,” says Jimmy’s son, Jim. With his own growing family, the two partner in Collins Farms today. “He [James] was also the engineer — with a high school degree, but still the engineer.”

CONTINUED ON PAGE xxx



Quality Down the Tracks CONTINUED FROM PAGE 97

He had a liquid feed business and worked Wednesday afternoons as the weigh master at the stockyard in Roanoke until he was 86. Without his boots on the ground, the Collinses would not have the operation they have today, Jim emphasizes.

“Without question, my dad is the nutritionist,” Jim continues, “and then my specialty’s been genetics and marketing.” He served as executive of the Georgia Cattlemen’s Association for six years and still consults across the region on marketing and policy matters.

For years, three generations of Collins men worked together with their families to improve their cattle and impress the consumer at the end of the line. Jimmy’s wife, Mary, and Jim’s wife, Jennifer, are actively involved with everything from recordkeeping to collecting and processing DNA samples.

“My dad joked that he had to be 60 before he was old enough to drive the hay baler because my grandfather, at 86, was still baling hay,” Jim says. He finds comfort in the fact that all three of his children were able to meet their great-grandfather before he passed.

Cusseta is by no means a sprawling town. With 300 people on the mail route, the Collins family has more cattle than that on owned and rented land. Sitting just 10 miles west of the Georgia line, many refer to it as the Deep South, but the Collinses just call it home.

Commercial focus

The commercial cows, 350 of them, are carefully managed and selected with the same detail as their 50 head of registered stock. Keeper heifers must be bred within the first 21 days of the breeding season. Then there are parameters on birth weight, expected progeny differences (EPDs) and results from GeneMax® Focus™ (GMX) tests to measure gain and grade in non-registered cattle, which all help determine if calves stay or go.

The first group for the DNA-based test in the spring of 2013 set a benchmark for the herd, all while helping to identify outliers. GMX scores from 50 heifers showed the top 75% scored 74 or better, compared to the national average of 50. The Collinses don’t stop with heifers. They run the Zoetis

HD50K test on young bulls to increase EPD accuracy. Then they pair that information with GMX Advantage™ scores on all heifer calves to match sires with progeny.

“We have several herds where we may use three or four bulls together,” Jim says. “So now we take some of the guesswork out, and get it to where we use the young bulls that are consistent to keep the calves as uniform as we can.”

That uniformity includes an abiding focus on balance, he adds: “We have tried to be more aggressive and balance growth characteristics over time with maternal traits.”

DNA testing increases the accuracy of the EPDs of young sires to prevent wide swings in traits, and it helps the family match heifers back to their sires.

Customer appreciation

Maternal traits are what keep longtime customers like Omer McCants, Talbotton, Ga., coming back each year.

“I started six years ago and purchased 17 bred heifers, and I’ve purchased every year since,” the Army veteran says. After 24 years in the service as an aviator, McCants decided he’d retire with cattle, but not just any cattle — he wanted good ones.

“I’d been growing my herd since ’98 and by ’09 it had been long enough. I noticed I was spending a lot of money on cows, but I didn’t have quality cows. I decided to liquidate and start back with quality.”

McCants began by looking at heifer sales in the area, but when the locals told him about Collins, he picked up the line and called. A visit to the farm allowed

him to observe more than just the bred heifers for sale. He wanted to see the previous year’s cows with calves by their side.

“I was impressed with the quality and durability of them,” the no-longer-retired current engineer says. “I ended up buying some cows from one of the other sales as well, and there was no comparison. The Collins cows could hit the ground and stay. They didn’t lose.”

Perhaps it’s that Collins cattle aren’t creep-fed that they adjusted so well to their new



► Railroad tracks that have existed since the 1850s convey trains through the Collins’ property several times a day. Jim Collins, left, and his father, Jimmy, say it serves as a reminder of life beyond the cattle and comfort of home.

home. There’s also the fact that the father-son duo spends countless hours selecting genetics that work in their customers’ environment. They even sex embryos on the majority of cattle prior to sale.

“As an ex-military officer, it was important for me to get it right; if not the first time, to keep working on it until I do,” McCants says. “My herd is getting larger (60 head now), and it’s getting better every year. That’s a result of the Collins’ cows.”

High standards

So what exactly are Collins cows? For starters, they’re fertile. To avoid being culled, cows are expected to grow a calf 60% of their mature body weight, have adequate milk production given the natural forages, and have some longevity. Many a Collins cow is in production to the age of 12.

“We try to run a balanced program, rather than chasing outliers,” Jimmy says. “Sure, it’s a slower process, but when you get there, you’re there. We look at growth and carcass quality and strive to be a tier above the industry average.”

In young bulls, they’re looking for moderate-birth-weight EPDs. They would feed steers if the economics to do so were

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there, but with strong demand for their steers, they're sold in an alliance with other breeders in the state.

"Early on we often sacrificed our heifers to graze and sell as feeders," Jimmy says, "but we quickly realized heifers that we know the 'whole story' on are more valuable as replacements. Now we focus on making heifers that work first, and value-added feeder steers after that."

His son puts in that the finished product is always top of mind.

"We emphasize traits our customers need for feeder cattle, that ultimately meet the demand for our end consumer," Jim says. "While other operations have focused on crossbred females, our decision to stay with straight Angus allows us to put aggressive effort in watching our bloodlines. We try to cross and use lines that complement each other and allow our commercial customers the most flexibility in marketing their calves."

In an industry that sometimes resists change, the Collins men embrace it; for instance, when they decided to transition from complete phenotypic to a combination of genetic and phenotypic selection.

"It's a matter of surviving really and truly," Jimmy says. "You've got to be productive and you can do what you want, but it better be successful and work for the folks who are going to be consuming the end product."

"Some people don't want to admit that they know anything about beef after the calf jumps off the trailer, but we're always trying to follow and look at the cuts of beef and talk to people and see what is and isn't working."

What's working appears to be the Collins cattle. Terry Harris, Boston, Ga., can tell of cows he purchased from the Collinses 11 years ago that maintain and reproduce today. Then there's new cattlemen to the business like Jones Woody, Culloden, Ga., who has followed his calves on feed in Iowa and received data showing 81% CAB and USDA Prime.

"You just couldn't have asked for a better situation than the first year we had," Woody says. "It gave us the opportunity to increase our business with the peace of mind that we were partnering up with somebody who would give us a helping hand. It's been a success for us."

Would the Collinses say the same? The years it took to turn a dairy family into cattlemen were riddled with highs and lows, but Jimmy will say none were worth throwing your hat in the sand and giving up; not even the month nearly 30 years ago when

there were several unexplained deaths among the cows.

"We and the labs couldn't trace it to anything even after having it all tested," Jimmy says. "Those days make you wonder if it's worth getting up in the morning."

"You get some tough situations, but you have to work through them," he says, recalling the day he graduated from college and his professor told him, "It's okay to look back, but don't you ever stop and look back because they'll stomp you. I've thought about that 100 times in my life, and it's sort of been our philosophy here. You just keep plowing."

It was an early morning in the 1990s,

during the height of Desert Storm, when Jim watched the all-too-familiar freight train carry home battered tanks from the coast.

"Boy, you talk about humbling — that puts your life into perspective."

That same perspective, coupled with a humility that graciously acknowledges the award says, "It's an honor, but nothing's going to change here. We're going to keep on and do the best we can and see what else we can learn."

Right on down the tracks.



Editor's Note: *Laura Conaway is producer communications specialist for CAB.*

