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Green Garden of Memories

Friends salute 2017 Kansas Stockman of the Year Richard Janssen and family.

by **Steve Suther**, *Certified Angus Beef LLC*

It was a night of humor, history and honor as friends of Richard “Dick” Janssen verbally toasted the 2017 Kansas Stockman of the Year. That night was March 2 in Manhattan, Kan., at the 47th Annual Stockmen’s Dinner.

There were video tributes from Tom Burke, Norman Kanack, Pete Mitts, John Osborn, Henry Bergfeld, Ken Stielow, Galen Fink and John Mollhagen. The family also commented in the video, which provided a complete overview.

Janssen, an Ellsworth, Kan., Angus seedstock producer, was on the Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) Board of Directors from 1987-1989, chairman in 1989 and American Angus Association president the next year.

That was a “crucial time,” said CAB President John Stika in remarks. “The 10-year-old brand was just figuring out what

it wanted to be when it grew up, and it grew by 32% in those three years.”

Interviewed for a book on the brand in 2008, a typically modest Janssen said, “We just tried to keep it going.” He was a bit disappointed at its success across the industry, the 16%-17% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand acceptance rate then.

“Dick said the next generation would make it happen, and boy, did they,” Stika said. “He said small things can have big impacts, whether that is marbling or a steady, daily commitment to getting better. In his year as chairman, CAB acceptance was 20% on 354,000 cattle. Last year it was 30% on 4 million cattle, with producers earning \$1 million a week in premiums. Dick Janssen set the brand up for success.”

The first news of a premium paid for CAB-qualified cattle had just come out when Janssen joined the Board, but few Angus

producers saw how the brand could affect them.

“Dick stood out for going into the packing plants and coolers to see how it all worked,” Stika said. “He saw the potential demand and led the initiative to create a supply development division.”

Larry Corah, former vice president of that division and moderator for the after-dinner comments, credited Janssen with including a carcass focus “way before it was popular” with Angus breeders.

“When he saw the grading and differences in marbling, he knew we would need more of the better cattle and that would be an opportunity,” said Corah, currently a Kansas State University (K-State) emeritus professor.

Breeding strategies

One of Janssen’s most effective breeding

► **Above:** Dick Janssen was honored as the 2017 Kansas Stockman of the Year. Pictured are Ben, Anisha with Elliott, and Sophie Janssen; Shelly and Dick Janssen; Elizabeth and Dustin Perkins with baby Annabelle, Cassie and Billy.

strategies, Corah said, was developing three Angus sire lines with the focus on growth, maternal and carcass traits. He also noted one measure of success in putting those together in commercial herds became obvious when steers from Green Garden Angus won the \$100,000 National Angus Carcass Challenge prize for K-State in 2002 with 94% CAB and Prime.

Corah and Animal Sciences and Industry Department Head Ken Odde referred to the cattleman as “visionary,” and Odde noted in particular that Janssen was among the first to see the rising influence of the beef consumer in producer decisions.

Craig Good, president of the Livestock and Meat Industry Council that sponsors the annual dinner, noted the respect for Janssen across the livestock community and at K-State over the years, going back to his father Don Good, who had been the honoree’s mentor and livestock judging coach.

While every speaker touched on some aspect of Janssen’s personality and preference for work “behind the scenes,” few captured it as well as the former CAB associate executive director he worked with in setting up that supply development division, Mary Ferguson. She attended the dinner with husband Mike Colvin.

“When we came out here to be neighbors in 1994,” she noted of their move to Wolf Creek Angus Ranch, Luray, Kan., “Dick said, ‘Welcome to the land of extremes.’”

Weather was only one of those that helped shape Janssen’s mind-set, personality and cattle herd.

“He can be shy; he doubts himself and prefers Shelly or one of their kids have the attention,” Ferguson said, “but he is widely recognized as one of the most courageous and daring genetic engineers on the planet.”

Janssen was using a systematic approach “when few others even grasped the need to include marbling,” she elaborated. “He likes to fly under the radar, but he’s a true trailblazer — not easy to get to know, but he is deep, with a dry wit and self-deprecating humor, insightful and sometimes cutting commentary.

“He always said his cattle were a work in progress, but he had a laser-like focus on quality and value in Green Garden Angus cattle, a genius dynamically applied to breeding Angus cattle,” she said.

That no-nonsense focus was a helpful influence on the American Angus Association board, Ferguson added.

“It was a time when there was some divisiveness, but Dick saw the potential in CAB and worked in tandem with Mick [Colvin]. Nobody doubts it now, but CAB would not exist as the success it is today

without Dick Janssen then,” she said.

Dan Moser, president of Angus Genetics Inc. (AGI), said Janssen was among the first to explore what expected progeny differences (EPDs) could do.

“In the 1980s, to find those born unassisted and then bend the growth curves — that was crazy talk,” he said. “Ideas can be pursued through research, however, and curiosity is a valued trait in research. It’s just what John Brethour (ultrasound pioneer and then head of the Agricultural Research Center–Hays) was looking for.”

The Green Garden herd became a kind of test herd for calibrating ultrasound with animals sometimes checked twice a day to determine repeatability. It was methodical work but the researcher and cooperating family were curious as to the impact on genetics, said Moser, who was a graduate student in those days.

A pioneer

Janssen cooperated with the Association in tenderness and feed efficiency research, too. When one bull was shown to sire progeny with variable tenderness and another lacking in feed efficiency, Moser said, the cattleman was “glad to know.”

An early adopter of genomic testing, Janssen heard an Australian presenter talk about GeneStar® at a Beef Improvement Federation (BIF) meeting — several years after Green Garden was BIF Seedstock Producer of the Year.

“A few months later, he asked what I thought about that test, and I said they could be on the right track. Dick said that’s good because he’d just tested all his bulls,” Moser recalled. “He just couldn’t wait to get his data, find the analysis and share with all.”

Intent on adding superior feed efficiency, the Kansan trucked bulls to an Iowa feed test for a couple of years and then got his own GrowSafe® equipment for the ranch.

Mark Gardiner, Ashland, Kan., said Janssen’s packinghouse tours convinced him value-based marketing was coming.

“We’d heard that Angus cattle will grade and have calving ease, but Dick said we’re not good enough for what’s coming,” he said. “But, he said, we can figure this out, look at it a little different.”

Start of EXT line

Janssen studied numbers and was one of the first to buy bulls that way. Gardiner told of the Green Garden connection to the EXT line.

“Dick identified a bull, Emulation 31 — you young may not remember, but he’s in just about every pedigree, and the largest concentration was at N-Bar Ranch,” Gardiner related. “Dick and Shelly did not know Tom

Elliot and those folks in Montana, but they were curious and committed. They bought 25 open cows at market price and a bull for those cows from Emulation 31, and that was N-Bar Emulation 5522.

“He had to pay \$2,500 for the bull, which was a lot back then, so Dick, the marketer, partnered up with Fink in Kansas and Thomas Ranch in Oregon at \$750 each, for one-third interest in one of the first great calving-ease bulls you could take to the bank,” Gardiner said.

Not knowing the N-Bar folks made the deal an “intellectual commitment,” he added. That grew as they soon became friends. When Thomas got first use of 5522, Green Garden needed a cleanup bull on those 25 N-Bar cows.

“So he called Tom Elliot, who said, ‘Yeah I’ve got just the bull.’ It had missed the sale because of foot rot but should be just what Dick and Shelly were looking for. So the 5522 son with a bunch of numbers behind it made the trip to Kansas and was unloaded at Green Garden Angus.

“Dick, being a man of few words, said, ‘I hope he’s Extraordinary.’ I can assure you,” Gardiner told the crowd, “he didn’t look that great — and Shelly said ‘Well, maybe we can shorten that to EXT.’ That’s how one of the great bulls in Angus history became EXT.”

Getting into some more numbers, Gardiner said EXT has 38,000 weaning weight records among registered cattle, and 19,000 registered daughters in 5,000 herds. Today, 3.5 million registered animals include 10.8 million links to EXT. To be sure, 5522 and EXT “were a little bit sporty, as my family called them, but by golly they wanted to live. We shipped our last, an 18-year-old, a few years ago, and she ran right onto that trailer.”

EXT was one of the first curve benders in the breed, once in the top 10% for growth, Gardiner said.

“Learning from Dick’s example, today the breed has what was considered impossible: low birth weight, moderate-frame cattle that are very efficient to the end point, excel on the rail and ultimately have a maternal product on the ranch to replicate the process.”

Gardiner said the beef community is a better place for all Janssen has done, noting his drive, curiosity and independence.

“This is not all about cattle, it’s about people,” Gardiner said in closing. “Look at this family and think about the challenges and opportunities. Dick has not always been considered huggable, and he’s challenged us, but I love Dick Janssen, and I love his family.”



Editor’s Note: Steve Suther is the director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC.