

A High Calling



**Kansas feedlot owners live the philosophy
put man before business because man *is* your business.**

Story & photos by Steve Suther, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Tiffany Cattle Co. is the 2015 *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) Feedlot Commitment to Excellence Award winner. No commercial feedyard better exemplifies the commitment from core philosophy to its farthest reach.

That dedication has deep roots.

The Tiffany boys grew up in the business. Shawn and Shane's dad, Steve, was yard manager at what was then Black Diamond Feeders, near Herington, Kan., for 14 years starting in 1988.

Only a year apart in school, the brothers are even closer in other ways. They went to college on livestock judging scholarships, first to Butler Community College and then to Kansas State University (K-State), earning degrees in animal science.

Yet they are individuals. A minor in business foreshadowed Shane's future roles,



while Shawn's master's degree in reproductive physiology led him to manage an Angus ranch with a hands-on approach. Early on, both noticed something about their college classmates.

"Many of them came from big farms and ranches, and quite a few said they had no desire to go back home and work with family," Shane says. "They were going to pursue different opportunities and career paths. Shawn and I were always just dumbfounded by that."

Their family provided a solid foundation, work ethic and integrity, but no tangible legacy.

"We grew up on 32 acres with some pens of fat cattle, but nothing to come home to as a living," Shane says. "We wanted something that we could establish and pass on to our children one day, so we couldn't understand the other guys' choices."

The brothers had their own lucrative opportunities to pursue, and so they did. Shawn managed Chair Rock Land & Cattle, west of Kansas City. Shane took a position

with Bartlett & Co. that took him from Kansas City to the Texas Panhandle region, buying cattle for corporate yards.

Starting a legacy

“The things we learned from our father can be applied anywhere,” Shawn says. “Let your yes be yes and your handshake [be] as good as a contract — whether you’re a wheat producer, a beef producer or anything else. We have to conduct ourselves with integrity.”

Black Diamond owner and U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) co-founder Doug Laue was a mentor for the brothers, as well.

“Doug always told us to always do our best and the opportunities will come,” Shane says. “You don’t have to go out and actively look for leased ground or more things to do; just take care of what you have and people will take notice. People are watching.”

It turned out Laue was watching.

“You’re either born into it or someone gives you a shot, and that’s our story. I mean we had good careers, up-and-comers, we were good stewards of what God had given us,” Shane says. “We were going to retire comfortably and leave some things to our kids to help them climb higher.”

But one day in 2007, five years after their father had left cattle feeding to be a custom silage cutter, Laue called the brothers, one after the other. Among his daughters and other family, no one was interested in the business.

“He asked us if we would ever consider coming back and buying into the feedlot,”



► Brothers Shane (left) and Shawn Tiffany say they have locked horns before working together, but their support of one another and sharing of burdens has contributed to their success.

Shawn recalls. “There was some uncertainty in the cattle industry then, so a lot of our advisors warned us off, but we had always wanted something of our own.”

They were torn. They prayed and called each other, debating whether it was the right thing for their young families. Then Shawn summed it up: “If we’re 80 years old and in

our rocking chairs, if we don’t do this, are we ever going to regret it?”

The question was an answer. Of course they would.

Everything came together that fall for a Dec. 1, 2007, name change. To outsiders, it looked like a famous jeweler bought a

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► The feedyard uses a color-coded tagging system so pen riders like Nathan Cooley can know medical information at a glance.

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black diamond and took to feeding cattle. The reality was less glamorous, but just as pressure-packed.

“We started with six employees and 3,000 cattle for 10 or 12 customers, whereas now we have 20 dedicated employees, a customer list of 150 and stay pretty full at 12,000 to 14,000 head,” says Shane, CEO of the cattle company. Equal partner Shawn functions as chief operating officer at the yard and president of Tiffany Family Farms.

Day to day, titles are not important, and everyone works together. That approach dealt successfully with the first crisis, which happened just 10 days into the new venture. An ice storm shut down power for the next 10 days.

“We put our heads down and worked through it,” Shane says now. “We scrambled to find generators to run the feedmill, but it was better to experience that right away with those few cattle, and we learned from it so that we are much more prepared for anything now.”

As spring came around that first year, the brothers were still settling into roles when it came time to till the soil for what was then a relatively small farming enterprise. Who would take charge? Shawn, because he had a garden. Barely more valid than a coin toss at the time, the older brother parlayed that start into a 2,500-acre, no-till operation known today across the Midwest for innovation and cover-crop strategies.

It was obvious from the start that the community would support these feedlot owners just into their 30s.

“To local people, I think even when we are in our 90s we’ll be the Tiffany boys,” Shane says. “They wanted to see us come home and make something of it, so they sent us cattle to take care of, and our customer list grew.”



► Tiffany Cattle Co. has grown to 20 employees, a customer list of 150, and about 12,000 to 14,000 head of cattle. Everyone works together to get the job done. Here, Shawn Tiffany (left), Head Cowboy Jess Coirier (center) and Shane Tiffany discuss operations.

The “boys” will never forget that, and they try to give back every day.

“We want to see our rural communities flourish, not only survive,” he says. “We want to see kids that grow up in the same place we did have opportunities, something to stay home for.”

Their own kids come first, of course. Eight youngsters between the two close-knit families are growing together and learning about the cattle community firsthand. Shane’s oldest son cashed his first paycheck

from the feedlot for helping out this year as a 12-year-old, and his 9-year-old cousin can hardly wait till he gets the chance.

Shawn is on the board of a local telecommunications business, and Shane is mayor of nearby Alta Vista, Kan., where he recently reopened a grocery store that had been closed for years. Both are active in church and men’s ministry on a wider scale.

“We definitely stay busy in our community, outward-focused at all times and making decisions based on what would

Air base foundation

Shawn Tiffany enjoys history, and looked into the origins of the 42-acre concrete, World War II-era Army Air Corps base that underlies the feedlot.

“We have old photographs of 29 bomber crews processed through here,” he says. “One crew in particular stands out for me, as they came through in September 1944 and all 12 of those men sacrificed their lives for this nation over the Asian Theater by May 1945.”

It’s a unique property in many ways, although there are other former bases now used as feedlots. This one saw its first cattle bunks little more than 50 years ago.

“It’s really amazing how the military started building here in 1942,” Shawn says. “Within six weeks, they can land planes and within six months it is fully operational, training for B-27 and B-29 bomber pilots.”

It was decommissioned in 1946 as military surplus.

“So it sat for almost 20 years with really no usefulness until Swift & Co. developed a small feedlot in 1964,” he says. “Shane and I are the fourth or fifth owners, and our connection goes back to Doug Laue, who bought it in 1985 and later helped start U.S. Premium Beef.”

Laue and assistant manager Steve Tiffany doubled capacity to approximately 7,000 head in the 1990s. More recent growth brought the yard to a permitted capacity of 15,500 head.

“It is very well-suited for feeding cattle,” Shawn explains. “While the industry standard for a concrete apron for bunks is 12 feet, we have 50 feet or more as they are built on runways. Every pen has a mound that overlaps that apron to where even in muddy conditions, cattle can get from the bunk to the water tank to dry bedding without ever leaving solid footing.”



► Tags say a lot. Ranch tags tie calves to their dams, so the Tiffanys never remove them, but they add as many tags as it takes to tell each calf's story at a glance. They all get a green lot tag, but the few that had to visit the hospital pen get other tags with unique four-digit numbers. In turn, those tags sometimes sport a dangling color-coded tag with a date marked on it. Those indicate calves that received treatments good for several days, so a pen rider can tell at a glance how it is doing, what it has received and when it could be retreated if necessary.

benefit our customers and neighbors," Shane says. "It's kind of a way for us to give back when they've been so good to us."

Earning high quality

Every day is not all sunshine and roses, but that's more than all right. The brothers thrive on overcoming challenges and admit the first

one was close to home.

"A lot of people that knew us when we were boys would say, 'How in the world are you going to work together?'" Shane says.

"We're both very 'Type A' personalities, so we have locked horns a time or two," his brother admits, "but there's enough responsibility to go around."

Circle of sustainability

Kansas cattleman Shane Tiffany shares his thoughts on sustainability:

"Sustainability is a big buzzword right now, but it's always been top of mind. Everything goes hand-in-hand: I want to do this as my job for the rest of my life, and then I want to pass it on to my children.

"Across the beef community we've focused on sustainability for generations, but we never had a word for it as a separate thing. We're careful about how many head of cattle we put on any given pasture because we want there to be grass there next year; we want to do the best for the pasture and for the land that we live on. The same is true of our farming practices where we have nutrient management plans for use of the manure.

"It's a big circle in our operation. We grow corn, which comes into the feedlot and is fed to the cattle; they produce manure and that goes right back onto the fields for fertilizer. All of those things are based off of sustainability and what's best for the land. I want to have something better than what I had to pass on to the next generation.

"We have a good story to tell about a wonderful lifestyle that we all want to share."

They agree on almost everything these days, including a key reason for their business success. Each says, "It's because there's two of us. We can lean on one another and share those burdens together."

Shawn specifies, "We feed almost all customer cattle, so while Shane is in the office most of the time, it helps to have an owner looking at things out in the yard every day, catching little things before they become big."

After his years in Angus cattle ranching, he now prefers the "intensity" of feedlot management.

"We both love the challenges of weather, markets and the risk situations that come up every day," Shawn says. "We like to shelter those worries from our customers." That helps build relationships.

Those are more important than ever at today's cattle prices when a rancher may have hundreds of thousands of dollars on the line.

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“They’re entrusting you with their livelihood,” he says. “They want to do business with people that they trust and with people of integrity, and so we work hard every day to make sure that we follow through. Part of our motivation is just that we like helping people.”

Such an outward focus defines the culture for 20 employees who are like family. The brothers say they worked to establish the culture and reputation, so people that fit have been drawn there.

On the cattle side, customers often become friends who use performance data to bring back ever-better cattle and more of their friends as customers. Some of those have reached beyond 70% CAB and 10% Prime, Shane says, and the annual average for all cattle marketed from the yard has been as high as 40% CAB in the last few years.

“The good thing about front-end genetics,” he adds, “is they are more likely to pay you back at the end of the day than anything else out there, because there’s strong demand for that kind of beef, here and around the globe.”

Coordinating retained and shared ownership relies partly on investors who take a financial interest in most cattle at the yard, sharing in multiple pens to spread risk over animals and time.

Typically from business but non-farm backgrounds, the brothers say they often pick up valuable insight from investor partners.

When there’s a track record of quality, “oftentimes you’re locking in a breakeven and feeding for the premiums because those

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— Shane Tiffany

are your profits,” Shane says. “It’s always best to have a history with any given set of cattle, but we are adding new sources and new cattle weekly, and I’ll tell you, genetics have improved greatly from across the country.”

Among the opportunities for improvement and the community they work to build, the Tiffanys take a wide and long view.

“Inconsistency in eating quality was a huge issue that our generation was challenged to overcome,” Shane says. “We have really made a big push in that direction and rarely feed what I would call upgraders anymore, but rely on the fact that CAB, USPB and premium beef brands have sent signals so that producers are upgrading cattle at home.”

Still, the cattle feeding world is often misunderstood by consumers, he says.

“Many have never been to a feedlot, and if they drive across the Panhandle or southwest Kansas, they are just overwhelmed with the amount of cattle and the scope of things. It looks like a big factory,” Shane says. “So it’s

vital that they get to meet the people and hear from our hearts why we do what we do.”

That’s why the Tiffanys keep their doors open for media interviews and tours from all walks of life — chefs, ranchers, students and CAB groups. One connection they get the most satisfaction from is a joint program of Fort Riley and K-State that brings veterans affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) around to learn about agriculture. Some of them are even potential employees.

“Being a food producer obviously becomes a way of life,” Shawn says. “There is no way you can be in the beef community without that fingerprint in your life. Whether you’re getting out of bed at midnight to help calve heifers, or see if that steer on the road the sheriff called about is yours, you know there’s great responsibility.”

It goes way beyond the day-to-day logistics.

“If we make money or lose, if a day is good or bad in some way, we can go home with our heads high because we helped put food on somebody’s plate,” Shawn says, “and that is a noble task. As part of this community, we have to conduct ourselves with thoughtfulness. We try to balance technology with what the consumer wants and just do everything with excellence because of them.”

That commitment is part of the company’s vision: “To uphold a family culture defined by faith, hard work and integrity that results in personal spiritual growth and creates shared wealth.”

Amen.

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

