

# Old-Fashioned Progress

The 2005 CAB Progressive Partner Award goes to an Iowa team.

Story & photos by **Susie Knetter**

**F**ifty years ago, this was an industry of handshakes. Partnerships were made on pickup tailgates and a man's word was as good as his signature. Today, things may have changed. Some would say progress has made that kind of trust impossible. But, Roger and Jill Chambers believe you can have both progress and trust.

The husband-and-wife team owns and operates Silver Creek Feeders Inc. (SCF), a 3,300-head feedyard out of Treynor, Iowa. Roger grew up in the business, the third generation to own SCF, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot since 1999. Maybe it's the close family ties that help keep the trust alive, or perhaps it's their belief in doing things right.

Combined with a desire for progress, those values make a solid foundation for any business, but this team has built something worthy of recognition as the CAB Progressive Partner of the Year for 2005. Roger and Jill accepted the award at the CAB annual conference Aug. 20 in Baltimore, Md.

## Customer service, family tradition

Pulling down the driveway, you can see SCF is a diverse operation. Located in the heart of the Corn Belt, the house is surrounded by fields. Hog finishing barns sit opposite their new cattle pens, built to handle a growing customer base.

"We're growing, that's for sure," Roger says. "We started a 1,200-head expansion,



► The husband-and-wife team of Roger and Jill Chambers owns and operates Silver Creek Feeders Inc., a 3,300-head feedyard out of Treynor, Iowa.

and we've put in 300 head so far. Some of it is because we're getting more cattle from the same customers; some of it is because we're getting new customers. Either way, we're excited about it."

When Roger took over the business in 1993, he and Jill knew it could go far. After working at another feedlot for many years, Roger decided to devote all to SCF and its customers, just as his father and grandfather before him had done. Now they can see the growing results of keeping the family tradition.

The expanding customer base says they are doing things right. Roger and Jill attribute most of that to the good relationships they built early on, and letting those speak for themselves.

"We've got a clientele that we've grown and become quite tight with, personally and professionally," Roger says. "We get a lot of satisfaction having people come back here year after year, and help them make changes in their operations. They can do that because we get carcass data back to them. And health data. And feedlot performance. That's just part of our growth, and a part that we really enjoy."

Those customers aren't exactly in the Chamberses' backyard.

When word of mouth spread like wildfire, they found the largest part of their cattle coming from the East and Southeast.

"We talked to a producer years ago," Jill says. "He came out to see us and our operation; but when we didn't hear from him for a while, we thought that was it. Out of the blue one day, folks called us, and it turns out the producer who was originally here gave them our name."

Roger takes to the road sometimes as a part of customer service.

"When most of our stuff comes from 1,000 miles away, word of mouth and windshield-time matter. Airline tickets are big, too," he says. "You figure you need to spend some time down there with them if they send their cattle to you."

## Good as gold

Despite the increasing cost of trucking, their distant customer base is getting larger by the year. Larry Cottrell, a West Virginia producer, thinks that says something about the way Roger and Jill do business.

"When we started out, we were interested in feeding in a lot that was CAB-partnered. That's one of the reasons we went there," Cottrell says. "Just the type of people they are, we felt like we could trust them, and they came pretty highly recommended. A neighbor started feeding with them last year, too, and there are a few more around here looking at it."

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Just as choosing the right feedlot is important for producers, Roger and Jill say choosing the right customers is important for them. They look for a certain kind, and go after them with full force. In a competitive industry, recommendations from other producers are as good as gold, and SCF has plenty of those.

“One of the things people always ask me is, ‘What makes you unique?’” Jill says. “I don’t know how other operations run, but I know that when one of our customers’ kids is having a baby, we’re the second or third people to know. When one of them is getting married, we’re invited to the wedding. I think that does make us a little unique that we have that close of a relationship,” she says. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Relationships are a key part to the SCF operation, but not the only part. The CAB Progressive Partner Award goes to the operation that shows it is moving forward and, as a result, helping to move the industry forward. For the Chambers team, that means constantly looking for the edge.

After trying another data system for several years, SCF blazed a trail in data collection when Roger and Jill decided it was time to adapt their own. The Total Performance Information Program (TPIP) is a system offered to their breeders and cow-calf producers. TPIP helps those producers determine the economic contribution of management practices, as well as the value of each animal. In an industry that moves so fast that herds are planned years in advance, this kind of data collection is invaluable.

“What they are accomplishing with TPIP is the exact direction that the beef industry needs to go,” says Gary Fike, CAB feedlot specialist. “It is complete identification of the cattle from birth to harvest. Together with the individual feedlot and carcass data that they provide and the genetic information from customers, TPIP helps everyone by identifying the winners and the losers,” he says.

### Keeping the edge

Another aspect of keeping that edge is the CAB partner license. Offering CAB premiums, programs and data to their customers keeps SCF ahead of many other feedlots.

“We’re always trying to look for something that makes us unique and keeps us ahead of the competition. We’re struggling for new ideas, but CAB has helped

us a lot with that,” Roger says.

The National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) is one of those programs sponsored through CAB. Open to anyone who can assemble a pen of 40 steers or heifers sired by a registered Angus bull, participants must feed with a CAB partner. Carcass data is then collected, and the NACC ranks the pens of cattle, offering cash and other prizes to the winners. Roger says it’s a program worth being involved in for his customers.

“That’s the next step for us. We are working with some people who are trying to improve their genetics to do better in the Challenge. Hopefully we’ll have some cattle that will do pretty well this year,” he says.

Perhaps the key to SCF success has been Roger and Jill’s drive for customers. Whether it is establishing solid relationships or pushing themselves to stay ahead of the industry, they try to do what is best for customers to get them a profit. Bane Robertson, a Kentucky-based order buyer, has worked with the Iowa couple for six years. He says he can’t think of a better operation to work with.

“They take such good care of doing things like that. I think he’s up-and-coming and will continually get bigger,” Robertson says.



► “When most of our stuff comes from 1,000 miles away, word of mouth and windshield-time matter,” says Roger, who believes in spending time with his customers and their operations.

“I’ve even fed cattle with him. Roger’s very honest, and he tells you exactly what he thinks and what he doesn’t think, so you know where you’re at and where you’re coming from. That’s something this industry could use a lot more of.”

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