

ROCKYTOP



The Herd That Inspires the Words

Suther writes, raises cattle for the brand.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

It's probably not the first time livestock on the loose caused a change in business plans, but it might be the only time a hog breakout affected the greater beef industry.

In 1994, Steve and Anne Suther, Onaga, Kan., were in the hog business. Early one morning, 60 of them completed a "sneaky, underhanded, gate-busting escape from the finishing floor," and, as is often the case in such situations, tension between the couple was high.

"Anne asked me to show her, on paper, where those hogs — that just rearranged her flower garden — were making us money," Steve Suther says. "I couldn't do it."

He was finishing 700 pigs a year to complement a cow herd and crops on their 600-acre diversified farm. That same year Suther called a local hog market to ask the price, and got an unusual response: "Who is this?"

"The buyers were starting to keep records

so they could pay on carcass merit, but my pigs were nothing but commodities," he says. "So I saw no future in it. We quit raising pigs and never regretted it."

A freelance ag journalist then, Suther saw that closing door as an opening to reinvigorate his writing career. What's happened since then is why most people in the beef business know him as a former *Beef Today* editor, turned Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) industry information director.

Many don't realize that producing cattle has always been in his blood.

"I put my cropland into cool-season grass when a holistic resource management (HRM) analysis convinced me to go with cattle and journalism in '95," he says.

Building Rockytop

The farm — called Rockytop for its hilly, rocky terrain — was established 15 years earlier. In 1980, the Suthers were married for two years and Anne had begun her teaching career at Onaga when they bought their first 120 acres and a rundown, more than century-old home.

"We didn't realize that the 'Farm Crisis' lay just ahead," he says.

They began renovations on the stone house, which quickly became home for the couple, and later three children: Shea, Frankie and Tom. They also started building a registered Simmental cow herd.

Of course, he wasn't making his living

► **Above:** Suther says he gradually swapped his seedstock goals for a commercial program that emphasizes docile cows that produce predictable, value-added calves that will grade and gain.

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solely on that ground. Suther was running a weekly regional ag newspaper, writing and even selling advertising. Greg Henderson, now editor of *Drovers*, was an early employee and friend.

"I went with Steve to purchase some of those Simmentals," Henderson recalls. "We had a flat tire on the way there. Then it was muddy when we got back to Rockytop, so we had to open a gate at the end of the lane and drive them up to a pen."

"It was supposed to be a Saturday afternoon event, but it took all day and half the night and one cow got away," he says. "As far as we know that cow is still somewhere on the ridges west of Rockytop."

Henderson tells the story to illustrate a point.

"To Steve, that was something to joke about, rather than complain about," he says. "It was just like another episode in life, and you made light of it and you went on."

With a start like that, it would be hard to predict how the story would unfold.

"His focus 30 years ago would have been much different than it is today," Henderson says. "The trend then was bigger cows. Today he's an Angus breeder, and it's more about carcass traits and beef quality."

Setting a quality target

Indeed, Suther says he gradually swapped his seedstock goals for a commercial program that emphasizes docile cows that produce predictable, value-added calves that will grade and gain. Retained heifers help stack uniform genetics to hit the ultimate payout: a high percentage of *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) qualifiers.

It took time to establish that goal, and even more time to reach it.

"I had charted which cattle were topping the auction markets since my days at *Grass & Grain*, and in the early '90s I saw that Angus were passing Hereford and sometimes Simmentals," he says. "I began buying more cows and crossing everything to Angus, but with unknown, rented bulls. Then we got a dozen really nice Angus heifers."

One of his first columns at *Beef Today* centered on his

"change in direction away from junk"

"For my own bottom line and for the good of the beef industry, I would not bring home someone else's cull cows," Suther says. "I wrote a lot about value-based marketing and grew to understand the feeding industry through writing about it and interviewing professional cattle feeders on their strategies.

"He's got firsthand experience of what it's like to lose a calf in a blizzard or send a set of cattle to the feedyard. To me, that gives a lot of validity to his writing."

— Lisa Moser

"I was determined to develop the ideal commercial herd, sticking with Angus to do it, because that breed stood out as one with the database and predictability," Suther says. "I started using only registered Angus bulls."

Joining Team Angus

That fit nicely with his 1998 career change to editor and communications chief with the world's largest branded beef program, and his work with CAB only cemented that philosophy.

"I was hired to increase producer awareness of this brand, but [CAB vice president] Larry Corah and I quickly established that I needed to go beyond that to a show-me-the-money approach," Suther says. "I had to see it for myself if I was going to believe in it and editorialize about it. I had to understand what I was asking producers to do in retaining ownership."

He "topped the market" the year before, but decided to take the plunge in 1999 and partner on his steers with a CAB-licensed feedlot. Results were defined by "10%" — that's the portion that went CAB, the same share as Standard and Yield Grade 4s.

"Sold on a grid, they did not make money, but I learned from that high-tuition course," he says. After five years of better breeding and culling, the steers moved up to 40% CAB.

Calling his herd a "learning lab," Suther applies what he discovers from story sources.

Early articles on HRM led to rotational grazing, and then as he covered calving barns and other management systems he incorporated new ideas.

"That served me well when I designed and built facilities that let one guy work 100 head," he says. "I wondered at first why commercial guys would use AI (artificial insemination), but after several of them explained it was the way to add value and consistency, I decided to get back into it."

For the past decade, Lisa Moser, Wheaton, Kan., has done the AI work for Suther's heifers and top cows.

"He pays very close attention to EPDs (expected progeny differences) and using proven sires," she says. "I'll be AIing a cow, and he'll pull out his little book and say, 'Her mother did this and this the last few years. She's the daughter of an AI cow that you bred four years ago.'"

"It's pretty amazing to see a commercial man trying to have strong cow family lines and combining all that with good disposition, good udders, just encompassing all the aspects of raising cattle," Moser says.

Heifers calve in February, after Suther



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returns from the Cattle Industry Convention and National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Trade Show, and cows start a month later. The herds start grazing cool-season brome and fescue, then warm-season native forages as the fescue paddocks produce hay, before grazing once more on the way to weaning in early September.

"About the time I heard about it, I realized earlier weaning would be a good fit because I wanted to increase my ability to hit quality targets, and a lot of times my fescue doesn't come back from the summer slump by late August," Suther says. "If I wean then, it gives the fescue a chance to recover and cows can regain condition."

That's the point in the production calendar where Suther cooperates with his dad, Ralph, and nephew Matt, pooling their calves of like genetics and management.

"I don't have a facility or the time and focus available for weaning and maintaining health," Suther says. So the calves are trucked 20 miles to the farm where he grew up, where they're hand-fed as the top-dressed ground hay gives way to silage.

"A lot of people aren't keeping replacement



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heifers or don't know that much about their cattle after weaning, because it takes a great facility and plan for feeding, nutrition and health," he says.

A story trip to Iowa gave Suther some ideas about pulling creep feeders right into the weaning lot.

"Now all our calves know what grain and hay taste like before weaning. We start them out with tanks of open water on the perimeter of the pens," he adds.

Health can be the biggest challenge, but trial and error have shown Suther what works.

"We use a medicated receiving ration for four weeks," he says. "We don't want to feed antibiotics just for the heck of it, but it can make such a huge difference in preserving their health when you bring calves together from six different pastures. We've seen the results in cost and grade."

A few years ago most of the calves got sick and had to move through the chute for temping, a lot of \$40 shots

and eventual CAB acceptance falling back to just 10%.

All told, 210 of the 240 family calves are

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Family ahead of cow families

The lives of those involved in animal agriculture are rarely easy. There are fences to mend, hay to bale, animals to care for and a balance to find between all that and family life.

Add in a full-time writing career, and you have a snapshot of the demands on Steve Suther's time.

But there's more.

The director of industry information for Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB) got into the cattle business near Onaga, Kan., in a decade better known for getting out.

"Steve and Anne started at a time when interest rates were astronomical, but he was determined that place was going to work," says Greg Henderson, fellow ag journalist. "He's the type who creates a plan, develops it and sees it through."

Henderson was writing for Suther at *Grass & Grain*, a regional ag weekly, when the Suthers' first child was born in 1983. Doctors soon discovered she had a heart defect and would need a risky surgery.

"There was a period in there where it was touch and go," Henderson recalls. "That was certainly a great stress on him. Here he was, a young man in his 20s. He had his first baby, they'd bought their first place, and he's trying to manage a weekly newspaper, but through all of that Steve never lost hope or faith."

Throughout the first of four surgeries, Ag Press let Suther work from Kansas City waiting rooms and from the road as needed. At the same time he was completing a master's degree in journalism from his undergraduate alma mater, Kansas State University.

Shea pulled through and Suther transitioned to a full-time farmer a few years later. A second daughter, Frankie, was born in 1989 and

three years later, Tom completed the Suther family. He is deaf and autistic.

"In holistic resource management, you take stock of your assets, including personal talent, and maintain open communication with all stakeholders," Suther says. "I had my wife, and a couple of special-needs kids. When the opportunity came up to move from freelance to staff at *Beef Today*, I needed a good, steady job, so I tried for it and got the job."

The division of time looked like it had 10 years earlier: full-time editor, part-time cattleman.

"He's very respected on the journalism side. Everybody has read him for years and years, and he worked hard to develop those skills," says Bill Miller, who preceded Suther as *Beef Today* editor. "When he got really serious about his cow herd, he went at it with the same gusto. He was going to do it right or he wasn't going to do it.

"But he's done all of that and never slacked in how he's cared for his family," Miller continues. "He's had challenges that a lot of us, fortunately, never have to deal with, and it hasn't slowed him a bit. It hasn't discouraged him. He and Anne have always been so positive and done whatever needs to be done to give their kids the attention they need."

Locals know Suther the cattle producer, a whole nation of readers know the ag journalist, but those who know him as a family man say that's where he excels the most.

"Not to put down any of the other aspects of his life, but that's the very best thing I can say about Steve," Miller says. "He's a role model on how to balance all of that and never short-change the family."

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weaned and for the past five years, in early November the top 75 steers go to Gregory Feedlot, a CAB partner near Tabor, Iowa.

"We have a lot of customers trying to hit the quality market," says David Trowbridge, feedlot manager. "How we handle Steve's cattle is how everybody's cattle are handled."

He says that proves Suther's CAB average, which reached 71% in 2010, is a real-world example, not simply a company employee so narrowly focused on brand acceptance that he'll get there no matter the cost.

"If there was another marketing plan that would make more money, Steve would be no different than any other cattleman; he would try to hit that market," Trowbridge says. "In this business we have to make money, because it's the only way we get to keep doing what we're doing."

Feeding for a "CAB guy" has its benefits, he says. "Steve's experience and knowledge give him the advantage of having very realistic expectations of what his cattle are capable of."

Suther calls himself a "sundowner," keeping regular CAB business hours in the basement office, just 50 yards from his

pasture, and then putting on his producer hat when that virtual whistle blows.

"Thank goodness for daylight saving time and vacation days," he says. There's time off for family trips or bottling the homemade wine he's made for 30 years. "But more often, my requests come with a note that I'm preconditioning calves, preg-checking or sorting a truckload for the feedlot."

Bill Miller, director of communications for U.S. Premium Beef (USPB), worked with Steve as he developed that full-time journalism career out of his home office.

"*Farm Journal* really encouraged its editors to live out in the country and farm, and when he went to work for CAB they realized that was not a detriment, but a benefit," he says. "Then Steve took it way beyond just running cows, and that's really evidenced by the quality of cattle he has now."

Miller says both companies were wise to hire someone with Suther's dual focus on writing and cattle.

"When I was the editor at *Beef Today*, when Steve's stories came in, he had asked questions that you almost had to be a

producer to know to ask," he says. "He understood the business better because he lived it."

Miller and Henderson each have an interest in Kansas Flint Hills ranching.

"Anytime a person is directly involved and has a financial or family tie in an industry, they're more alert to everything that pertains to that industry and making it better,"

Henderson says.

Moser says, "He's got firsthand experience of what it's like to lose a calf in a blizzard or send a set of cattle to the feedyard. To me, that gives a lot of validity to his writing."

Suther plans to keep using his cow experience to strengthen his work and likewise his day job to help advance his herd.

"We have so much work to do in building the cattle with the combination of gain, grade and disposition," he says. "I'd like to get to where we don't sell old cows by the pound but as reputation bred 5- to 7-year-olds."

He's no stranger to building a reputation; he's just done it with writing. Now his stockmanship provides supporting evidence that Suther really is all about quality.

