

Driving Change



A Kansas family seeks to build something better and to help the next generation.

Story & photo by Chelsea Good

Tom Porter has seen a lot of changes in his Glen Elder, Kan., family farm through the years. He and wife Bev both grew up on area farms, and Tom has lived in only three houses, all on the same section of land. His mom lived in four places on that section, where his granddad bought 80 acres in 1904. But he credits his father, Gene, with the expansion that got the farm rolling.

“Dad’s philosophy was to buy land, and he did,” Tom says. Even now, at nearly 3,000 acres, expansion is still a possibility if it fits overall plans.

“Dad got started in hogs in the 1960s and phased them out in the ’80s,” Tom says. “I don’t suppose he ever had more than 50 cows, and those were crossbreds. We’ve built up to 300 Angus cows now. Dad preferred farming over cattle; I think they complement each other.”

His father’s passion for farming held true to the end.

“Bev and I would have gone no-till sooner, but Dad loved to drive a tractor,” Tom says. “That’s what made his life, especially the last couple of years.”

It’s been seven years since he passed away and the Porters went 100% no-till. Adjusting their tillage practices was a big change, but a positive one, freeing up time that allowed Tom to focus on the enterprise that’s always had a special place in his heart.

Cows were calling

“I knew at 6 years of age I was going to farm,” he says. “I had two older brothers, so they got started on the tractors and the combines first. I always ended up having more livestock chores to do.” Though it was mainly hogs back then, it was worth it to also deal with cattle.

When he got the chance to build his herd, he didn’t want just commodity cows. Top, performance-backed Angus genetics have come from Benoit Angus, Esbon, Kan., and TC Ranch, Franklin, Neb., plus an occasional standout at the nearby Beloit (Kan.) Bull Test Sale.

Today, the Porters artificially inseminate (AI) their herd using the highest-carcass-quality bulls available without sacrificing maternal and growth traits. Proven bulls lead the way to steady improvement, and decades of sticking to the program have paid off.

“He drives by the cows every morning to check on them,” Bev says. “They’re not just four-legged critters that he raises. Each one has to be something he’s proud of. A lot of people don’t think they can afford to do that or buy the expensive bulls. They can’t afford to pay for the AI work.”

► **Above:** While some don’t believe they can afford to pay to produce a higher-quality product, Tom and Bev Porter believe just the opposite. “You have to think of quality first,” Bev says, “because when you have good quality you’re going to be paid back for it.”

“In Tom’s mind, it’s just the opposite,” she says. “You have to think of quality first. Because when you have good quality you’re going to be paid back for it.”

Quality focus

The payback she’s talking about isn’t just the swell of pride when you drive by the cattle. It’s also a swell in the bank account.

Proven by several years of data from feeding ventures, the Porter cattle perform and grade above average, with a *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand acceptance rate of 25%-33% and getting better.

“It may cost us more to raise a quality product compared to an ordinary calf, but people are going to want to buy that calf, and they may not want the other one,” Tom says. It’s the same all the way to the consumer.

The role of cattlemen in the U.S. is to produce the top end of quality beef, he says, noting “hamburger can be grown anywhere,” but the kind of quality beef that will keep consumers coming back is an American specialty.

“That’s the premise behind CAB,” Tom says, “to put a consistent, high-quality product in front of the consumer when he sits down to eat his meal.”

“If they walk into a restaurant and have a great meal, they’ll be back,” Bev says, adding that the concept goes beyond the beef industry. “Our son Lucas works for a fish company that’s doing this,” Tom says. “It’s a brand name and a certain species of fish, the Barramundi. They’re limiting genetic variation and raising them with sustainable production practices. The chefs buying for restaurants know exactly what the product is. It’s easy for them to prepare and easy for consumers to recognize. There are some similarities to the CAB program.”

Consistent-quality product drives demand for both brands. That increases profit all the way down to the producer.

“The Barramundi generate a lot more dollars per surface area of pond than do trout,” Tom says. “Same thing with the cow business. CAB is a quality product, and you get more profit out of the land you place those quality cattle on.”

The next step

The Porters see irony in a boy growing up on a High Plains cattle and wheat farm, then going into the fish business in

Massachusetts. But Lucas still asks for a steak when he comes to visit, and the Porters always encouraged their children to follow their own interests.

“We didn’t pressure our three sons to come back to farm or ranch,” Tom says.

“We wanted them to do what they wanted to do.” The oldest, Jacob, found a career in geology and the youngest, Levi, is making a life with the Marines, so the Porters had decisions to make.

“We’re to a point that, if we wanted to, we could retire,” Tom says. “But we wouldn’t know what to do with ourselves, and it’s not in our nature. So we’re going to have to continue to farm.”

Keeping his father’s example in mind, the Porters will stay active on the land and care for those top-quality Angus cows. Converting to no-till was a kind of retirement already, he adds.

“Retirement is just slowing down,” Tom says. “You never quit. Retirement for us means having Ryan.”

That would be Ryan Schwerman. The Porters wanted to bring a young person into the operation, and Schwerman was their answer.

“Ryan works *with* us,” Bev stresses. “He is not our hired man. He does not work *for* us. I think that’s an important mental adjustment that needs to be made on this side of the table and on his side as well.”

Schwerman manages 50 of his own cows with the Porters’ cows and rents cropland from them.

“It’s truly a win-win situation,” Tom says. “Ryan coming on allows us to do this for another 10 years, or even longer if we want to. It also allows him to get started. He’s building a cow herd and getting ground for rent at a reasonable rate.”

These were important issues for the Porters. Concerned about the return rate of rural sons and daughters who choose other careers, they wanted to find the right young person interested in production agriculture.

Changing for the better

Schwerman grew up just five miles away, but the families went to schools in different towns and didn’t know one another. In fact, the Porters had to go a lot further away to find him.

Bev searched through vocational schools, community colleges and

universities across Kansas and Nebraska. They talked to several young people before they found a fit when a Hutchinson Community College teacher recommended Schwerman, who also attended Kansas State University (K-State).

The process took a couple years, Tom says. “It’s difficult to find the perfect fit in terms of your operation. A personality fit is also very important.”

However, the Porters agree that the search process was rewarding.

“It was a good experience because it forced us to re-evaluate our operation,” Bev says. “We had to step back and take an outsider’s view at where we wanted to go and the slot we were trying to fill.”

Although the big picture evaluation was helpful, Tom says it would make no difference without the many short-term goals and achievements along the way.

“You can’t get there if you don’t know where you’re headed,” he jokes. Perhaps more seriously, he adds, “You can’t get anywhere if you don’t adjust goals over time.”

“Change truly is constant,” Tom says. “You’re always going to have it, so you better keep looking for something new, more ways to change for the better.”

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