



# Hard Work Advances Texas Legacy

*Panhandle trio pairs tried-and-true with something new.*

*Story & photos by Diane Meyer, Certified Angus Beef LLC*

*Laborum Dulce Lenimen* is engraved across a wooden mantle in the Hansford County, Texas, home of Joel and Joyce Lackey. Translated, “the sweet solace of my labors” reminds family of rewards earned, and embodies the spirit of grandsons Chandler, Collin and Chance Bowers. The three have an eye for quality and opportunity that sustains the family legacy and predicts success in the cattle business.

“If you have a goal in life, you have to have work ethic to reach that goal,” says Collin, 31, of Spearman, Texas. His twin, Chance, and their brother, Chandler, 33, of Pampa, an hour to the south, have built up a diverse operation consisting of commercial Angus cattle, wheat, corn, cotton and milo. Both sides of the family have ranched and farmed in the northern Panhandle for more

than a century, but these three won’t rest on that fact.

“We’re determined to leave footprints for our kids and the next generations,” Collin says.

“We all manage separate parts of our operation, but we’re all partners,” he says. Each naturally fell to their leading role: Chandler manages the farm at Pampa. Chance heads the cow-calf aspect, and Collin manages everything up north, including the heifer development program.

From the start, the twins had an eye for quality. When it came time to find a steer for their eighth-grade 4-H project, the boys picked out an 850-pound (lb.) Angus steer that came off their family’s herd from a nearby feedyard.

It won breed champion at the state fair, says Chance with a laugh, “and it went from there.”

As the brothers started high

school the next year, their parents Charles and Janyth gave each a dozen heifers from the family’s then 150-cow Angus herd. They decided to artificially inseminate (AI) those to a show bull, and raised a small herd of show calves to get through their school years. After a couple of years at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas, the pair went on to study ranch management at Texas Christian University, a rigorous program that focused on cattle and pasture management.

After college, Collin and Chance decided to continue what they knew best: ranching. Dispersing the show cattle, they sold one load of calves to buy two loads of AngusSource® cows. That instinct for quality came back to the family tradition of Angus cattle.

“It’s the business breed,” says Chance. “There’s so much selection you can make toward your goals. We

*Above: From left, Chandler, Collin and Chance Bowers decided to revive the Lackey family’s X Cross X brand and apply it to all their Angus cattle.*

like quality cattle, and Angus cattle are the top of the line.”

“They fit the environment we’re in really well,” adds Collin. The Texas Panhandle is infamous for its volatile weather. Dry and drought conditions are a regular occurrence, along with high heat and wind. The winter brings frigid north winds and sometimes blizzard conditions, not necessarily ideal during calving season. “They have to be able to travel in our part of the country,” Chance affirms.

## Finding the right bull

All three brothers attribute bull selection as the key to maintaining a quality herd. Pedigree and expected progeny differences (EPDs) such as carcass weight, ribeye area and marbling are important tools for finding the right bull, but birth weight and calving ease are most important.

“With the right bulls, you produce the right females,” says Chandler.



*Meet the fourth and fifth generations of the Bowers family. Pictured are (from top left) Lacey, Collin, Cruë and Casen; Erica, Chance, Maddox, Bristol and Cayler; and Chandler, Jenna, Hadleigh and Anleigh.*

“That way you can keep good genetics and build those into your herd.”

However, finding the right ones harkens back to a lesson from their father.

“Our dad always said, ‘Look at all your numbers and the EPDs and pick the ones you want on paper. Then go through the pen and make sure you like the composition. ... You have to like the way they look, too,’” Collin says.

Like most valuable lessons, this one

was learned the hard way. The twins once bought five full-flush brother bulls with outstanding numbers, sight unseen. They knew there’d be trouble when those bulls walked off the trailer sore-footed with back legs “straight as an arrow.” Two were crippled within three weeks.

“Now we make the final decision when we actually see the bulls and determine if their conformation and disposition are suitable for our type of country,” says Collin.

## Female influence

“A good bull will do a lot for herd management,” he continues, “but you still have to know how to pick your females.”

Their replacement herd may be the Bowers’ biggest source of pride. A lot of thought goes into ensuring the top heifers make the cut. The most basic requirements are a moderate frame and low birth weight, but the

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trait of top concern is fertility. Only the heifers that stick with AI or breed with a cleanup bull in the first 30 days can stay.

Aling heifers has been great for calving ease, consistency and marketing.

“If you plan on keeping those cows in your herd for 10 to 12 years, they’re going to stay in cycle,” says Collin, drawing on experience.

“Those heifers will all calve within 10 days of each other,” says Chance. “That’s huge for marketing our calves because when we sell them they’re all going to weigh the same.”

He and Collin point to a set of 140 6- and 7-year-olds with nearly 80% still calving within 10 days of each other.

“They’ve weaned the very biggest calves and have the most consistent set every year,” Chance says. “When you keep seeing that on down the line, it’s well worth Aling.”

The farming enterprise has also helped develop replacements, though a successful wheat crop has proven detrimental in some ways. Heifer calves grow on wheat pasture, usually under Collin’s oversight in Hansford County, but like most aspects of their business, this process took some finessing. Collin and Chance used

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— Collin Bowers

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to select heifers coming off wheat pasture, but that method tended to create some “false positives.”

“Everything looks good coming off of wheat,” says Collin. “Everything is fat and happy.” Now, after heifers have been weaned, they straighten out on grass and protein cubes in the fall. Then the first cut is made before retaining to wheat pasture. “The top of your heifers will be the ones that stay in good shape and keep themselves up.”

### Farm-ranch synergies

The farm-ranch connection has led to several opportunities.

“Our farming has sustained

us through the dry years,” says Chandler. “We don’t have to cut our numbers because we can take the cattle off grass when it’s dry and put them on cornstalks or cotton and milo in the winter.”

In 2011, when parts of Texas experienced the worst drought in history, the opportunity arose for the brothers to lease a large section of ranchland.

“We had to figure out how to pay for leasing 45,000 acres of country, while only stocking half because there wasn’t any grass,” says Chance. Signing the lease was a necessary risk, but part of the plan was committing to a partnership under the auspices of the family’s long-dormant X Cross X brand.

“In this industry, the opportunity’s not there every day,” Chance says. “There’s too much change in this world, and if you don’t stay with it you’re going to be behind in a hurry. I mean in a hurry.”

Changes are not limited to weather.

“People don’t realize how much the market’s changed from the time that calf hits the ground to the time you sell it,” he says.

“The cattle market is so volatile,” says Chandler. “We do a lot of



forward contracting to ensure that if the prices go one way or the other, we're covered."

## Reason to retain

The brothers are always looking for ways to generate cash flow. They know their steers can reach 850 lb. on wheat so, rather than sell them to a feedlot at weaning, they usually retain them on wheat pasture through the winter.

A long-term goal is to feed those steers and the cull heifers all the way through, say Chance and Collin, who adds, "Our calf crop is so consistent, we're losing out by not feeding them all the way through."

They know their calves have an average daily gain from 2.5 to 3 lb. on the cow, maybe better when conditions are right. They'll typically do about the same on wheat pasture, but results seen in feedyards show they could push that to 4 lb. per day.

"We're getting around 90% to 95% Choice and better than 40% *Certified Angus Beef*<sup>®</sup> [brand] with our home-raised cattle," says Collin. "We also want to continue growing our cow herd, and when we do grow we want to keep our herd consistent."

They're considering making use of GeneMax<sup>®</sup> Advantage<sup>™</sup> genomic testing on some heifers in the X Cross X herd. After discussing the idea with their father, he ordered some tests last spring.

"Dad's a very forward thinker," says Chance. "He looks five to 10 years down the road and that's what we all do. ... We have to keep looking forward, too."

That doesn't rule out looking back,



like the decision to revive the Lackey family's X Cross X brand and apply it to all their Angus cattle. The brand goes back as far as other famous brands in the area, like the XIT and XR ranches that operated on millions of acres before the High Plains were settled through the Homestead Act. It hadn't been used since the 1960s, when it proclaimed survival of the 1930s and 1950s droughts.

This generation came through a worldwide Great Recession in 2008 and that 2011 historic drought.

## Working together

"We could not have done it if our operation wasn't diverse," says Chance. "One year the farming makes up for the cattle, and the next year the cattle make up for the farming. And some years they both stink and some years they're both good."

"We all trust each other to make the right decision," says Chandler. "We all have our own part of the puzzle. The older we've grown, the more we've learned that trusting one another is the best thing."

It starts at home every morning

and every night, for the men say they owe a huge part of success to their wives: Chandler and Jenna, Collin and Lacey, Chance and Erica. "We wouldn't be able to invest the hours we do without them," says Chandler. "They definitely pick up the slack."

Another motto has taken hold in the Bowers family, its rough Latin rendering, *Victoria Via Communicatus*.

They run every major decision by each other,

knowing it takes the entire family to make things work.

"They never stop," says their dad, Charles. "Janyth and I are very proud of them. Very proud."

Yes, the fourth generation has been afforded some opportunities, but hard work and drive capitalized on them. Hard work — *Laborum* — is the only way the brothers know how to prove themselves to any who might think they were handed everything. It's the only way they have been taken seriously as 30-year-old ranchers on the Texas scale.

It wasn't luck that sustained the Lackey and Bowers families in the northern Panhandle for four generations through some of the "worst hard times," as author Tim Egan recounts.

"It's a daily thing where I sit back and go, 'How did this happen?'" says Chance, oblivious to his ironic name. "It's a dream every day. We're blessed beyond belief. ... The good Lord has taken care of us." **AJ**

*Editor's Note: Diane Meyer is a former industry information intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.*