



Cornerstone of Quality

Andy Larson draws on his family's rich farming heritage to keep producing better beef.

by Jill Seiler, Certified Angus Beef LLC

Watching his cattle graze on remnants of tallgrass prairie, Andy Larson muses about those who built Larson Family Farms, near Green, Kan.

“We’re just your normal Kansas operation, built by generations of hardworking family members,” says the cattleman, who still farms with his father, Raymond. “I’m the sixth generation.”

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The first, Erick and Emma, started 60 miles west of here in 1872. The Swedish immigrants married and worked to save \$3,000 by 1880 to purchase 310 acres of Flint Hills grass and creek bottoms in the May Day community northeast of Green. The place is still headquarters for a crop and cattle farm spanning several thousand acres, 500 commercial Angus cows and a feedyard.

Guiding the farm over those generations were John and Amanda, then Paul and Elfie, Jon and Evelyn, Raymond and Kellie, and, most recently, Andy and Erica Larson.

“I pretty much always knew I was coming back to the farm,” Larson says. “As you’re growing up, you’re working on the farm, putting up the hay, running the tractor. You don’t realize what all goes on behind the scenes until you actually get into it.”

He came home to expanded farm leases in 2002 with an agribusiness degree from Kansas State University. When that door closed six years later, he realized there was a much larger business side to farming than he initially thought.

“It prompted me to go back and focus more on the business side of the operation,” he shares.

Larson completed a master’s of business administration (MBA) degree at Emporia State University. He then stepped up his farm management role, starting with cattle, while his father stayed with the farmland.

“We share responsibilities now, and have several

employees that help keep things running smoothly,” Larson says. “It takes a team effort.”

The cow herd doubled in size over the past decade, now mainly Angus with a few Charolais crosses, but they weren’t always Angus.

Switch to quality

“Initially, we were a Hereford operation, then we somehow switched to Simmental,” Larson says.

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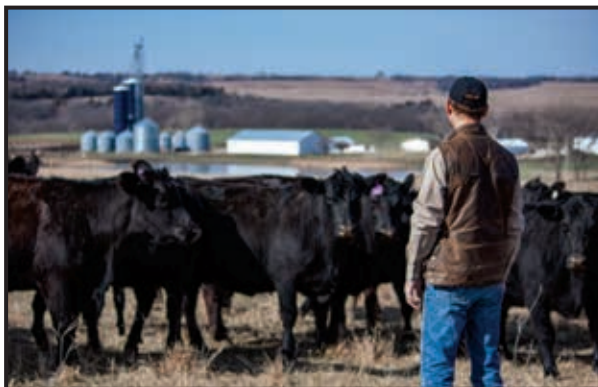
That was to capture more premiums from quality programs.

“It’s just what the market wanted,” he says. Though herd color changed, many cows may trace back to the first animals on the place.

“We have never sold out,” Larson says. “We have always maintained a cow herd and repopulated

exclusively through our own replacements until a few were added in the 1990s and 2000s to aid in expansion opportunities.”

Part of that included adding a fall-calving herd to spread into both traditional seasons. The spring calves are the purest Angus genetics, but both herds hit the high marks. Of 181 calves finished last year, 60% qualified for the *Certified Angus Beef*[®] (CAB[®]) brand.



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Those were finished at home or with longtime friend and CAB award-winning feeder Ty Rumford at High Choice Feeders, in Scott City, Kan.

“The Angus do really well here, and they’ve paid us back,” Larson says. “Quality has been

very important, so when we’re choosing bulls or replacements, it’s always been a priority. Quality is what pays.”

Breeding for the best

Attaining that high quality requires comprehensive breeding plans. Larson has worked with nearby Fink Beef Genetics for years, using their bulls to improve his cows. He looks for a well-balanced bull to bring in larger ribeyes and greater marbling without sacrificing fertility.



“I’m not focusing in on just one trait,” he says. “It’s the whole package you’re looking for.”

Larson uses a mix of herd bulls and artificial insemination (AI) to get there. He AI’s heifers to bring in new genetics with greater accuracy, so he can focus on individual mating decisions. AI also

allows him to synchronize calving into a short time period followed by earlier and easier rebreeding.

“Really, our whole goal with the cow herd is to raise females, because your females are what produce the quality calves,” Larson says.

Feeding for success

As a complement to his breeding program, Larson provides high-quality forage and feed. Consulting with a nutritionist to feed balanced rations helps

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him keep the cows on a high plane of nutrition at every stage of life. That lets each one reach her genetic potential.

“There are a lot of things we do to try to make sure that once that calf hits the feedyard, he’s prepared to excel,” Larson says. “It starts with nutrition, includes health, and some of it comes back to genetics.

We want to be able to express those genetics through the way we’re feeding them, and producing them on through the chain. That’s what we do.”

That combination of nutrition, management and genetics results in greatly limiting production risk so that cattle finish early and don’t give up quality.

“The faster we can get them to market, the less feed we’ve got to put through them,” Larson says.

Data are powerful tools in that management. In the early 2000s, the farm started using the American Angus Association’s Angus Information Management Software (AIMS) for herd records. Combining it with harvest data from U.S. Premium Beef (USPB), he tracks overall trends to be sure the herd is on course, hitting the marks for both size and quality.

“They give us so much information,” Larson says. “You can’t really hone in on one thing and say that’s making the difference. You have to take it all and see the trend. As long as you’re bringing in the right genetics, the cattle should be improving.”

A strong foundation

Balance remains the highest goal as he adds more focus on feed conversion and efficiency to finish earlier.

“Everything we do here, we do with the goal of producing beef, realizing the quality potential

of that animal, and then doing it as efficiently as possible,” Larson says.

His gaze shifts from the barns, sheds and pens to a limestone and wood-frame home built by Erick and Emma in 1896. Home to each generation of Larsons, it reminds this scion of the sixth that his strong foundation was built by family who fearlessly



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prevailed over the Dust Bowl, Great Depression and several tight margin years since. Larson knows his ancestors did what they could to give him what he has, so he tries to do the same.

“We’re stewards of the cattle. We’re just the caretakers,” he says. “It’s all for somebody on down the line. You hope what you’re doing is going to benefit the operation and

benefit the family down the road.” **AJ**

Editor’s Note: Jill Seiler is a producer communications intern for Certified Angus Beef LLC.