

High Calling

Tiffany Cattle Co. wins CAB Feedlot Commitment to Excellence Award.

Story & photos by

STEVE SUTHER,

Certified Angus Beef LLC

Brothers Shawn and Shane Tiffany grew up in the feedlot business, around a 42-acre yard built on the runways of an old Army Air Corps base. Their dad, Steve, was a manager at what was then Black Diamond Feeders, near Herington, Kan., for 14 years starting in 1988.

Only a year apart in school, they were on livestock judging teams together and earned degrees in animal science at Kansas State University. A minor in business foretold Shane's first career as cattle buyer for Bartlett & Co. in the Texas Panhandle. Shawn's master's in reproductive physiology led him to manage Chair Rock Land & Cattle near Kansas City. From the start, each wanted to build a legacy.

"The things we learned from our father can be applied anywhere," Shawn says. "Let your yes be yes and your handshake as good as a contract."

Black Diamond owner, U.S. Premium Beef (USPB) co-founder and mentor to the Tiffanys, Doug Laue advised them, "Always do your best and the opportunities will come," Shane says. "People will take notice."

Laue noticed, and in 2007 he called the brothers, one after the other.

"He asked if we would ever consider coming back and buying into the feedlot," Shawn recalls. "There was some uncertainty in the cattle industry then, so a lot of our advisors warned us off."

They were torn. They prayed and called each other, debating whether it was the right thing for their young families. Then Shawn summed it up: "If we're 80 years old and in our rocking chairs, if we don't do this, are we ever going to regret it?"

No regrets

The question was an answer. Of course they would. The company name changed Dec. 1, 2007.

Tiffany Cattle Co. received the 2015 *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) Feedlot Commitment to Excellence Award, accepted by Shane and wife Morgan at the brand's annual conference in San Antonio, Texas, Sept. 26.

"We started with six employees and 3,000 cattle for 10 or 12 customers, whereas now we have 20 dedicated employees, a customer list of 150 and stay pretty full at 12,000 to 14,000 head," says Shane, CEO of the cattle company. Equal partner Shawn functions as chief operating officer at the yard and president of Tiffany Family Farms.

Day to day, titles are not important, and everyone works together. That approach dealt successfully with the first crisis, 10 days into the new venture, when an ice storm shut down power for the next 10 days. They learned to be ready for anything.

As spring came around, Shawn was tagged to head up farming simply because he had a garden. He parlayed that into a 2,500-acre, no-till operation known today across the Midwest for innovation and cover-crop strategies.

It was obvious from the start that the community would support these feedlot owners just into their 30s.

"To local people I think even when we are in our 90s, we'll be the Tiffany boys," Shane says. "They wanted to see us come home and make something of it, so they sent us cattle to take care of, and our customer list grew."

The "boys" try to give back every day so the next generation will have



Brothers Shane (left) and Shawn Tiffany overcame the challenges of two "Type A" personalities working together. Today, the team shares burdens strategically to run a successful business.

opportunities, "something to stay home for," and it starts with their own eight children in the two families.

Shawn is on the board of a local telecommunications business, and Shane is mayor of nearby Alta Vista, Kan., where he recently reopened a grocery store that had been closed for years. Both are active in church and men's ministry on a wider scale.

The brothers thrive on overcoming challenges from weather to markets, but admit the first one was close to home. Those who knew them as boys wondered how they could be in business together.

"We're both very Type-A, so we have locked horns a time or two," Shawn says. But they agree on almost everything these days, including the key to success: "It's because there's two of us. We feed almost all customer cattle, so while Shane is in the office most of the time, it helps to have an owner looking at things out in the yard every day, catching little things before they become big."

Fixing those little things early shelters customers from risk and helps build relationships. "Part of our motivation is just that we like helping people," he says. The outward focus defines the culture of employees who are like family, so that people who fit are drawn there.

On the cattle side, customers become friends who use performance data to bring back ever-better cattle and more friends as customers. Some of those cattle reach beyond 70% CAB and 10% Prime, Shawn says, and the annual average for all cattle marketed from the yard has been as high as 40% in the last few years.

"The good thing about front-end

genetics," he adds, "is they are the most likely to pay you back at the end, because there's strong demand for that kind of beef, here and around the globe."

Putting food on the table

The Tiffanys work to build a wider community for beef.

"Inconsistency in eating quality was a huge issue that our generation was challenged to overcome," Shane says. "We have really made a big push in that direction and rarely feed what I would call upgraders anymore, but rely on the fact that CAB, USPB and premium beef brands have sent signals so that producers are upgrading cattle at home."

Still, the cattle-feeding world is often misunderstood by consumers driving across the Panhandle.

"They are just overwhelmed with the amount of cattle and the scope of things—it looks like a big factory," he says. "So it's vital that they get to meet the people and hear from our hearts why we do what we do."

That's why they keep their doors open for media interviews and tours from all corners — chefs, ranchers, students, CAB groups and more.

"Being a food producer obviously becomes a way of life" that goes beyond logistics, Shawn says. "If we make money or lose, if a day is good or bad, we can go home with our heads high because we helped put food on somebody's plate. That is a noble task."



Tags say a lot. Ranch tags tie calves to their dams, so the Tiffanys never remove them, but they add as many tags as it takes to tell each calf's story at a glance. They all get a green lot tag, but the few that had to visit the hospital pen get other tags with unique four-digit numbers. In turn, those tags sometimes sport a dangling color-coded tag with a date marked on it. Those indicate calves that received treatments good for several days, so a pen rider can tell at a glance how it is doing, what it has received and when it could be retreated if necessary.

