

## Furniture to freezer

### Family-operated Down Home Meat Processing of Claiborne County comes from unusual beginnings

Story and photos by Hannah Nave Lewis

In the rolling hills of Claiborne County, Down Home Meat Processing is serving up high-quality cuts of beef, pork, and venison along with a hearty helping of family atmosphere. From traditional livestock processing services to retail products offered directly from the farm store, Down Home has become a valuable member of the Tazewell community.

But the journey to this thriving agricultural endeavor was anything but predictable.

“My family was in the furniture business until 1995,” says Down Home owner Chris England. “After my father, Dwight, developed cancer, and La-Z-Boy bought the business, I found myself out of the industry. Honestly, I didn’t have a clear direction for some time.”

In the 1990s, Chris discovered a natural talent for working with livestock and began “fooling with cattle.” After establishing his own 200-head, commercial beef herd in 1998, Chris and his son, Alex, began working the cattle together.

Success didn’t come easily, though. Chris admits that the learning curve was high, and he was never satisfied with the price his animals were commanding.

“It seemed like every time I took calves to the market, they discounted them,” says the devoted Claiborne Farmers Co-op member. “They would say [the calves] were ‘rat-tailed, flop-eared, long-haired, or spotted’ — it was always something. I never seem to get full price. So, Alex and I decided to go in a different direction, and we began knocking around the idea of opening a slaughterhouse.”

In 2015, the father-son pair opened a small meat-processing plant at their cattle farm. Down Home Processing was born and was soon USDA certified. Over time, the entire England family — Chris’ wife, Janet, and the couple’s other two children, Alaina and April — took their places in the family business.

“From the time we uttered the word ‘slaughterhouse,’ it was three years before we ever processed the first animal,” says Chris. “But the whole time, we were working toward that goal.”

Hard work and persistence finally paid

off, and today, the business keeps eight to 12 employees busy processing 20 to 40 animals per week.

“Before COVID-19 hit, we were only processing around 15 head per week,” Chris says. “But when the grocery store shelves began to empty in 2020, people came looking for meat. We’ve really been blessed with a lot of business during an otherwise difficult time.”

In addition to offering traditional processing services, Down Home keeps their farm-store freezer stocked with a wide variety of pork and beef cuts, including sausages, tenderloins, roasts, ground-beef patties, steaks, and much more. During hunting season, the facility serves as deer processor and produces such venison favorites as summer sausage with cheese. All the while, the Englands raise around 75 head of commercial black Angus cattle and a small herd of hogs.

Alex says the family has worked hard to keep a high standard in all areas of their business.

“We concentrate on quality, customer satisfaction, and honest business practices,” says Alex. “Once a new customer meets us, sees the kind of facility we have, and what type of people we are, they understand what we’re about.”

All Down Home employees are trained in ethical animal care, how to respect the

carcasses, and the process of only cutting and packaging the best products.

“We’ve always said if we won’t eat it, we’re not going to package it for our customers to eat,” says Chris. “If it’s dropped in the floor or not up to quality, it goes in the trash, no questions asked. It’s just that simple.”

Chris stresses that through blessings and challenges, the Englands leaned on faith during the uncertain years of launching a new business.

“We have a strong belief in God, and He has continued to bless us,” Chris, an ordained Baptist minister, points out. “It seems like when we come up to something that’s really hard that we don’t have an answer for, our faith carries us through. I don’t believe in luck; I believe the Lord is in everything.”

As the company has grown, so has the England family. Alex and his wife, Kim, have two children — Bryce, 20, and Carlye, 16. April and her husband, Wesley, have three kids — Anagail, 14, Debbie, 13, and Lynnix, 5. Alaina and her husband, Forrest, are proud pet parents of two dogs — Ruby and Mossie.

“The part that I enjoy the most is how our entire family works together,” says Bryce. “I think it creates a great atmosphere that translates to our other employees and even to our customers.”



Faith and family are the backbones of Down Home Processing. Picture are (back row from left) Chris England, his daughter April, and son Alex; (front row from left) Chris’s wife Janet and daughter Alaina.



*“That’s our story – we started a slaughterhouse, we use our cattle, we grow the corn, we feed the cattle, we know you’re getting a quality product to feed your family.” — Chris England*