



SUNNY VALLEY FARM

Angus stemmed from diversification philosophy

by Jeri Lynn Sloan

What could enhance the beauty of a scenic pasture more than a herd of black cows grazing in it? And at Sunny Valley ruthless culling has made every cow one of which to be proud.

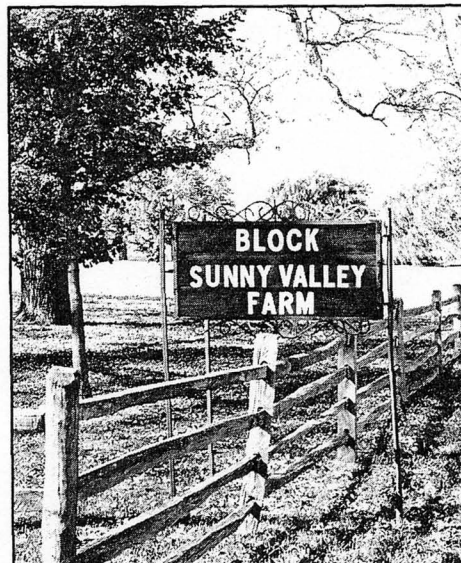


As a prominent Chicago surgeon George Block has many things of which to be proud. At 56, his skills and knowledge as a surgeon have placed his reputation among the nation's best. His talents have been recognized through professional honor societies and worldwide lecture invitations. He is professor of surgery, chief of staff and head of his section at the University of Chicago Medical School. But as a remarkably organized, versatile achiever Block has made time for more than medicine in his life. His greatest pride is taken in his 2,000-acre Sunny Valley Farm located about an hour southwest of Chicago, near Yorkville, Ill.

Block's desire to achieve nothing less than excellence in everything he does is what makes Sunny Valley Farm a top-notch operation. Sunny Valley is a well-planned, well-managed diversified farming operation in which the owner is very much involved. Land use includes 1,000 acres of corn, 500 acres of soybeans and 500 acres devoted to improved pastures. A cattle feeding operation and purebred Angus herd round out the diversification.

Pride in Sunny Valley comes not only from ownership, but because it is part of their family experience. George and wife Mary and 13-year-old son Edward reside on the farm. Their home is part of the beautiful landscape that makes Sunny Valley such an inviting showplace. Located in the midst of prime Illinois farmland, their farm appears to be the

epitome of success. Rail fences outline the main farm where the Blocks live. A spacious quadrangle dense with pine trees enhances the well-kept appearance. Upright silos, grain handling systems, barns and machine sheds further confirm the prosperity of the operation. Four of the six full time farm employees live in houses on the Sunny Valley Farm.



Everything about the Sunny Valley Farm is inviting. Located about an hour from Chicago, it is more than a showplace. Sunny Valley represents diversified farming at its best.

One man is employed strictly for ranch upkeep and maintenance, an unending concern.

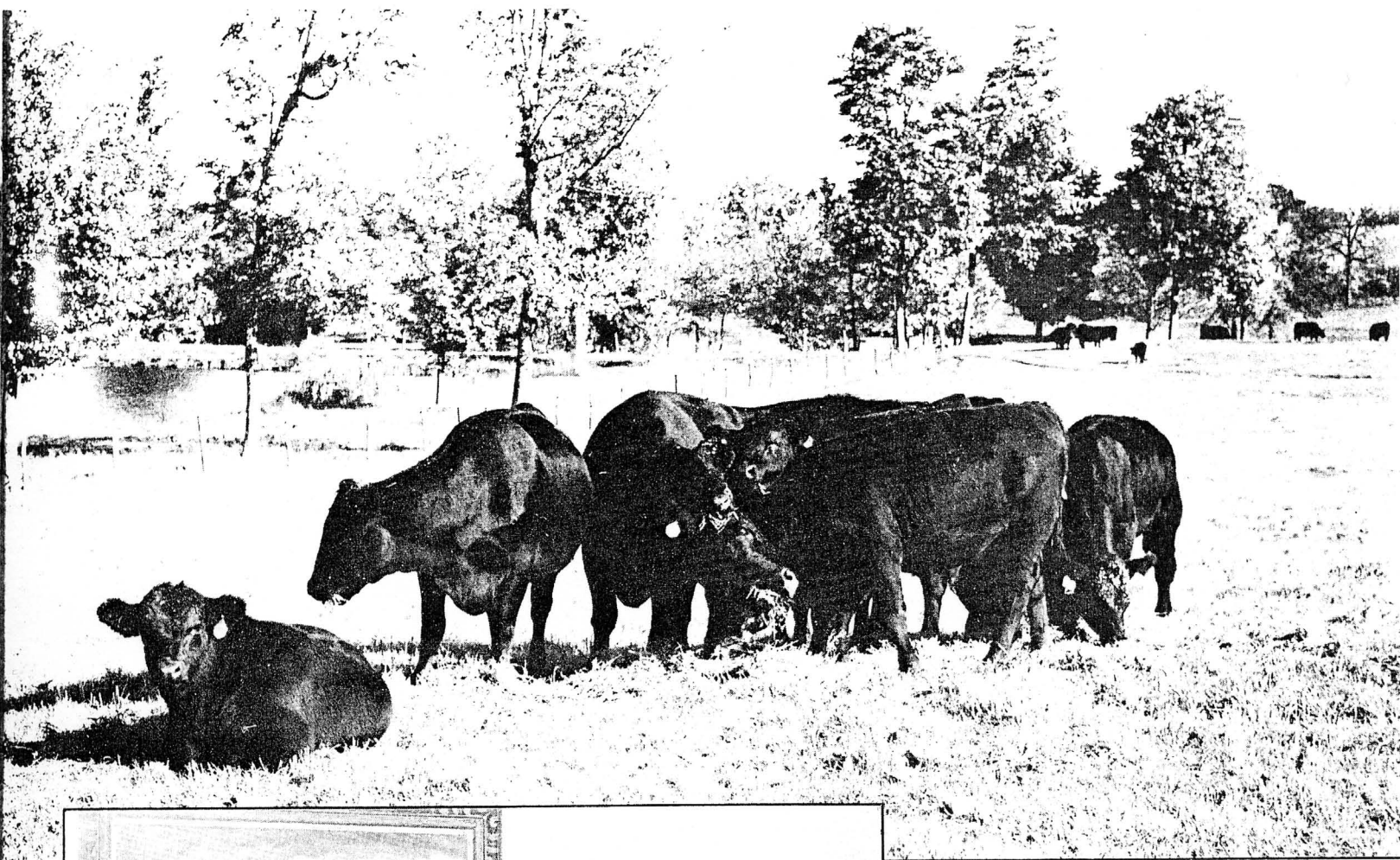
More than a showplace

But Sunny Valley Farm is more than a showplace. The facilities are practical and workable. And they have not been put up overnight. It has taken 20 years to do it. Many buildings now on the farm are older structures remodeled to suit current needs. While large investments have been required along the way, frugal planning has kept improvements at an economical pace.

Approximately 750 acres of the farm are part of the original homeplace which belonged to George's father, an engineer. George, with his mother as a partner, began purchasing adjoining land in 1960. George says, "I was not as knowledgeable about stocks and bonds as I thought I should be, so I decided to invest in land."

From the start George was skeptical about putting all his eggs in one basket. "All farmland does not lend itself to the rotation of crops. I wanted to have as many products to take advantage of as many markets as I could."

It was this philosophy that 10 years ago undermined the decision to add purebred cattle. When the decision was made to add purebreds, the decision to make them Angus quickly followed. George observed, "It became obvious the genetic pool was greater



George, Mary and Edward (he prefers E.L.) pose in front of pictures hanging in the family den. The bull on the left was an International grand champion owned by Mary's father, Lloyd J. Cobb, a New Orleans attorney and Angus man. Forty years later the Block family showed the grand champion bull at the North American International which is pictured at right.

in the Angus breed than in competitive English breeds."

The Sunny Valley Angus herd started with 10 cows. And in a pursuit for excellence, ruthless culling began almost simultaneously.

A specialist himself, Block frequently looked to others for advice in his farming operation. So it was with the Angus. George invited the help of Dr. Gary Minish in his selection process. Minish, professor of animal science at VPI & SU, Blacksburg, Va., agreed to help in an advisory capacity.

Minish says, "When Dr. Block first asked for my help, I went up and looked at the program. He was operating a first class farming

operation—everything was well done. When he said he wanted the Angus operation to match the farm, and cropping, feedlot and swine (since discontinued) operations, then I figured he meant business."

And he did mean business! George Block is sincere when he says, "Sunny Valley Farm is not a tax deduction." The farm is operated under the premise that it should pay. The purebred herd is no exception. If the cows are productive, then financial rewards are likely to go hand in hand.

Started with good cow base

The start of a good cow foundation came when Block and Minish traveled to perfor-

mance herds and bought cows based not only on their performance but also on their size and frame. They basically selected animals that had enough frame and lateness of maturity to keep in tune with the times.

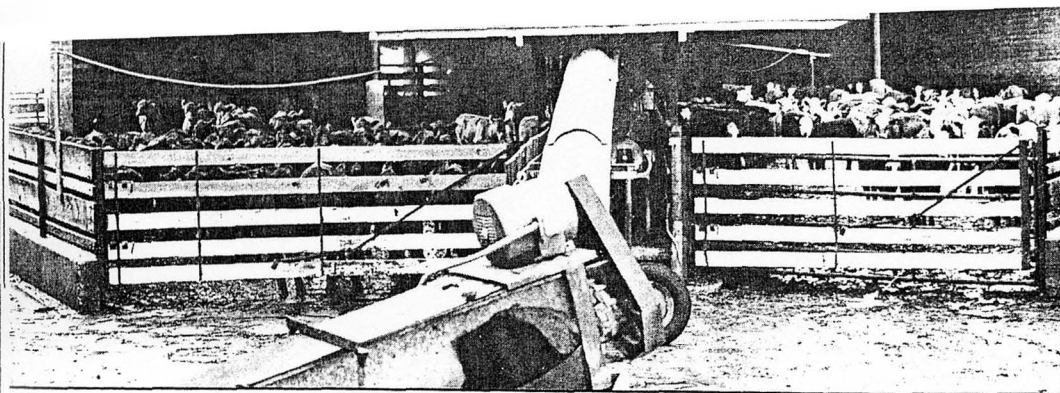
These early purchases were made mostly at Graham Angus Farm, Albany, Ga., and from Tom and Clarence Burch, Mill Creek, Okla. Prices paid were not exuberant as compared to today's standards, yet Block felt he had made a substantial investment.

Until 1982, \$2,000 to \$3,000 was the most Block paid for herd-building females. Last year he splurged, though, when he spent \$16,000 to bring home a cow from Wil-We Cattle Co., Colquitt, Ga.

"I don't think you can make a lot of money buying \$20,000 and \$40,000 cows," Block says.

Since 1976, the purchasing of outside females has slowed and progress is being felt through their own herd improvement.

Minish comments, "Sunny Valley cows are just now starting to prove themselves. It took



The feedlot operation is an important part of this integrated farming system. Steers from the purebred herd and purchased crossbred calves are fattened in four pie-shaped lots with concrete floors. Automated feeding has been in use at Sunny Valley since 1963.

10 years to put together a cow herd like they now have. Their replacement heifers are as good as anybody's. The secret is the cow foundation."

Block says two main cow families have evolved from their early purchases—those originating from Graham's and the Blackbird line from the Burch herd (now Blackbird of SVF).

"We have gotten extremely more selective each year," Block notes. "Cows we are now culling, we would have been delighted to have had 10 years ago."

Selection combines performance and type

Sunny Valley has been enrolled in the AHIR program since it began. Their strict culling process has relied heavily on performance records, but at the same time visual appraisal has not been ignored.

Sunny Valley's proof of eye appeal and excellent physical traits has come partly through success in the show ring. Their biggest win came at the 1981 North American International when SVF Power Pack was named grand champion bull. (The granddam of SVF Power Pack was one of the original cows purchased from Graham's.) This April 1980 son of PS Power Play is now owned jointly with Power Pack Associates (a group of Oklahoma and Texas breeders) and valued at just under a half million dollars. He is leased to Select Sires Inc.

Other proof of the acceptance of Sunny Valley cattle has been in sales. The most recent successful sale was when Quirk Land and Cattle Co., Hastings, Neb., purchased an April 1982 bull calf sired by Ken Caryl Mr. Angus 8017 and out of their Blackbird cow family.

The most interesting sale of Sunny Valley cattle was made this past summer to King Hussan of Morocco. Eleven head of Sunny Valley cattle (one bull and 10 females) were shipped to the king who plans to raise beef in his private herd.

Top management at every step

While family involvement in the operation is one of this farm's strong suits, the medical profession is a demanding one. Good people are needed at home to keep things running smoothly when George is away. And

that is just what Sunny Valley Farm has—a responsible, hard working farm staff. There is not a rapid turnover of employees, either. Two of the six have been with Sunny Valley over 30 years. General farm manager Jim Webb has been there over five years and cattle manager Wayne Strawn has been there four years. The day-to-day feeding and management of the beef cow herd are handled by these two men, along with help from newest employee Dale Rains.

Good management at every step of the operation is evident in the cow herd. All cows are artificially inseminated for two cycles and then placed with a clean up bull. Most of the A.I. work is done by Webb, who gets an 84 percent conception rate. Their breeding philosophy has been to heavily use one top proven performance bull while testing a couple of younger, unproven bulls each year. The herd bull battery for this past year consisted mainly of PS Power Play, SVF Power Pack and Pine Drive Big Sky.



George Block has a B.S. degree in biology from Northwestern University, a medical degree from University of Michigan Medical School (where he served on the faculty for 14 years) and served his country in the 31st Infantry Division in Korea. Now one of the nation's top surgeons, he is the owner of a diversified farming operation in which Angus cattle have become an important part.

In an effort to maintain a strong cow foundation, embryo transfer has been used as a tool. It has been used only moderately and selectively with proven females. It is on a predictable basis. Transplant calves have been sired by Ken Caryl Mr. Angus 8017, Sayre Patriot and Continental.

In the fall cows are pregnancy checked, wormed and treated for grubs. Cows are also retested for brucellosis to maintain their certified brucellosis-free herd status.

Creep feeding is practiced but cautiously. Cows with bull calves are separated from cows with heifers so bulls can receive a creep ration containing corn, while heifers that are creep fed receive an oats ration. Weaning weight is sacrificed, if necessary, to assure maximum milking ability in replacement heifers.

Heifers are bred to calve at 24 to 30 months of age and just prior to when the cows start calving. Calving primarily occurs in March and April because of harsh northern Illinois winters.

During grazing season cows are rotated among 25-acre contiguous pastures. A heavy fertilization program is applied to the timothy, alfalfa and clover pastures. Pastures have been extensively field tilled (as has the crop ground) in an effort to get more production from the land.

In the winter cows glean stalk fields and are supplemented with hay and silage. Free choice mineral is available year round.

Every effort is made to control summer face flies by the use of ear tags, feed additives, liberal spraying, back rubs and dust bags.

At weaning heifer calves are put on a growing ration and bull calves are put on feed test at the farm. Bulls are later sold by private treaty, through Angus consignment sales or at performance tested bull sales. Male calves not meeting their rigid standards to remain a bull go into the commercial feedlot.

Feedlot an integral part

Possibly part of the reason for Sunny Valley's success in the purebred business is the fact that everyday, they have a chance to view the finished product. A cattle feeding operation that dates back to George's father in the 1950s is a major part of their integrated farming operation.

From 1,000 to 1,500 head of calves are fed out each year. Crossbred calves are pur-

chased by George and his farm manager, usually in Iowa or Missouri. Plus, the majority of bull calves in the purebred herd are castrated and fed out. Block prefers to purchase preconditioned calves, but since this is not always possible, about half of the calves are processed when they come in.

Block likes predominantly black calves, as does his fat cattle marketplace. Discounts from \$.50 to \$1.00 per hundredweight are common for calves which are not black, Block says. Fat calves are marketed at the Joliet Stockyards where high choice and prime cattle for New York restaurant buyers

are in demand. Market weight averages 1,250 lb. to 1,300 lb. Calves are sorted at market time and sold in uniform groups.

Innovation has always been a part of Sunny Valley Farm. A mechanized feeding system was first implemented in 1963. At the push of a button, haylage and high moisture corn from upright silos and protein from a bulk bin are mixed in metered amounts and delivered via an inclined auger to sheltered, concrete fenceline bunks. Silage is fed on a limited basis. Feed samples are analyzed to determine needed protein amounts.

Since not all of his land is suited for corn, Block feels he is getting the maximum return per acre by marketing haylage through the sale of fed beef. Approximately 50,000 bushels of corn are used in the feedlot and 130,000 bushels are sold on the market.

Four pie-shaped feedlots with concrete floors and ventilated-roof shelters are arranged in a semicircle. Lots are sloped to prevent drainage problems. Large bales of hay are ground in a hay grinder for use as bedding. Manure is removed by an industrial tractor and disposed of by spreading. An underground manure pit holds only manure scrapped off outside floors (no bedding).

The feedlots and feeding system are just as immaculate and clean as are all other facilities on the Sunny Valley Farm.

The man is the key

1982 was a case in point for Block's philosophy on diversification. About this past year Block reflects, "The grain operation was a disaster as far as prices were concerned. If I were solely dependent on grain at this time, I would be in really tough shape. I have reviewed the books and it is quite obvious the beef cattle are keeping things afloat."

With a man like George Block at the reins, it is no wonder the system is working.

The most unique thing about Sunny Valley Farm is the man who owns the place. He is extremely brilliant, hard working and dedicated to results. It's proven in the farm, in his medical practice and now in the Angus operation.

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These Angus steers are a part of the 1,000 to 1,500 head of steers fed out annually. Being able to see the finished product every day no doubt influences decisions in the purebred operation.

