

MERCHANDISING

by Keith Evans, Director of Communications and Public Relations

Taking Quality Photographs

Making a good photograph is simple. Just push the shutter release the instant the picture you want to record appears in the viewfinder.

The trick, of course, is to be where you are likely to see good pictures and then to recognize a good one when you see it. Taking quality photos has a lot to do with being in the right place at the right time to record the best of what goes on.

The right time to take outdoor cattle photos is usually early morning or late afternoon. The best lighting is when the sun is low, coming over your shoulder. The higher in the sky the sun, the worse the light. At noon on a summer day, only the animal's back is lit.

If there are people in the photo, only black shadows appear where there should be eyes, mouth and neck. People wearing hats will have their entire faces obliterated by deep shadow. Few well lighted animal photos are taken at high noon, or between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. for that matter.

The right place is where the cattle feel comfortable and the background is suitable. To take cattle pictures in a beautiful pasture that has great morning light, the animals should be in the pasture for a few days. Turn them in a few minutes before you are ready to shoot photos and they won't settle down for an hour or two, maybe longer.

Unless the scene is more important than the animal or animals being photographed, you want as little background as possible. An all-sky background often works best. At any rate, avoid having a tree growing out of an animal's back or a fence post propping up its belly.

If you want cow-calf pictures, then take them when the calves are likely to be nursing. I am always surprised by people who think that good cattle photos can be taken at any time, under almost any conditions. They will drive cattle to a certain location, or run a cow and calf to separate them from the herd, then expect them to behave naturally for a photo. It seldom happens.

Finally, how do you recognize a good picture and know when to trip the shutter? Start by studying good photographs. Since you will likely photograph cattle for your advertising, let's confine our discussion to that subject.

Look through livestock publications and note the cattle photographs that catch your attention and appeal to you. The standard side shot of a bull or cow can vary greatly in quality and interest. Note how little things like foot placement, ears and the angle of the head can dramatically alter these photos. The trick is to implant these visual images in your mind so that when you see the right pose you recognize it.

Also study photos which present something other than the standard side shot of an animal. If you live in Texas or other parts of the South you will see advertising by the Beefmaster Breeders Universal Association. Two things characterize these ads, technically good photography, and innovative, interesting photographs. They are taken by a professional, but you can try to duplicate them.

Advertising photos need to involve the reader. One way to do this is to show



action, or the beginning of action. A bull that is just beginning to move or to look back, or pick up his head at the sound of a cow bawling looks alive and animated even though he was standing stock still when the shutter was clicked.

Angus cattle are hard to photograph. That's because they are black and thus reflect very little sunlight. Since reflected light is what produces a photograph, go to great lengths to get enough light for the photo. Usually this means over-exposing the film by one or two f-stops. In other words, if the light meter in your camera tells you to expose the photo at a 500th of a second at f-16, you will probably want to expose at f-8 or f-5.6.

If you have an automatic camera, learn to override the automatic functions. The camera's instruction book will tell you how. Experience and knowledge of your camera and the film you use will lead you to properly exposed film.

Success will come when you feel comfortable with your camera, film and equipment, and understand picture composition and graphics. You don't need a degree in photography, but a photography course will help. Courses are offered by the continuing education departments of many local colleges. At the very least, buy and read a photography book.

You can develop skills in less time than you might think. It will take work and practice, but it can also be fun. And if you can't afford to hire a professional, it may be your only route to quality ad photos.

Keith Evans