

*Don and Mida Peterson have been hosting a production sale at Rocking P Farm for the past 14 years. They offer a good cross-section of the herd and manage the event themselves—mainly because they feel they can do more for their customers that way.*

# Peterson's Rocking P Farm

by Nancy Ann Sayre



**“W**e try to keep it plain and simple and work with customers we know will remain our customers,” summarizes Don Peterson about Rocking P Farm’s annual production offering. He and his wife Mida have been hosting a sale 14 years now—doing all the work themselves and, indeed, striving to keep it simple in Horner, W.Va.

Simple should not be taken to mean easy. Sale plans are rooted in breeding, selection and management programs of the 100-head, 800-acre operation. Public rela-

tions play an important year-round role as well; while advertising, catalog preparations and other details require a more concentrated effort each fall. Don and Mida take care of every angle (down to mailing, billing and delivering), hiring only sale-day help.

Though some of the work could be turned over to a sale manager, Petersons feel the extra efforts are worth their time. Expenses are reduced, allowing them to line up top-flight auctioneers and ring help. More importantly, Don and Mida feel they reach their clientele most directly and effectively themselves. Rocking P’s success depends on the support of local cattlemen, both commercial and purebred. Who should know those potential customers better than Don and Mida?

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*Petersons have promoted this as the brand of quality. Every calf born on the place wears it, and Don makes sure each represents his program well.*

Ask any West Virginia Angus breeder—especially one who has moved up through the junior ranks—about Rocking P Farm. They will probably know the place. Chances are they have been there for a field day, showmanship contest or open house. And chances are they think the world of Don and Mida Peterson.

Scenes such as this crowd shot are common at Petersons' farm. They hosted

contest at their farm in 1967. Not only did they specially halter break 13 yearling heifers for the competition, they also accompanied the two winners to the first national contest.

Within the next few years, Petersons helped those winners and other interested juniors start a state junior Angus association. With the help and guidance of this couple, the ambitious group has

and nephew Jeff Bailey, both of Linn, each have been very successful with Angus and run cattle with the Rocking P herd. In fact, between the two of them they own some of Rocking P's most productive cows.

Diane recently earned a gold award and has captured much purple in her show career. (Petersons' living room doubles as a trophy room and is quite



their first Angus field day in 1964 and have invited breeders back nearly every year since. In fact, during the occasional years the state event is held elsewhere, Petersons make a point to hold a less formal open house (something they had been doing to bring folks to their place even prior to 1964).

Although they have no children of their own (Ernie, an 18-year-old foster son, has been with them several months), Petersons are deeply involved with juniors. Their concern starts on a community level where they are involved in their church, 4-H projects and with a volunteer program to house foster children on weekends and vacations. Their work with youth reaches state and national levels through efforts with junior Angus association members.

Don and Mida organized and hosted West Virginia's first state showmanship

hosted the Eastern Regional Junior Show and managed annual fall calf sales as well as participating regularly in the national junior Angus show.

"These junior events are usually our vacation," says Mida. "We travel to the eastern regional or the national show each year."

For her outstanding help and support, Mida was honored last year as National Junior Advisor of the Year. She and her husband also have been recognized often within their state and community. The West Virginia Department of Agriculture named them top purebred beef producer in the 1982 farm family of the year competition, and their local paper honored them with a Neighborland award several years ago.

Petersons' involvement with junior Angus association does have some family ties. Their niece Diane Somerville Loudin

full; cabinet space is devoted to cattle and sale records, mailing lists and the sort.) Jeff recently graduated from the University of West Virginia (Don's alma mater) and is now working with the agricultural statistical reporting service in Pennsylvania. He sold one of the top cows in Rocking P's most recent sale.

Don may have to compete with this younger generation, but he says he would not do things any differently. "I gave them each a good heifer or two to get started and it's grown from there. The kids have shown and done well and we have enjoyed it."

Don and Mida are very special people. Certainly their leadership efforts have helped build Rocking P's reputation and boosted the value of their cattle. But the true results of their endless enthusiasm and generosity will never turn up on the sales tally. They were never intended to.

Active in their community and deeply involved with Angus breeders and fellow cattlemen across the state, Petersons are as attentive to people as to their cattle business (See sidebar.) Don promotes  $\$$  as a brand of quality. Petersons breed and select what they think is best. However, they also concern themselves with reaching and satisfy

ing customers—quite a key to their successful sale record.

#### Bringing customers back

"We don't have the cattle to attract big buyers or investors," adds Don. Instead, he concentrates on offering a good cross section of the herd each year. "That's impor-

tant," he says, "because we know there will be buyers for every class of cattle we offer. They (buyers) each have a limit to what they're willing to spend . . . and if we don't have anything that sells in their price bracket, they won't be back."

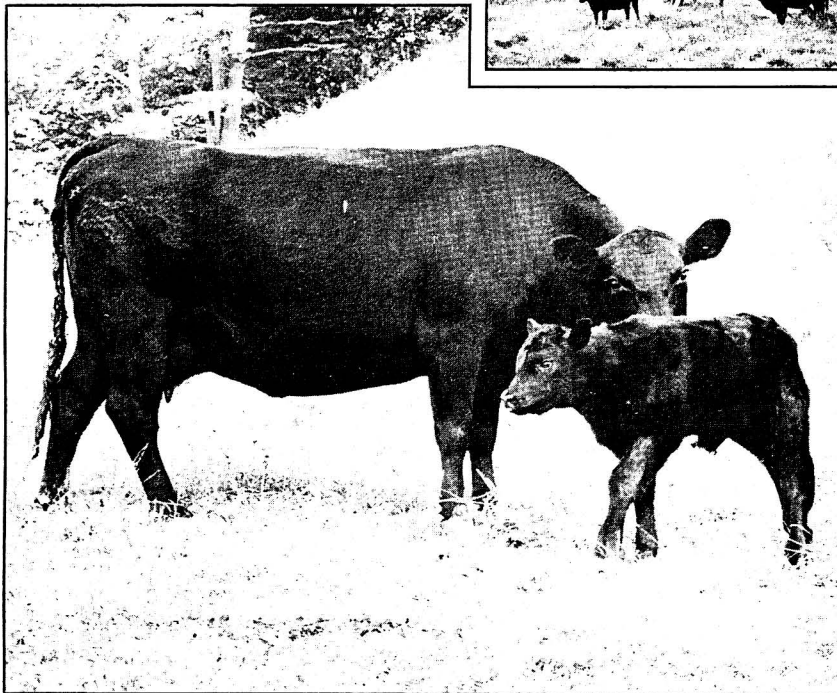
"But if they can afford an animal and that heifer or cow or bull does well for them,

then maybe they'll move up a couple hundred dollars when they come the next year," says the native West Virginian. His primary concern is bringing customers back.

"There's no herd where they're all top individuals and our average cattle may very well be top producers for our customers." Don illustrates his point: "A Big Bandy daughter we bought in a sale never ratioed above 96 in our herd. She had a good Sayre Patriot daughter at her side, though, and we sold her rebred the same way. Now she's the top honcho in the herd of the fellow that bought her . . . he'll be back and is interested in something just like her, or maybe a little better."

Along the same lines Don adds, "If we can get a bull to do well on test and sell him at top dollar, that's great . . . but still the

*This Craigie-bred cow and Summitcrest Powerbuilt calf owned by Don's nephew summarize the Rocking P program well. Although several of the herd's top producers belong to his niece and nephew, Don says he wouldn't have done things any differently.*



*The 800 acres of this "one-horse" operation are mountainous, and much of the land is in timber. "We cut hay anywhere we can find it," comments owner and manager Don Peterson.*



the registered herd with a pair of heifers in 1953, assuming the reins of his mother's family farm from her father and brother. (The farm had been named after the way old highway 33 curved around the farmstead and buildings—the resemblance is still noticeable.)

Don now mans this "one-horse" operation, while Mida teaches health and physical education and is girls' track coach at the area high school. Their joint efforts and the combination of incomes has supported the couple for 25 married years. Don's father and Mida's mother also live at Rocking P; they were married several years ago after each had lost their spouse.

Management at Rocking P centers around a solid forage program and low overhead, which means the herd is handled basically as a commercial operation.

"If it's flat enough to cut, we have to fence it and try to make some hay," comments Don. "We'll get hay anywhere we can find it, and if we need to graze the land after we cut the hay, we'll do that."

*"If we can get a bull to do well on test and sell him at top dollar, that's great," says Don Peterson, "but still the bread and butter end of it is the bull that sells for \$1,200 to \$1,500 and stays local."*



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Petersons have certainly claimed top dollar with a few Rocking P progeny; they topped the first West Virginia bull test in Wardensville (17 years ago) and have done well there since. Successful participation in West Virginia and Ohio test stations, regular consignments to sales in both states, and showing winnings across the East have helped Petersons build a respected reputation. The Rocking P brand has been scattered to many states as a result. Still, Don concentrates on local trade.

#### **Brand is an important trademark**

Each animal born at Rocking P must qualify to wear the firm's brand. Whether an animal sells through the farm production sale, in a test station or consignment offer-

ing, or by private treaty—whether it brings top dollar or sells on down the line—Petersons want that brand to represent their program well.

The brand itself was an idea borrowed from Summitcrest Farms, Summitville, Ohio. Like Summitcrest, Rocking P has used the brand to help establish an identity. Petersons have centered their advertising and logo around it in the last few years, including it on checks, catalogs, ads, stationery and farm signs. Most importantly, it marks each calf, making high quality crucial. Customers do not tend to forgive, but they will return for a certain brand if it works well for them. Again, repeat business is the key.

The brand may be just three years old, but the quality Petersons intend it to represent traces back much farther. Don started

Generally, the herd runs in large, distant pastures for summer and fall, then spends winter and calving months close to the farm headquarters. The land is mountainous and much of it is timber. The cattle are well adapted, though—another selling point for local trade.

### **Combining performance with eye appeal**

Don expanded the herd to its current capacity in the early 1970s and began hosting annual sales shortly afterwards. Ankonian Dynamo and Sayre Patriot influence is predominant in the Emulous/Craigie-based herd. The herd sire roster today centers around two members of National Western Stock Show champion carloads: 3-year-old Summitcrest Powerbuilt was purchased in 1981 from Summitcrest, and junior sire Jackson Baros SA 962 came from the 1983 winning team of Slagle Angus, Sargent, Neb. Don also continues to sample top sires each year through A.I.; 1985 calves will be sired by Schearbrook Extra and QLC Winchester.

Selection of bulls and replacement heifers is based on a combination of pounds, frame and eye appeal, stresses Don. As an early indicator of growth potential, the leg length (elbow to toe) of each calf is measured. Don has found bulls must measure at least 19 inches at birth to reach a frame score five as a yearling. He has also realized that area buyers, especially at test station sales, demand bulls of at least frame score five. In response, Don castrates any calf with a leg measurement below 19 inches at birth.

Heifers are generally sorted on the basis of their weaning performance data. Except for those offered in the sale, all calves are handled as a single contemporary group and weighed again as yearlings, when final replacement selections are made.

"I've been raising them long enough, though," says Don, "to know that in most cases those that don't have it at weaning won't catch up over the winter. Ninety percent or better will stay right where they ratio at first."

He also comments, "We don't keep any heifers that ratio below 98, but you've got to be satisfied with what they look like, too."

Since they aim to sell 50 females a year (this includes about 20 consigned by neighbors and guests) and because those females represent an honest cross-section of the herd, Petersons are forced to keep a high percentage of young heifers. They also keep an open eye for good females on the market.

Often purchased females will find their way through the Jackson's Mill auction arena during the Rocking P sale. But most animals there carry the *P* brand. And that brand speaks as a mark of quality.

Petersons are in the business of improving such quality each year. They also make it their business to bring cattlemen in who can appreciate each level of the Rocking P offering. Then they make it their business to bring those cattlemen back year after year.

**AJ**