

Not Just Another Jackpine Savage

*Wisconsin Angus breeder Bill Kurtz likes to do things the easy way.
If he can't find an easy way, he invents one.*

BY JULIE GRIMES ALBERTSON



The Plasta Post earned Bill Kurtz, St. Croix, Wis., a bronze medal at the Minnesota inventors Congress last June. He also won the "Friend of the Environment" plaque at the congress with the Plasta Post which eliminates the need for treated lumber in pole shed construction.

When Barb Kurtz awakens in the middle of the night to find her husband, Bill, absent from their bed she doesn't worry, it happens.

"I get up in the middle of the night and I have an idea for an invention. After that I can't possibly go back to sleep," says Bill.

Ideas vary from farm machinery to pharmaceutical supplies to kitchen utensils. Kurtz is intent on finding better ways to do things.

The January morning I visited the Kurtz Angus Farm near St. Croix Falls, Wis., was typical of this year's winter. The temperature was close to minus 20 degrees with a brisk wind whipping through the St. Croix River valley. Snow was piled high and the sunshine did little to warm the scene. Like most folks, Bill could do without the

cold weather. So he has invented ways to minimize his time in the elements.

For example, Bill's innovation, the Last Hitch, allows the driver of a tractor to hook or unhook the hay wagon or bale fork without getting off the tractor. He also created a portable calving shed which is used to warm up newborn calves. I was especially appreciative of the wood stoves that keep both his shop and chute area warm for tinkering or tattooing.

One of 10 Kurtz children, Bill learned the importance of the scrap pile early on. When something was broken, his dad would go behind the barn to the glorified junk pile and find what he needed to fix the problem. That's exactly what Bill does today.

While he learned a great deal from his father, Bill never expected to be running the family farm. But when his father died, the 19-year-old took over the dairy, "I milked cows for several years and then decided to get into something else," says Bill. "Our neighbor was a prominent Hereford breeder, so I decided to buy some Angus so I wouldn't have to compete directly with him."

Twenty-seven years later, the Kurtzes maintain 80 Angus females. Bill and Barb have

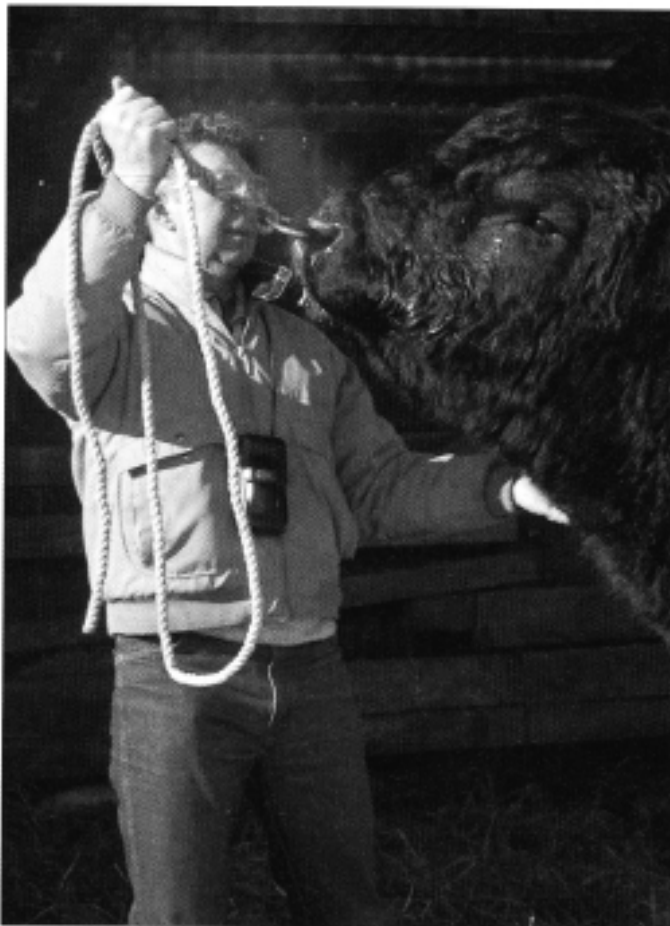
specific objectives for their calf crop each year. "Our goal is to wean calves at 205 days that weigh 50 to 60 percent of their dam's body weight without creep feed. We also strive to keep them at or below 7.5 percent of their dam's weight at birth," says Bill. It's a formula that allows them to see just how good a job the cows do raising their calves.

While they sell breeding stock off the farm regularly the Kurtzes' real niche is selling freezer beef to 40 to 50 customers a year. Bill advertises locally and in the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minn., 40 miles away Bill's classified advertisement gets people's attention. It mentions Angus beef and also that it's raised naturally, without using growth hormone stimulants.

He processes 17-month-old bulls and sells the meat in quarters or halves. "A lot of people are skeptical if you tell them it's bull meat. The butcher was, too, but now he brags our beef up to everybody," says Bill.

Feeding cows became tougher with the wet spring and dry summer of 1996, compounded by this year's harsh winter. "We were only able to get one cutting of hay last summer," says Bill. "I've had to start feeding shell corn to the cows this winter and I've never

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Bill Kurtz gives his herd bull extra attention on a frosty January morning.



Kurtz incorporates many labor-saving ideas into his Angus operation. This feed bunk is attached to a small storage shed which speeds up morning cattle feeding chores.

done that. But hay is just not available in this area.”

The ups and downs of the cattle business have convinced the Kurtz Family that diversification is key. While for some people that might mean raising hogs or working off the farm, for Bill and Barb it meant developing Bill’s hobby of inventing.

His most promising project to date is the Plasta Post. This product is an environmentally safe post made entirely of recycled plastic that takes the place of treated lumber posts for pole shed construction.

Untreated 2x6s are bolted on top of the Plasta Post to form a pole. Stress tests performed on the pole indicate a strength of 1,900 pounds per square inch.

The post is being manufactured on a limited basis and costs under \$20. Kurtz hopes to find several other manufacturers so the post can be sold by a large retailer.

The Plasta Post is the first of Bill’s inventions to be manufactured. “We had interest in other products, but manufacturers are scared off by the issue of product liability.”

It takes an enormous amount of legwork to get a design from paper to production. Once Bill has a

design, he requests a patent search for a small fee to see if there are any other patented products similar to his. Bill applied for patents on both the Plasta Post and the Last Hitch.

Barb worked off the farm for 20 years, but now she and Bill tend to their Angus herd and farm 700 acres including pasture. “I have the job of managing the paperwork. I’d like to think I know where everything is,” says Barb.

Bill usually has several projects going at once, so Barb tries to keep things organized.

As word of Bill’s talent gets out, agricultural media have shown great interest in his work. *Farm Show Magazine* and *Farm Industry News* have featured stories on The Last Hitch, the Roll Around Weed Whip and the Rake Caddy. Interest has developed overseas as Bill’s Rake Caddy was featured in a recent edition of *Practical Farm Ideas Quarterly* published in England.

Improving upon technology that we use on our farms and in our homes takes great commitment and persistence. Bill and Barb Kurtz have both qualities. That serves them well both in their business and on their farm.



Other Kurtz Creations

BK Rake Caddy

Uses an eight-inch hydraulic cylinder to fold the two sets of rake wheels up and to adjust the height of the rake from one inch to 18 inches.

Roll Around Weed Whip

A trimmer that is pulled behind the tractor. It mows around fence posts, buildings or in other tight spots. You can use it to mow under an electric fence. It bounces back after it hits the fence posts to allow you to continue moving.



Creativity is also vividly displayed in the entrance sign to Kurtz Angus Farm.