

# A Quality Life

*For the Schiefelbeins of Minnesota and their eight sons, there's no place like home.*

BY JULIE GRIMES ALBERTSON



"There's never a lot of cash flow. But we tell the boys some of the greatest benefits are found by looking around at where you're living and by having the privilege of working with your children," says "Frosty" Schiefelbein.

8:00 a.m. — *The Schiefelbein Farm's daily meeting begins with six of nine brothers present. Frank, father and mediator calls the meeting to order and discussion follows on the current markets, the day's agenda and any problems that need to be addressed.*

**F**rank Schiefelbein always planned on having a large family. He says 19 would have been fine. This man, as nice and seemingly ordinary as you'll find, has mastered the art of diplomacy. Six sons, their wives and 17 grandchildren all live on the farm. Frank and his wife, Frosty, make it work by treating all with respect and fairness.

"Frank really listens to the boys' ideas," says Frosty. "He doesn't tell them how it's going to be, but helps them come to a consensus."

Each day begins the same on the 3,500-acre farm. The Schiefelbein men discuss what needs to be done that day with each son leading the discussion in his own area of expertise.

"If we're talking about that guy's area, he takes the lead in the decision. If push comes to shove, he's the one who will decide," says Frank. "It's not as simple as it seems, but it does work."

While pushing and shoving are avoided, take downs and reversals could be common among a family as intense about wrestling as they are about raising cattle. The Schiefelbein brothers had a combined 553 wrestling victories for nearby Kimball High School. The family was profiled in a 1991 issue of *Sports Illustrated* that compared farming to wrestling.

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"Wrestling taught them responsibility," says Frosty. "In both wrestling and farming you can do everything right, but some circumstance is wrong, so you lose. That's what life is. You don't get everything you want. But that doesn't stop you from trying."

Farming and wrestling each take tremendous individual effort with little glory at the end of the day. This family learned early that it's the process that gives you the rewards, not always the end result. Enjoying the process has given each Schiefelbein son a desire to continue the tradition of raising a family and raising cattle on this central Minnesota farm.

The boys have always been interested in the farm, says Frosty — whose real name is Donna Mae. Being kind of shy, when the oldest son, Frank III, graduated high school, he said he would stay and work

"Frank and I said, 'No!'," she recalls, adding that she and Frank told their sons each had to go away at least a year and do something else rather than farm. "They all are so comfortable and secure here," she explains. "We wanted them to be sure this is what they wanted." So, as each son graduated from high school, he went away to college or to work

"The boys went where the top agricultural people were at the time," says Frank. Each son has developed an interest and talent in a different area to create his own niche back on the farm. "As each boy went to school, they knew what areas we needed help in and they developed skills in those areas," adds Frank.

While many farm families hope to keep one child interested enough to continue farming, the Schiefelbeins struggle to make a place for all of their sons. Currently, six families live on the farm along with Frank and Frosty. The

## STARTING OUT

Forty-four years ago Frank and Frosty Schiefelbein, two city kids, thought they'd try farm life. Enjoying no modern conveniences other than electricity, the newlyweds started with 12 milk cows, 20 sows and 500 chickens.

"I'm from the city and I find myself washing 90 dozen eggs every week," recalls Frosty.

As the dairy herd grew to 80 cows, it became evident to Frank that his farms rolling hills were better suited for beef cows.

"I went to the best Angus breeder I could find at the time, M.L. Snyder from Madelia, Minn., and bought his calf crop two years in a row," says Frank. "We haven't bought another female in 40 years with the exception of the Angus Foundation female one year."

Frank wasn't an experienced cattleman when he started out, so he sought the advice of Chuck Christians, professor of beef and swine genetics at the University of Minnesota.

"Frank decided to go against the advice of the economists of the time and try to make a living raising beef cattle," says Christians. Four decades later, Christians says the Schiefelbeins have one of the premier herds in the country.

"The University has a close working relationship with the family. We hold performance testing programs at the farm and one of our agricultural engineers set up the Schiefelbein's feedlot and feeding facilities," says Christians. "Frank has always been quick to accept new and innovative ideas once he's satisfied that it is the right way to go."

## Meet the Schiefelbeins



Above: Six sons, their wives and 17 grandchildren all live on the farm with Frank and Frosty Schiefelbein. Pictured here, left to right, are Tom (son), Mike (son), Sam (grandson), Frank IV (grandson), Bob (son), Frank III (son) and Frank II (dad).

**Frank III** — Kansas State University graduate • AI, herd health and veterinary program  
**Rick** — Iowa State University graduate • Input buying and dealing, building maintenance  
**Robert** — Michigan State University graduate • DTN, commodity futures trading and nutrition  
**Tom** — North Dakota School of Science graduate • Machinery and vehicle maintenance, welding  
**Michael** — Crops and field work  
**Donnie** — Texas A&M graduate • Publicity, feedlot program, marketing director for American Gelbvieh Association  
**Tim** — Texas A&M graduate • South Dakota and Nebraska bull sales; chief formula buyer for Monfort  
**Daniel** — Colorado State University graduate • Pedigree and EPD updating, calf feeding  
**Frank II, father** — Financing, keeps harmony in the family  
Donnie and Tim live and work away from the farm for now, but both have critical responsibilities and share in the decision making.

family adds land as neighbors retire.

"Tom got married a year ago and we had to find a place for them. So last year's project was remodeling an old farmhouse," says Frosty. "The whole family got together and gutted the house down to the studs and started from there." The family did all the work themselves except for laying the carpet.

The brothers stay connected both through their morning meetings and computers in each house that have all the farm records and information. Each son is responsible for the niche he has developed for himself. When decisions have to be made regarding artificial insemination (AI), for instance, Frank III leads the discussion and has the authority in that area. The system works because each son is respected for his knowledge and the father doesn't try to rule over the sons.

### Breeding for taste

The breeding program has been influenced to a great degree by Frank's taste buds.

"I've followed every animal through the coolers for the last 40 years," Frank explains. "I go in and cut, package and weigh our meat. Experimenting with different bloodlines, we select for flavor and tenderness."

Frank and his sons all are in on the taste testing. "We'll take five animals in at the same time and take steaks off each at the same spot. We cook them all up, the boys come in and we'll have colored toothpicks and identifying numbers to see what tastes the best."

Asked if father and sons agree on taste, Frank replies, "We don't agree on a lot of things, but we do agree on taste. We're out of the same stock. Genetically, I breed true. If you talk to one of us, you've talked to us all."

Through careful selection, the Schiefelbeins produce cattle that grade. The current set of numbers read like this: 93% Choice or better, 71% Yield Grade 2 or better, 29% Yield

Grade 3, 7% Select on cull steers and heifers born in 1996.

"These are the kind of numbers we can really be proud of," says Frank. "Our main thrust is to sell good bulls to commercial producers. We collect the carcass data on their cattle for them so they can see results, too."

When their bull customers sell their feeder calves, the Schiefelbeins bid on the calves to make sure they bring full value. "We end up with several thousand calves, but we bid on probably 10,000," says Frank. The calves they purchase are fed out in Nebraska, Colorado and Texas feedlots.

Six hundred registered Angus females now roam the 118 pastures that comprise the farm. Son Donnie helps in the selection of sires used naturally and through AI.

"We sort our best 200 females to AI and group them according to their numbers," he says. "We then use sires that will complement our cows." The targets, expressed as expected progeny differences (EPDs), are +2 birth weight, +35 weaning weight, +15 milk and +50-55 yearling weight, with positive numbers for carcass traits and scrotal circumference. "We want our cattle good enough so that there is a profit for all members of the beef chain — ranchers, feeders, packers and purveyors — still producing good-tasting meat that consumers are willing to buy at a premium price," says Frank.

Decisions about breeding are, like all the other decisions at this farm, topics of discussion at the 8 a.m. meeting.

The Schiefelbein family is unique in many ways, but what is most striking about this family is their genuine love and respect for each other. Problems arise, but with guidance from Dad and Mom, they make it work. It's easy to see quality of life brought the sons back to this impressive farm.



Six hundred registered Angus females now roam the 118 pastures that comprise the farm. All the cows are over-wintered on hay and corn stalks, says son Bob.

### Overcoming Tragedy

Working six sons and their families into one family farm, Frank Schiefelbein has obviously mastered the art of diplomacy. While he's used those skills on behalf of the Minnesota Cattlemen's Association as a member of the board of directors and chairing the Minnesota Joint Commodity Board, working with another organization brings him peace at heart.

Frank is chairman of the Governors Board on Mental Health. It took a tragedy of the worst kind to bring about the interest in this field, however.

"My third-oldest son, Bill, suffered for 11 years from paranoid schizophrenia," explains Frank. "We picked him up after he committed suicide about a 100 miles away from home. Frosty held him in her arms as we drove home. I kept looking at them in the rearview mirror and I said I'm going to do everything in my power so that no other family has to suffer as we did."

Frank began searching for ways to use his grief in a positive way. He was appointed to the mental health board for only nine months when they elected him chairman. A group bitterly divided now had an experienced peacemaker at the helm.

"Getting the cooperation of people has been my greatest achievement," he says. "We have a list of things we want to accomplish and I tell them that in order to accomplish these, we have to work together. That's what I explain to my sons all the time."