



*A cattleman
who just happens
to be blind . . .*

JOHN ROTERT

by Linda Wells

John Rotert. He's an Angus breeder, a businessman, a husband, a father. John's a solid individual, honest, intelligent, strong-spoken, not afraid to say what he thinks. Nothing extraordinary about this man—except for one thing. John is blind.

This October will mark 25 years that he and his wife Bettie have been raising Angus cattle near Montrose, Mo. In 1956 they purchased four cows. Today the Roterts run close to 200 cows with calves on 700 acres—400 theirs and the rest rented or leased. They also merchandise 50-60 bulls along with 30-40 carcasses each year and produce 1,000 feeder pigs annually.

The Roterts have come a long way since 1956. And it's no wonder. They believe in

maintaining a positive attitude and look at each new day as a challenge. And what's more important, they just plain enjoy what they do.

Doesn't Want Pity

John wasn't born blind. He is afflicted with retinitis pigmentosa—a lack of blood supply to the nerve of the retina—which has caused his vision to deteriorate slowly through the years. He doesn't want pity. And anyone who has been associated with him can see why. "Instead of being a blind cattleman," John proclaims, "I'd rather be considered a cattleman who just *happens* to be blind."

From 1952-54 he attended an agricultural school for the blind—before rehabil-

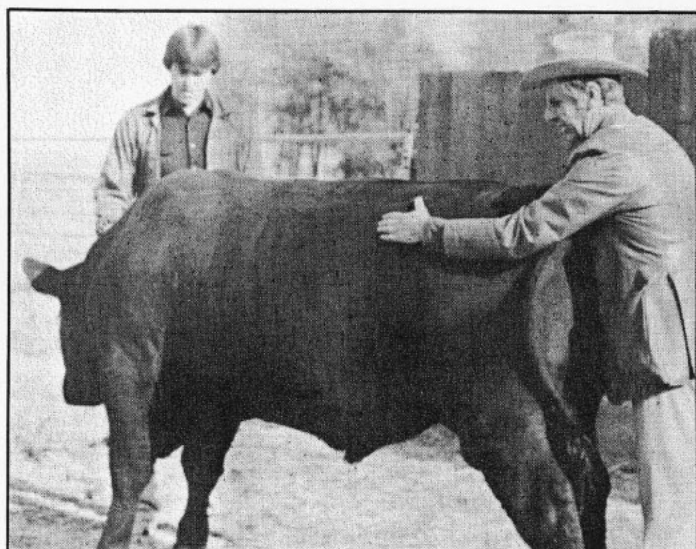
itation was a major concern. It was owned and operated by Harold Costigan of Oak Grove. "This man gave John the incentive to do something other than just sit around and be blind," the Roterts claim. And there was good reason. Costigan himself was blind—the result of contracting beri beri while held captive in a Japanese prison camp for three years during WWII.

When John finished training at Oak Grove and Bettie had graduated from nursing school, they were married. It was five years later, the fall of 1960, that the Roterts (both John and Bettie) enrolled at the University of Missouri.

Not a Sheep Man

At first, the university people did their

John feels an animal from stem to stern. He developed this "hand method" of evaluating cattle while attending the University of Missouri.



best to make a "sheep man" out of John. They felt he could manage sheep much more easily than cattle because of the sheep's flocking instinct. And even though the field was wide open for an animal science major, he persisted in concentrating on beef cattle. "I could see their point," John exclaims, "but I just didn't like sheep!"

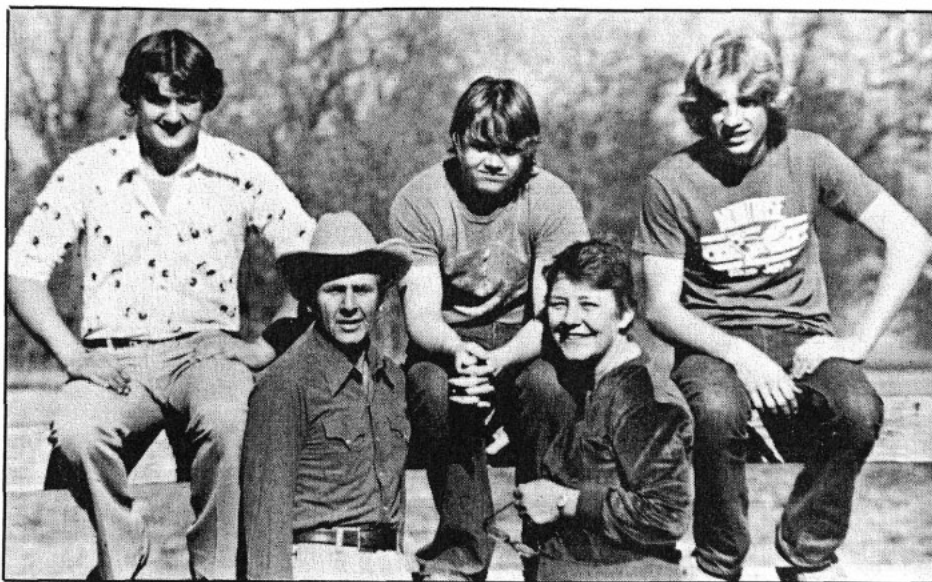
Bettie enrolled in every class with her husband in addition to working full-time at the University Medical Center. She took notes during lectures and recorded them on tapes for John to play back and study. He read in the same manner—tapes were substituted for textbooks. These services were provided through the Bureau of the Blind and the Downtown Optimists Club of Kansas City. Alcatraz prison even played a role in John's education when the Bureau of the Blind assigned one of the inmates there to tape Morrison's FEEDS AND FEEDING—more than 1,000 pages. The Roterts carried 20 hours each semester, made the dean's honor roll every time and finished in three years. "We were there for a purpose," says Bettie.

When the Roterts attended lab classes (where students are actually given practical experience with the animals) the Roterts were usually asked to stand back. "They didn't know what to do with him. He was the first, and so far the last, blind student in the University of Missouri ag school," Bettie says.

"But they didn't turn their heads either," John adds. "When they found out we were really sincere—that we wanted to do something—they really started to help us."

Evaluating Cattle

It was at the university that John developed a "hand method" for evaluating cattle. There is a definite procedure he goes through, almost subconsciously, each time. Condition is one of the things John feels an animal for. "You can make an animal look pretty square-pinned with enough corn," John remarks, "but what I feel for mostly is structure, length of rump, depth of rump



John and Bettie Rotert with their three sons, George, Paul and John J.

and down through the quarter." Next, he examines the stifle region and how an animal stands on its hind legs.

"With some help, I've developed a pretty good feel for the loin. By placing my thumb on the center of the loin and dropping my index finger down over it, I can just about feel where the loin breaks," he explains. John appraises the over-all length of an animal in proportion to the rib cage, the hooks to pins and across the shoulder. He checks out the shoulder blade to see how it lays and how straight the animal comes down across the front leg. He also questions the volume of the rib and width of chest for capacity.

In determining frame, John points out the importance of long-bone growth such as the cannon bone. "This bone isn't going to change much from birth on. It'll lengthen out some," John explains, "but an ole calf with an 8- or 9-inch cannon bone at 205 days of age is gonna have some frame to him. He'll probably grow out to be a 7-frame animal." John likes some length in the neck and a long plain head.

Feet and Legs

His next inspection takes him down each leg to determine how the animal stands on its feet. "You want them to be solid," remarks John. He also feels for "leather" underneath an animal. "Sometimes these cattle can look wastey but in essence may not be as wastey as they appear. You need a little bit of leather underneath for capacity and gain."

He always palpates the testicles of bulls—whether they're young or old. He checks to make sure the testicles are similar and adequate in size. And when measuring the testicles with his hand, John can almost always estimate their size within one centimeter. "These testicles need to hang right. You don't want them to be twisted," John says. "And when you're looking for fertility, you've got to check bulls for

testicular problems, because testicular development has certainly been proven a factor in fertility."

Rotert uses his own body as a system of measurement. (For instance, the length from his elbow to the tip of his hand is so many inches.) He also has a particular spot on his chest from which he can estimate height.

Misses Sometimes

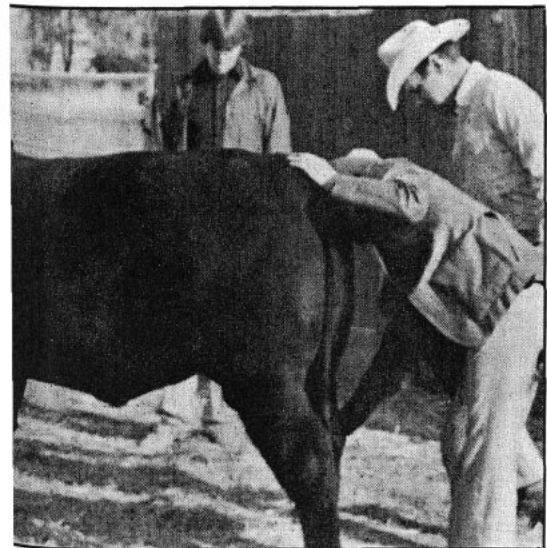
"I miss them just like anybody else at times. But there are certain things you're going to feel while handling these animals that you just can't see—especially in show cattle," John claims. He's not criticizing show cattle but points out that they're fit to the tee. "You're dealing with expertise in show cattle, and a lot can be done with condition and hair. They're going to have some holes that you can't tell until you've handled them."

People quite often ask for John's opinion about an animal. "I don't always tell them what they want to hear. I tell them what I think and answer them as honestly as I can. I don't hand out a lot of false answers. This isn't going to demand any respect. I guess if people don't really want to hear what I have to say, then maybe they'd better not ask."

John feels his biggest disadvantage in judging an animal is not being able to see how it moves and walks out. But this is where Bettie enters the picture. She visually appraises the animal while John goes over it with his hands. "We've developed a pretty good method of correlating what I feel and what she sees," says John. And when Bettie explains a certain animal to her husband, he can just about picture that animal in his mind. Not only that, but he retains these animals in his memory for future reference.

Conscientious Breeders

The Roterts are conscientious breeders. For nearly 25 years, they have guided their herd toward a genetic base—selecting for fertility, performance, frame, calving ease



The following was told by John Ponticello of Washington, Mo.:

Several years ago when the Roterts and I attended the National Western Stock Show in Denver, we were walking through the barn evaluating the cattle. John would feel the cattle from stem to stem while Bettie and I looked them over. John was particularly interested in Thomas Chaps and Thomas Impact. After we'd gone through all the cattle in the barn, John said, 'Let's go back to those Thomas bulls. I want to go over Chaps again.' So we did.

John had just started going over the bull when he turned around and said, 'Ponticello, you're blinder than I am. This isn't Chaps. It's Impact!'

Immediately I thought to myself, here's a blind man telling me I don't know which bull is which. So I said, 'No, it's not, this is Chaps.' Just as I was saying this, I looked up at the sign and, by golly, he was right! It was Impact!

This is only one example of John Rotert's ability. Don't ever under-estimate him. You can bet I never have since."

and mothering ability—while maintaining such carcass traits as marbling and tenderness that the Angus breed has long been known for.

They're also strong believers in performance testing. In 1961 they started taking 205-day weights under University of Missouri supervision. "The extension people are one of the biggest resources we have. Maybe we abuse them. But I believe their supervision of our records makes our performance program meaningful. They don't hand out many bouquets that aren't deserved," John explains.

Five years ago the Roterts placed all their bulls on the 140-160-day feed test. But since the price of grain and corn have gone up, the bottom end (about 20-30 bulls) are castrated and sold as stocker steers. The rest are placed on test. These bulls must make 950-1,000 lb. yearling weight, be at least 46 inches at the shoulder (in the 4 frame) and be in the "B" bull grade. If they don't make these requirements and are structurally incorrect, they're slaughtered and sold for locker beef.

"These young bulls coming off full feed make tremendous carcasses," John comments. They kill 30-40 bulls annually and usually have a waiting list for 10-12 sides of beef each year. They're sold at \$1.25 a lb., about 10¢ more than the dressed beef trade.

Above Average Beef

"It's above average beef," says John, "and our customers pay it without complaint." They're customers the Roterts have had for the past 15 years, and the list keeps growing. "If we don't have bull beef available, our customers would rather go without than

eat steer beef. Characteristically, there is more waste on steer beef. It just isn't comparable to bull beef once you've eaten it." The Roterts also believe, when feeding out bulls for carcasses, you can eliminate the mistake of castrating an animal that would have otherwise gone on to make a good bull.

"Although steers will gain up to .75 lb. a day," John adds, "it can also take them 60 days longer to feed out. So when you consider the extra cost of feeding steers, it's just more economical to feed out bulls."

The bulls are slaughtered as they come off test at 13-14 months of age. John explains: "There is no way I can sell these 14-month-old bulls for less than \$1,000—especially after you've registered, fertility-tested and guaranteed them. When these bulls will dress at 62-63%, there's no need to keep the lower end of your calf crop when you can hang them on the rail for \$750-800."

The Roterts buy all the grain for their tested bulls. They know to the penny what goes into them and consequently what they need to sell them for in order to make a profit. "If you figure the value of grain on the market—whether you raise it or buy it at the opportune cost—you can either sell it or put it into bulls. It's still worth so many dollars," John comments.



Herdsmen Mike Westhusing

Breeding Program

Last fall the Roterts bred most of their cows A.I. to Alberta Jumbo GR 22D, PS Power Play, Shoshone Viking GD60, Sayre Patriot and Eileenmere Masterpiece JAO. "We try to raise a top son or two out of one of these sires that has something to offer our cow herd. We take these top sons when they come off test, put them back in the cow herd and test them a little more by using them on half-sibs and on some of the cow families they came from on the bottom side. This gives us a progeny test in our own herd," the Roterts explain.

They also believe in using prostaglandin to synchronize estrus, and it's worked well for them. In a 3-week period, 54 cows that had been synchronized gave birth to 47 calves. Their conception rate was 83%. "The key to this," John explains, "is that a year ago we had the best growing season for grass and feed that we'd ever had. The cows were in good shape." In addition, they fed their cows supplemental energy before the first injection of Lutalyse. On the 12th

day, the cows were given a second injection and in 72 hours were bred. "We got tremendous conception by doing this."

When the Roterts first started synchronizing, however, they weren't giving their cows supplemental energy, and as a result, the cows weren't cycling as they should. But once they increased the cows' daily intake by 4-5 lb., it made a noticeable improvement in their program. The Roterts believe that heat synchronization is economical, especially when you consider the man hours you would otherwise have to spend watching your cow herd.

Split Calving Seasons

The Roterts calve about 60 cows in the fall. The rest—close to 140—calve in the spring. "Cows calving in the fall need more and better feed to get through the winter. They've got to have some awful good forage or you'll have to creep feed the calves," John says. "On the other hand, one advantage to having fall calves is that it provides us with some 18-month-old bulls ready for the spring market."

Five production sales have been held at the Rotert farm—the first in 1973, another in 1976 and the last three from 1978-80. In December of this year, a silver anniversary sale will be held to celebrate 25 years of continuous Angus breeding for the Roterts. At their last sale, more than 400 people attended, and they were prepared to meet the crowd with a new sale barn. "We had more interest in our sale last year than ever before. There was a whole different clientele here—a lot of young people and some new breeders," says John.

Their hope is to have a consignment bull sale in the spring—perhaps a performance tested all-breeds bull sale. Bettie feels that, with inflation and energy costs soaring, breeders are going to want a place where they can buy all of their bulls in one stop. John agrees, saying, "People aren't going to spend their time driving up and down the road looking for bulls. Time and energy are too precious."

A Cooperative Effort

There are a number of people John credits for helping him. "Everything I've done has been with the help of a lot of people. I can't even begin naming names," he admits. But there is one person whose name always will be found at the top of the list—his wife Bettie, a very bright, positive and savvy lady. Following close behind is Mike Westhusing, herdsman at Rotert Angus for the past 10 years. Not to mention the Roterts' three sons, George, 18; John J., 17; and Paul, 15.

Leaving a big fortune is not John Rotert's primary goal in life. Instead, he would like to leave some input and technical contributions to the Angus and beef industry in general. Something that others will be able to use down the road. And even though John just happens to be blind, don't ever underestimate him. He's got as much going for him as any Angus breeder today . . . and maybe a whole lot more. 