



# First Lady *of* Livestock Photography

*Vivian Sirratt found that being a woman  
cattle photographer was no handicap as  
long as the pictures were good.*

*by Mark Parker*

FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS, Vivian Sirratt reigned as the first lady of livestock photography. Until recently, it would have been nearly impossible to pick up a major beef breed journal without finding the signature, "photo by Sirratt."

Any of those photos would have been perfect. The bulls would have looked virile, the heifers feminine and the cows maternal. Each would have appeared so natural that you might have momentarily thought about dusting off your own 35mm camera — at least until you remembered that stack of awful pictures hidden away in your desk.

Making excellence look easily achieved was the Sirratt secret of success. In reality it meant hard work.

In a typical year, she spent more than 200 days on the road; most of the remaining 165 were spent either packing, unpacking or in the darkroom. The work was fun, though. The people were nice, the cattle were beautiful and Sirratt wasn't shackled to a time clock or cooped up in an office.

Ironically, the promise of freedom, which drew her to the life of a freelance livestock photographer back in 1960,ulti-



mately convinced her to move on to other pursuits a couple of years ago.

"The road was the main factor in deciding to quit taking cattle photos," she explains. "When you travel as much as I did, the road eats up all of your time. And when I did get home I would rush to develop my film, then I'd unpack, print my pictures, wash some clothes and leave again. It just didn't leave me any time for anything else."

It's easy to see that Sirratt misses cattle photography. For the people who know her, it's also easy to understand why she couldn't be anything less than completely committed to her craft.

"I knew I couldn't go halfway," she says. When something has been your life, you can't turn it into a part-time job."

These days Sirratt's creativity has been refocused. Although she has kept one cattle photography account, most of her time is spent in her Baxter Springs, Kan. home where she creates stained glass skylights, windows and decorative items. Additionally, she works for her brother, who designs and markets jewelry display cases.

The change in careers has given her

time to spend with her family and to do the things to her house that she used to dream about on endless airplane trips.

The beef industry, however, has not been forgotten.

"All of my friends are cattle people, so I could never turn my back on the beef industry," she says with a smile, looking just as pretty and charming as she would have looked at any major cattle sale or show where you might have seen her. "Cattlemen are a special group of people. They seem to care about each other even though they're competitors. There's kind of a brotherhood there—I don't really know what it is but I know you don't find it in any other group of people."

It is a group of people Sirratt knows very well. She walked into what was very definitely a man's world in 1960, not really sure of what to expect. Hayes Walker, the editor of the *Hereford Journal* at that time, told her that if she thought she could handle it, she ought to give it a try. He ended up getting her the first of what would be thousands of cattle photography jobs. Sirratt quickly found that being a woman was no handicap as long as the pictures were good.

She traveled from coast to coast, from Canada to Mexico and even in France, taking photos of the legendary sires of the dominant beef breeds. Her experience covered the spectrum: from the days when a photographer shot down on an animal to make it appear "deep," to the days when you had to get low to give the animal "altitude."

All of the major breed journals used Sirratt cover photos and her client list read like a "who's who" of the purebred business.

The key to it all was the eye behind the viewfinder.

"I always felt like there was something more than making sure that all four feet were in the right place," she explains. "I really felt it was a lot like shooting photos of people. You can have everything in the proper place, but if the expression isn't there, it isn't a good picture. Cattle have expressions, too. You're after a certain look that's more than just alertness. It's that special something that sets that animal apart from the rest."

Of course there wasn't always time to be as creative as she would have liked. She admits feeling stifled sometimes when sale catalog cattle were lined up as far as the eye could see. But there was always another assignment waiting, one which would allow her to really put her photographic abilities to the test.

"The jobs I liked best were the ones that gave me the freedom to try some-

thing different," she recalls. "Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, but that was what I really loved. I liked them all, really, because no two jobs were ever the same. Maybe it was the cattle; maybe it was the people; maybe it was the conditions. There was something different about each of them and I appreciated that. Not very many people have the opportunity to do the same thing for 28 years and have every day different from the one before."

Sirratt says she never passed judgment on the cattle she shot. Though she's spent countless hours with the best cattle in the world, she insists she really doesn't know much about cattle in the same sense that their breeders do.

"I just know when one looks good," she says.

Knowing when one looked good was more than good enough to attract more business than she could handle at times. Each new animal, however, offered a new challenge and a new opportunity.

"If I was shooting a famous bull, for instance, I'd shoot from all angles and I'd keep shooting," she says. "Even after I thought I had some very good shots I'd just keep shooting and trying for something better. I always felt that it was fairly easy to do a decent job, but to come up with something that was really good meant working harder."

Of course, there were the occasional uncooperative animals and even a few times when she wondered whether she'd make it back over the fence in time. Nonetheless, Sirratt loved the cattle and the people.

The walls of her workroom attest to that fact. They are lined with the cover photos she's taken, as well as pictures of the industry titans she became friends with. She's quick to point out, however, that her friends and customers weren't just the big name operators.

"They represented a wide range of the business," she explains. "I enjoyed working for all of them because all of us had something in common — we all loved cattle."

Although her career has changed, Vivian Sirratt hasn't changed the way she feels about the purebred beef industry and its people. She enjoys the new challenges which face her and she appreciates having more time for other interests. Taking photos of outstanding cattle under clear blue skies, however, is something she misses.

It's safe to say that many of the purebred cattle breeders across the country miss her, too.