

An Honest Angus Living

by Janet Mayer

Near the small rural town of Dover, Pa., nestled among gently rolling hills, is the 210-acre farm of Walter and Nellie Laird. The Lairds, who breed registered Angus cattle, are the fourth generation of the family to occupy and farm this land. A Pennsylvania style bank-barn and several outbuildings stand near the neat two-story white farmhouse built by Walter's family in 1899.

The kitchen of the old farmhouse has a special charm that comes from years of use. Its atmosphere is one of cozy warmth, partly from the woodburner on the adjoining closed-in porch, but also from the hospitable couple.

"I was born in the bedroom right upstairs," Walter says with a flourish of a work-hardened hand, to indicate the direction of the room. I have never lived anywhere else during my 63 years. My family have always been farmers; I guess it gets in your blood.

"We are getting retirement age, so we have started to cut back on our number of cattle during the last year. Even though we have less cattle to care for, the work stays about the same since we still have the same acreage of hay. Right now we have a 'for sale' sign out front. I think once we sell off some of the land, things will be easier. I guess you might say that we are semi-retired at this point. We would like to travel and see some of the country, which has been out of the question until now. I just hope we haven't waited too long."

The fact that the Lairds are of retirement age would probably surprise most; their physical appearance disputes that they have waited too long. Both are spry of step and lean of body. Their many years of hard work have obviously agreed with them, keeping them both in physical condition that could be envied by many people half their age.

The Lairds differ from most small breeders in the fact that they derive their entire livelihood from their farm and a herd of Angus cattle. The herd has never numbered more than 100 brood cows. In addition to the cattle, they also sell hay and firewood. For a short period of time, early in their marriage, Walter says he worked part-time doing odd jobs to help make ends meet. He soon found that he



Making a living from a small herd of Angus cattle takes good management and efficient cows, according to Walter Laird.

would have to devote his full attention to his farm if he intended to succeed. Other than that one period of time, neither has been employed away from the farm.

On the other hand, they have never hired any help for their farm because they substitute their own labor for money. "That's how we have gotten along,"

Walter says. "Over the years, as we made money and could see our way clear, we would buy land or cattle. I guess that's why we never had a lot of spending money. We don't live fancy, but we live well and this life suits her and it suits me."

Nellie was born and reared on a farm about six miles from where they now live, so she was accustomed to this type of farm work when she married Walter 38 years ago. Her youthful appearance belies the fact that she has worked side-by-side with Walter doing all types of jobs, in all kinds of weather. There isn't much Nellie can't do. When Walter broke his leg last year she had to virtually take over. Because Walter must be away from the farm hauling hay to customers and to hay markets, Nellie is often alone.

"There have been times when I wasn't here that she had to take care of calving problems alone, but she didn't call a vet

and everything turned out all right," Walter proudly says.

"I guess you just know when you have to take care of something by yourself and you do it. Of course, experience helps a lot," Nellie adds matter-of-factly.

For Nellie, working full-time on the farm has made her job as homemaker more difficult. It is apparent by the tantalizing homemade pies sitting on the kitchen counter, however, that she has somehow worked out a schedule that allows her time in the house.

"It is sometimes difficult to get my work in the house done. The house usually suffers for it, especially at haying time. But there are only the two of us, so we make out," Nellie explains in a soft voice that has a clipped, slightly German accent, common to this section of Pennsylvania. "Walter likes to eat meat and he likes to have his pie, so I try to at least take time for cooking."

Walter was one of nine children. During his childhood the farm was a Guernsey dairy operation. No other member of his family showed any interest in farming, so after the death of his father he bought the farm, which then consisted of 68 acres. He says he hated to milk and hated Guernsey cows because they had horns. Both of these factors entered into the

decision to change to a beef operation.

"I tried several breeds of cattle first and raised commercial cattle for awhile, but I wanted to get into the registered business," Walter explains. "One reason I chose the Angus breed was that they didn't have horns. I also saw that the Angus sold better at sales, had better meat and greater calving ease. I didn't want to pull calves."

The Lairds got into the purebred business in 1954. According to Walter they didn't have the money to go into the business in a big way, so they attended Angus sales in Pennsylvania and bought as cheaply as possible. "If there had been a meat buyer at some of those sales, he probably would have bought the heifers we were buying. They were all we could afford," he says.

However, he feels that doing their buying in this manner turned out to be a fortunate move for the operation.

"Everybody at that time was after the pony-type cattle. Nobody wanted the leggy cattle that were at the bottom end of the sale. This was the kind we usually ended up buying. We hit it right. Later, when the breed changed over to the taller cattle, we already had them.

Walter recalls one cow outstanding in his mind. She was an Eileenmere cow bought along with a heifer at a Bedford County sale. When he got home, his nephew was helping unload the two females. He looked at this skinny, leggy cow and wanted to know why Walter bought that old spider. "I told him to never mind, if she didn't work out I would eat her," Walter says. "Well, I am really glad I chose not to do that because her first calf was the top seller at the Pennsylvania Angus sale. I kept that old cow until she was 19 years old. She was my main cow and produced and raised many a fine calf."

Cows in the Laird herd must be able to take care of their calves, or they are culled. Walter says he also culls if a cow produces two bad calves in a row or because of age. He feels if a cow can produce a calf over half of her weight, she is making money for the operation. Two maternal lines that he favors are Prime Bate and Great Northern, but he doesn't lean too much toward any bloodline. If he



Walter and Nellie Laird work side-by-side on their Pennsylvania Angus operation.

has a breeding problem, he will usually get rid of the bull he is using.

Most of the Laird herd bulls come from within the herd. When the herd numbers were up, Walter says they maintained two herd bulls and used AI. on 30 to 35 percent of the cows. With today's smaller herd of 34 brood cows, they have one bull and still use the AI. program they have followed since they started in the 1960s.

"We don't have a lot of time to watch the cows," he says, "so our practice is to use artificial insemination once. If we miss, we turn the cow out with the herd bull."

Walter makes most of the breeding decisions. "My main objective is to breed for meat, so I try to use the right bull to achieve this," he says. "I think a lot of the fast growing bulls today have small ribeyes. This is something the industry needs to watch, because, after all, the ribeye is the choicest part of the animal. I may be an oddball, but I feel EPDs just don't always hold up. I use them mainly as guidelines on calving ease, because I don't want any calves weighing over 100 pounds. I feel it is more important to grow a calf after it is born, than before."

The Lairds supplement first-calf heifers that calve at two years of age with protein and sometimes grain, but feed old hay to the cows over the winter. "They really look rough in the spring, but we get a whole lot of live calves during our calving season in March and April," Walter says.

The Lairds are members of the South Central Cattlemen's Association of Pennsylvania. This association holds a yearly state-graded sale at York, through which the main calf crop of steers and heifers from the Laird herd are sold. Walter says they can make more money on steer calves than they can on bulls, and it's not as much work. Other heifers are registered and sold for 4-H projects or

to neighbors starting in the cattle business. Many are sold to repeat buyers.

"I always figured we were too little to advertise, so most of our customers get knowledge of our cattle by word of mouth," he says.

The Lairds showed cattle at eastern shows, such as the Keystone International, the Eastern National and at the local fair. They got good exposure, which helped with sales.

"A lot of people starting in the business have bought from us over the years. It makes me feel good to think how many people have started their business from our cattle," Walter says.

The couple have always participated in state cattle activities. Walter has served as president and as a member of the board of directors of the Pennsylvania Angus Association; Nellie has been active in the Pennsylvania Angus Auxiliary. They also have helped with Pennsylvania Angus sales for many years and have been 4-H Beef Club leaders.

Two memorable events for the Lairds were earning the Herdsman of the Year Award from the South Central Cattlemen's Association and being the Pennsylvania Angus Family in 1982, the first year the award was presented.

"We still have the award shanging on the wall of our living room because we were really pleased to have received them," Nellie says.

The Lairds are looking forward to semi-retirement. "I don't think we will ever completely get out of the cattle business because we just like it too much," Walter says. "We could probably have made more money by feeding steers or some other way. I don't care how old you get, there is just something about breeding that keeps you looking ahead. You plan what bulls to use, what kind of calves the cows will produce next spring, and how well those calves will wean off. There is always something to look forward to with cattle. We intend to keep Angus cattle here until we are 90, if we live that long."

After thinking for a moment, Nellie adds with a laugh, "Well, yes, we do enjoy working with the cattle. But as to doing it that long, well I don't know about that."

