

"this angus life"

All across Angusland, there are examples of what education and free enterprise can accomplish. Two brothers build their lives, careers, and families around a clinic and a veterinary practice, one that earns them both the good will and respect of a community and also the personal satisfaction from investing one's life in a cause of noble and lasting impact.

Folks involved in this Angus life fortify it with a special sense of commitment. . . .

Practicing what's been Preached

With survival his topic, Dr. Kenneth Liska, DVM, deadpans a kind of surprising admission for a veterinarian.

"Maybe we're backward, maybe we're behind 20 years. But . . . we don't have the herd mortgaged either."

The brothers Liska, both veterinarians, make no pretense of becoming leading-edge Angus breeders. They have a good herd, a productive herd, but it's their clinic in Wayne, in the northeast corner of Nebraska, which claims their major energy and effort. The cows are an important adjunct, however, and must stand on their own four feet.

Their owners are cost-conscious. They see and experience enough in their travels and profession to have absorbed the importance of holding expenses in line. Perhaps respect for the dollar was ingrained. Kenneth Liska remembers:

"I paid \$425 per head for six bred heifers I bought in 1973. I thought it was too much and it almost was. Now, you can say you'll wean a 600-pound calf or you'll sell a bred heifer off that cow, but by the time you take all your expenses and don't give yourself much for labor, it's a long way to the bank. Cheap feed, cheap roughage, minimal equipment, family labor, and rigid culling have been our answers to survival."



Dr. Kenneth R. Liska
Wayne, Nebraska

Dr. J.J. Liska
Wayne, Nebraska

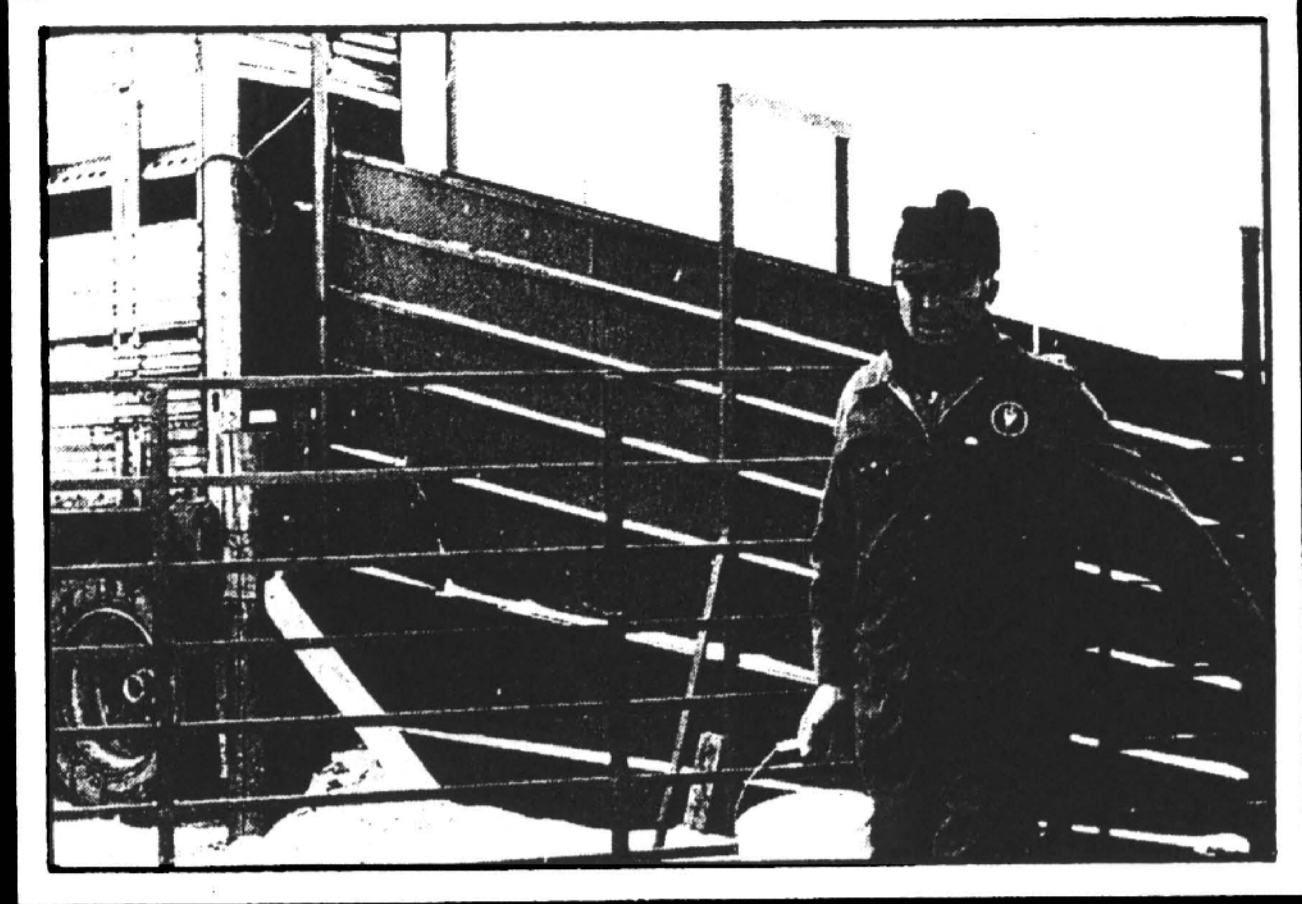


Severe contrast to that \$425 is the 50 bucks a head the senior Mr. Liska paid for his first 10 head of Angus, 1937. That herd continued as a registered unit for several years, then Mr. Liska quit registering for a period but always kept a herd of black cows. When Jay and Kenneth started their practice, they bought what was left and ran it as a commercial operation for three to four years. "In 1973, we bought our first bred registered Angus stock.

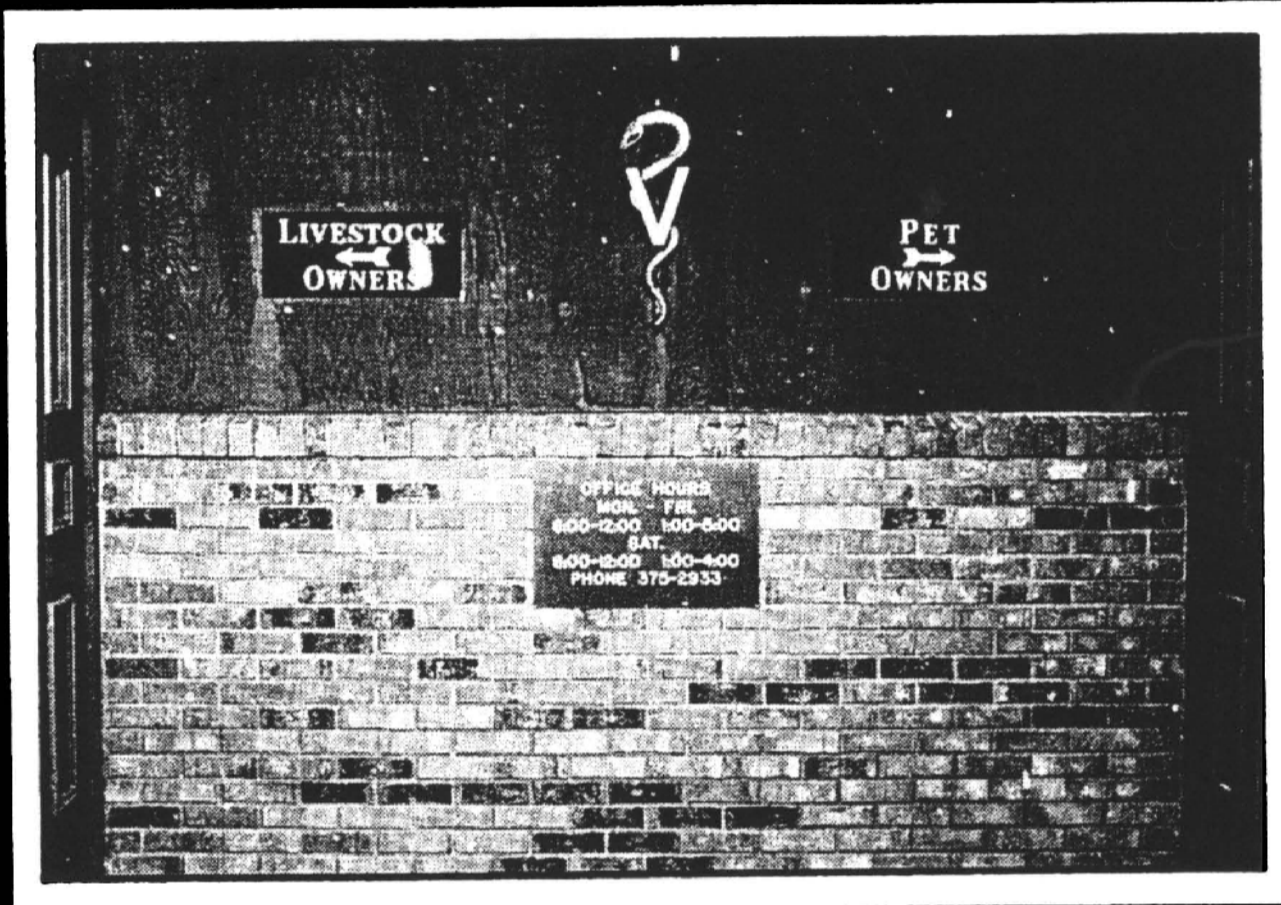
"Our dad always told us you have to walk a long time in agriculture before you run. That sounds kind of simple, but it's true. One reason we've stayed afloat is buying used equipment. We don't even have a Heat-Hauser on our tractor. We still use rusty staples

just like we learned from Granddad."

The Liskas face those universal challenges in common with everyone in the beef game. In their neighborhood they contend with surviving the depressed cattle cycle, pasture rent competing with feed grains for land, limited time, and marketing bulls effectively. If there's a capsule statement expressing their approach, Jay offers, "In general, the cattle



Dr. Kenneth Liska: "I see a trend in our practice back to the English breeds with the black baldie being predominate. The disposition is so much better and the feeder has some predictability. So does the packer. So it's a pretty merchandisable thing."



Dr. David Swerczek is part of the team at the Wayne clinic. Right or left, depending on your species.

"The syringe and needle cannot replace a bucket and broom. Husbandry and feedbunk management are essential to success in cattle. This is a long learning process, not always learned in the classroom."

business is one where you have to stick with some very basic things. You have to be clever about handling large amounts of roughage. You must avoid high fixed costs especially now. Good herdsman husbandry is vital."

While controlling costs, both men recognize there are gains to be made from exploring new techniques or time-proven practices even. "We don't want to be critical of people who have done a lot of E.T. or A.I.," says Kenneth. "Nor do we criticize those on the show circuit of who are active at a bull testing station. Those are all important tools in the beef business. The fact is we just happen to not be able to afford them in our herd, and we're getting along pretty well without such."

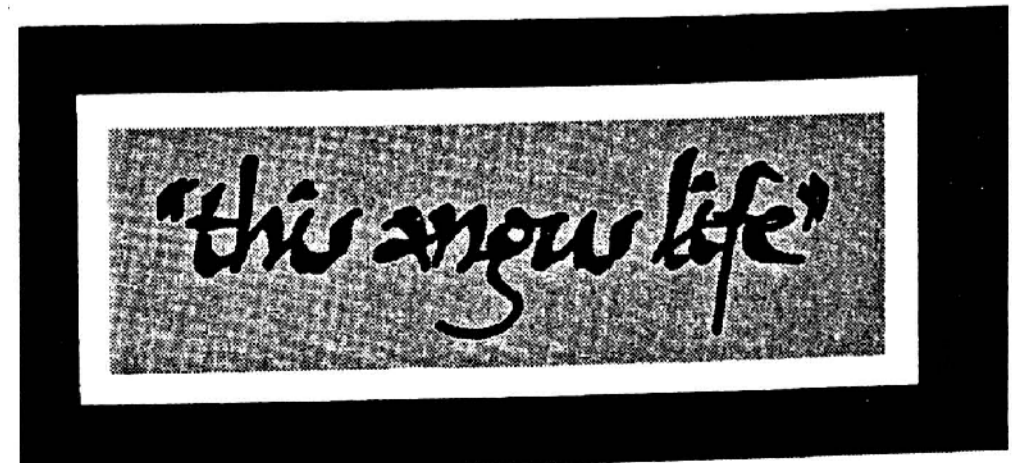
"Getting along" is predicated on wringing that herd out. Theirs is

not a demonstration herd. In fact, the family Angus herd is not highly visible. It complements the character of these two men as it assumes a modest, almost private role, an after-hours aspect of their lives they feel doesn't need a lot of public hoopla.

Nonetheless, pity the beast who fails to conceive or deliver. This is a veterinarian herd where minimum input and maximum output are expected. The Liska herd has experienced a very high rate of reproductive performance with few open cows and abortions. Reasons include a demanding cull rate, selection for high efficiency on poor roughage, low stocking rates, tight breeding seasons, and naturally, attentive herd health management. High-quality roughage is the only supplement and fed to extend whatever cheap source is available.

Two cows out of 190 were pre-tested open this fall. Thirty-two heifers showed up bred. The one that didn't was a victim of lightning and thereby excused.

Liskas turn in their bulls by the first of June when it's still cool at that latitude. The majority of the cows are bred within the first 30 days following this practice. Belly-deep grass exerts a flushing effect. It's a commercial herd in the sense of its management. Only the tattooing and registration certificates distinguish it. There's no showing.



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"Our cattle type or conformation has changed with the demands of the cattle industry as well as the trends," Kenneth says of outside influences, "but to a lesser degree. Our selection is largely based on weights, size, reproductive performance, and roughage conversion." It's natural service here, and as might be expected, no E.T. program is anticipated down the road.

"We've flushed a couple of our cows to see if we could do it." Kenneth admits to a stroke of curiosity. "Frankly, we devote most of our time to our practice and the cows come second on evenings, Sundays, holidays. We don't have time for that high intensity labor. We have the facilities to breed A.I., but we can't devote the time. I'm a firm believer in A.I., but it's more than getting a bunch of semen and sticking in the cervix of a cow. So we've been buying good bulls of high quality and have had good luck."

Perhaps it's a philosophy formed by a cow-country practice, but Kenneth isn't keen on the average seed stock producer trying to

incorporate E.T. into his or her program.

"There are a number of people that have tried it over the last 10 years that are no longer in the cattle business. So you can't tell me it's cost effective. When you drive by and see a bunch of mixed breed recipients or dairy breeds out in front of an Angus breeder's place, that doesn't pump any water with me at all," he says, recognizing the technique has a place and will be a tool of the future.

"There's the cost of trucking them around, the cost of making it work. Maybe for a Pathfinder Cow that needs to have some more calves on the ground before she's through, but I question it for the average producer. It sure doesn't fit into our game, not at all." And Dr. Jay adds he finds "very few cows around of a quality that warrant the extra intense management."

Both have observed breeds of all stripes, and the experience bolsters their concern Angus not wade off into the problems they witness with prolonged finishing in the feedlot, oversize carcasses, poor rebreeding and calving, lackluster milking ability, and questionable roughage conversion.

Pulling calves on a bitter cold night is all too often a large animal doctor's cross to bear. They respect calving ease. "It will continue to be one of the breed's most cherished qualities if

producers want it to be. With larger herds and less intense labor and husbandry, calving ease is simply essential."

Kenneth recalls graduating from veterinary college in 1969 when his father-in-law had a better calf jack than he did upon opening his practice.

"And he knew how to use it. Since he switched over to black cows, he hasn't used it for five or six years. That's a pretty positive trait, calving ease."

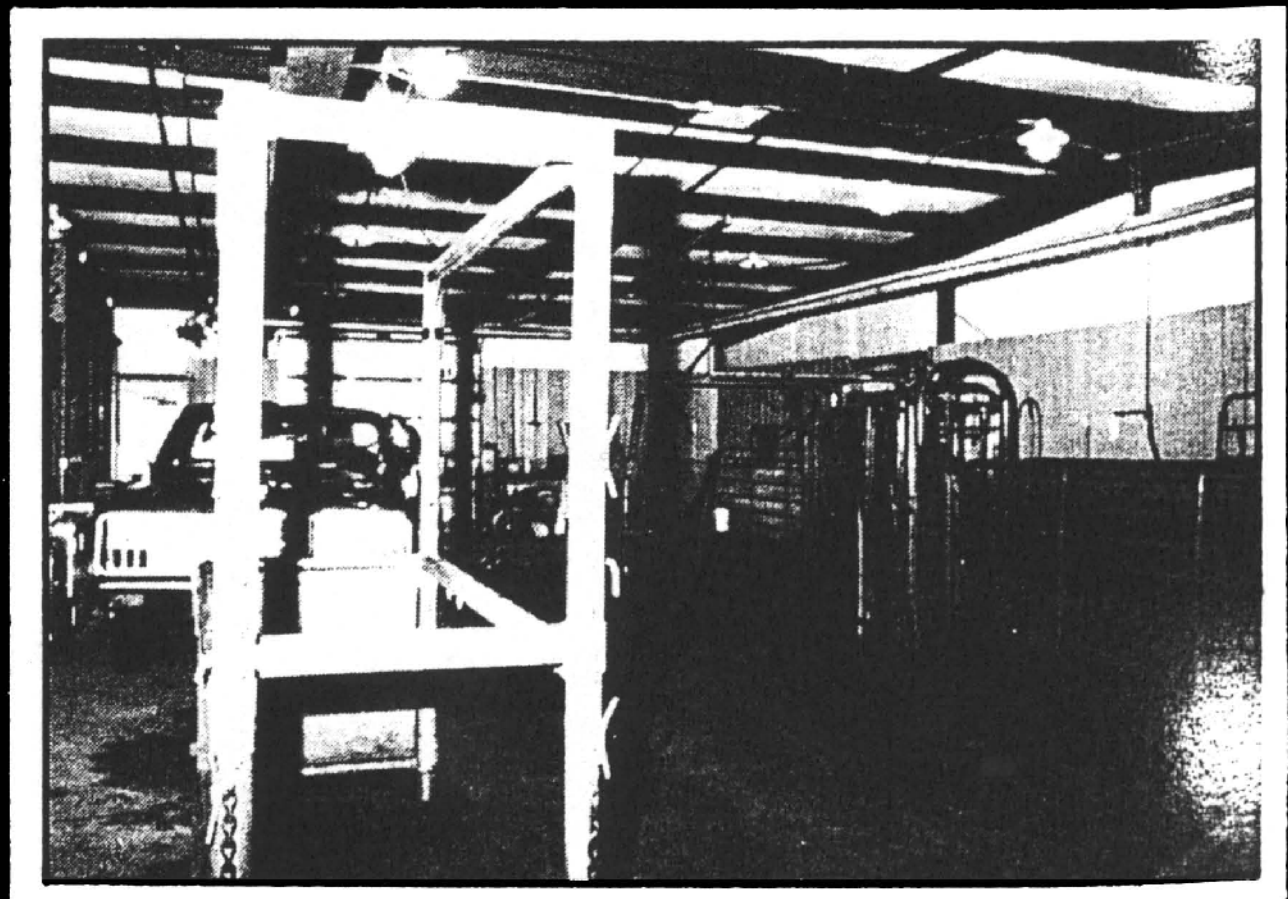
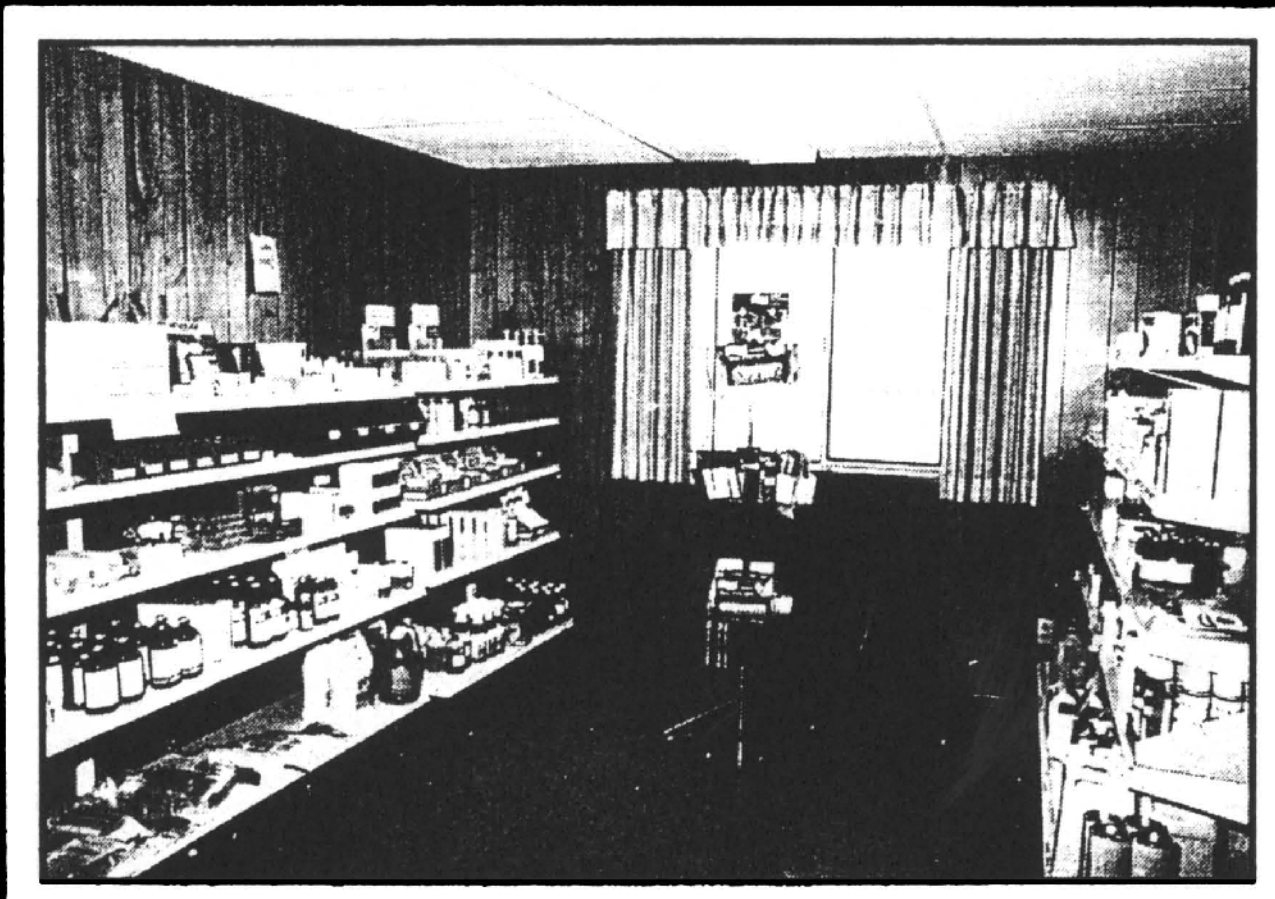
Science and industry force practitioners to stay abreast. New drugs and breakthroughs are almost a weekly item. Yet it's still cowmanship and husbandry both doctors respect.

"Husbandry is in some ways becoming a lost art," Jay notes. "Our fathers and grandfathers were masters at taking care of animals. And they often didn't have much to work with."

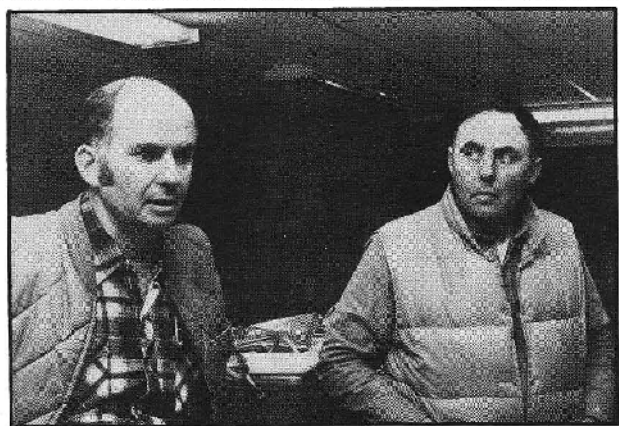
"The eye of the master fattens the ox' is so very true. We're losing that to some degree, and I'm quite concerned. It's something that's not so much a classroom experience but being around some old boy that tucks you under his wing and helps you with the do's and don'ts. Clean, dry, and warm at calving is the name of the game—"

"—Giving that critter a good home," Dr. Ken interjects.

"Right. Good nursing and colostrum, and you're a long ways down the road. If you don't follow



Facilities and pharmaceuticals reflect attention to detail and service.



"We've enjoyed the cattle as they take our mind off the day-in day-out veterinary business and we can apply what our dad taught us and what we know as veterinarians. We don't have to explain how cost effective a procedure is, we just do it."

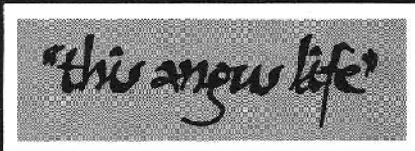
—Dr. Ken

"And we just plain like cattle. We've been brought up with cattle. They can be a financial burden, though our expenses are about as minimal as can be."

—Dr. Jay.



A vet is a kind of clothes-horse. Coveralls especially consume a large chunk of his wardrobe expense.



a few little cardinal things, you're going to have to rely on a crutch," Jay says, referring to the drug arsenal that's often used to stem a crisis.

And it's not just disease but rather other industry practices that might be fairly scrutinized. Dr. Jay suggests drugs have been used as a crutch to replace good husbandry practices.

Indiscriminate use of drugs or overkill can adulterate the food chain in their view. Overuse and abuse by untrained administrators is an industry issue.

"Many people do not realize the importance of side effects. They don't understand residues or dosages. That's where the veterinarian comes into play. We're really the only group in the world trained in veterinary pharmacology."

Yes, there is some foundation for public concern.

"Beef producers must continue to provide large quantities of pure unadulterated beef. There's too much potential for adulteration by untrained people using unapproved medicine," Dr. Ken points out, raising the possibility of

medications and pharmaceuticals eventually being limited to quite specific uses in cattle. "Some firms are voluntarily not using low level feed antibiotics. As a practicing veterinarian, I can testify bacterial resistance to some antibiotics does exist and is becoming a serious problem because routinely approved medications are not as effective as in the past."

Another area where a public forum is becoming more active and one where veterinarians will unquestionably become embroiled is animal rights and welfare. Kenneth Liska on welfare:

"We don't have to be inhumane or filthy with animals or handle them roughly or without anesthesia when needed, but I really question animal rights. I think animals have been available for domestication for mostly the production of food, and yes, for companion animals too, but mostly to feed human beings.

"And when we provide them with a good environment, good nutrition, good health care, I don't see too much wrong with that."

"We find anyone who works on

a daily basis with livestock has a keen interest in animal welfare," Dr. Jay adds. "That's as it should be."

Veterinarians aren't economists on the side or even of the armchair variety. But they do have a sensitive finger on that resounding pulse as they deal daily with the realities confronting their clients; their accounts receivable are but one gauge. Getting a better price for the product would cure a lot of woes, thinks Dr. Jay.

"We need to challenge our land grant institutions to do more in this area. For years, they've been telling us how to get another tenth of a pound gain, but we need to take a hard look at how, where we're going to distribute our products. If we don't get the products marketed, we're sunk.

"There's so much food quackery today, and we've got to speak to that. No one else is going to do it for us. I was at a poultry conference recently and those people were talking about new products—frozen deviled eggs, for one. I feel frustrated—involved with cattle to the extent we are—that

we aren't doing more. Twenty or 25 years ago, I couldn't see much of a place for beef promotion, but I've done a complete circle on that one. Now, I don't think we have any alternative.

"We can raise plenty of beef but we've got to sell it. Value-added products such as branded convenience entrees will offer that opportunity. I'd like to see something more palatable get into the fast food chains."

The Liska Angus herd consists of Eileenmere strains, some various Bardoliere, Viking, Crackerjack, and Emulous breeding. The brother team tries to look at the herd's performance on a whole herd basis. They strive for a total weaning poundage that is half the cow weight of the herd. That's overall, and including calves from first calvers, heifers, bulls—all lumped together and divided by the total weight of the cows.

The dividend should be 50 percent or better.

"We try very hard to measure that. We know the cows in our herd, and we know the ones producing good heavy calves, but we like this total herd weaning weight concept and goal. Keeping it at half the body weight is not easy to achieve.

"I want to know how many pounds of beef did we wean off those 190 cows out there. If those cows are weighing 1,100 pounds, then we should be weaning an average calf of 550 pounds. If those cows weighed 1,500 pounds, then we'd better be weaning 750 pounds or we're kidding ourselves." Again, cost-effectiveness: What does it take to get that soggy weaner? Total herd weaning weight can be a barometer of conditions for that year and cost efficiency.

It's called keeping things in perspective. Jay likens it to tools such as a new silo or tractor. "These are good tools, but you've got to be careful you don't get into a position where you can't make a profit with those things."

They've seen too many tragedies in their region, what they call emotional and financial wrecks.

"You see people out here who have worked really hard, they've managed things well, but they were just in the wrong position and



the wrong time. What's really a tragedy is seeing a lot of really good young people from good farming operations who, of necessity, are having to leave. They want to stay involved and just can't."

As their contribution to a remedy, the Liskas are leasing some of their cows to young aggressive managers who are strapped for funds. They found immediate response when they advertised and ended up spending several evenings talking with young people wanting this kind of opportunity.

As Dr. Jay explains the arrangement and objective, the time, pursuits of family members, and the required physical labor entered into the leasing concept.

"We want to maintain our cows until we see what our kids are going to do. Ken and I are starting to get a little tired. You often need a young man around cows. We're going to be limited some day in family help as the boys leave home for school."

Leasing, then, represents a new dimension, an opportunity, and certainly a transition. The younger Liskas have learned from being on the farm and working around livestock. They can start a tractor on a below-zero day, saddle a horse, and they can work with their

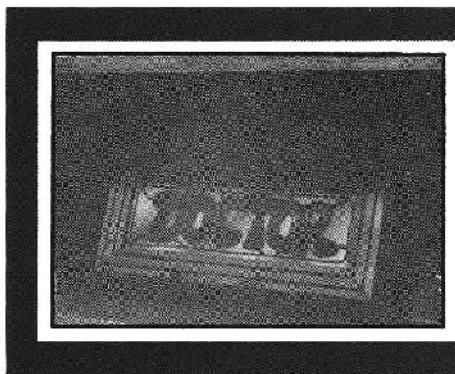
"Things will turn around. Seems like in agriculture when things look the gloomiest, something happens to start improvement, like interest rates today for example."

"But, it does look like we're going to have two levels of production. We're going to have the man with the high fixed costs in contrast to some of the younger men willing to make some sacrifices and working with machinery that's pretty modest, renting land."—Dr. Jay.

hands. They've planted trees, potatoes—"some pretty basic things, but to me they're important," Dr. Jay Liska points out.

"With a veterinary practice, there's a temptation to not spend enough time with the family. So we try to make some of those times in the evenings working around the place. My son and I might have a chance to talk about things we wouldn't otherwise.

"Angus cattle have been a part of that."



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