



Family Ties

Running a small herd on a small Iowa spread, the Schmalenbergers rely on optimum forage production, quality Angus cattle and a concerted family effort.

by Troy Smith

Steve and Nancy Schmalenberger represent the fifth generation of Steve's family to operate their Webster County, Iowa farm. Dubbed Century Acres in 1968, when the family celebrated 100 years on the land, the Schmalenberger operation is located near the community of Vincent.

This is the heart of corn and soybean country. Corn and beans grow on Schmalenberger land, but Steve and Nancy also pursue a small, successful registered Angus business.

It's very much a family endeavor with the Schmalenberger's daughters Sara and Anne playing active roles. A common

interest in raising cattle prompted the family to shift its primary emphasis to seedstock production during recent years. They haven't been sorry. Maintaining 30 head of registered brood cows on 70 acres of forage-producing ground, the Schmalenberger cattle operation is profitable. Some may wonder how they do it.

When the fertile farmland in this part of Iowa can easily cost \$2,000 per acre, how can one justify anything but row crop production? Steve Schmalenberger says it requires optimum production of forage from the limited acreage, plus optimum return from the cattle sold. He admits that a commercial cow herd might not work, but a

seedstock operation can make money.

Steve's interest in Angus cattle dates back some 35 years. He acquired his first Angus heifer as a youngster and never outgrew his love of the cow business. Steve did find a new love in Nancy, whom he met while both were attending Iowa State University. The couple married in 1970, and returned to the farm. It wasn't long before Nancy shared Steve's interest in cattle. In fact she became skilled at just about any job that needed to be done.

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The Schmalenberger daughters took an early interest in Angus cattle and have become show ring veterans. Sara started exhibiting cattle in 1987, at age 10, leading a class-winning heifer. That successful first trip to the winner's circle was a preview of many to come for Sara, now 16, and Anne, age 13. Early show ring success prompted the girls' parents to take stock and alter the course of the family operation.

"We had stressed performance testing of our cattle since 1968," says Steve, "and we could see how some show ring publicity was going to help the marketability of our seedstock. But we also saw how the Angus business was something our whole family could be involved in, together. Nancy and I really liked the idea of having the girls be active in the cattle business with us. We knew that it wouldn't last if we couldn't make it pay."

In 1990 the Schmalenberger Family redirected its emphasis toward Century Acres Angus and the production of performance seedstock. That meant they would no longer personally handle the cultivation of the farm's 1,400 row crop acres. Instead, neighboring farmers share-crop the Schmalenberger fields allowing more of the family's time to be devoted to the cattle business.

The redirection did not call for expansion of the cow herd. It did, however, call for greater emphasis on quality and a hard look at optimum use of the land. Winter feed was no problem with ample corn stalks available. To get the most from 32 acres of permanent pasture and about 38 acres of supplemental hay ground, Steve devised plans for increased production of forage.

"I can generally run a cow-calf pair per acre, on pasture," says Steve. "I try to look at total tonnage of forage produced on our pasture and hay ground combined, rather than animals per acre. Our permanent pasture is bromegrass and the hay ground is a 50:50 brome and alfalfa mixture. We shoot for annual production of five tons of forage per acre on both pasture and hay acreage. To get that kind of tonnage and still maintain nutrient quali-



Sara (left) and Anne Schmalenberger with one of their Angus heifers.

ty, we utilize a high-fertility program."

Their hay acreage receives a split application of fertilizer. Steve applies an 18-46-150 rate of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium in late April. Then, after the first cutting is taken, he'll come back with another 150 units of potassium.

That is applied as a dry granule fertilizer. On the pasture the early fertilization is applied at the rate of 80-46-150 (N-P-K). In late August or early September Steve will go back with 10 gallons of liquid nitrogen plus one pound of 2-4D per acre, applied as a spray. That will yield about 30 pounds of nitrogen per acre and good weed control.

"The total cost of fertilizing all of our forage producing ground comes to \$50 per acre. If you figure the average rental value for this area is probably around \$125 per acre, and if we are getting at least five tons harvested per acre, then I figure the cost per ton of forage (including cost of the land) is about \$35. I think that's in line with practical standards," says Steve.

Steve says he might be applying potassium at rates higher than necessary, but when using a high stocking rate, the

added potassium helps keep forage stands from thinning.

"I learned that from making mistakes," he adds. When we get thin areas, we inter-seed those spots using a planter rented from the Soil Conservation Service. And periodically we'll inter-seed the whole pasture. Using the rented equipment really helps keep the cost down."

Even with an economical program for forage production in place, the Schmalenberger Family needs to make every animal count. To realize a profit, each calf must yield a premium over the commercial market. Effective merchandising has helped the family achieve that goal.

"Merchandising is a family project for us," says Nancy. "Having our girls show the cattle has provided valuable exposure to our program and it has provided the girls with experience that they might not gain any other way. But, we don't breed cattle for the show ring."

Nancy and Steve admit they once tried to breed cattle that would be show winners. They found they could do it but the results were detrimental to their own cow herd.

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on the basis of frame size and the cattle did well in the show ring," Nancy says. "The cattle weren't useful in the long run, though. They weren't the 'total package' animal that the industry wanted, so we learned early that we had to back away from frame and go back to performance. Growth is our first selection criteria, when that growth is displayed as muscle. But even with adequate growth, the cattle aren't useful unless they are fertile."

Working toward filling the needs of commercial cow-calf producers, Schmalenbergers prefer a brood cow with large capacity but moderate frame size. They expect above average milk production and good disposition in a "keeper." In their attempt to marry respectable performance with show ring acceptability, they realize that a show-topping heifer that won't raise a calf is of little use to anyone.

Century Acres Angus cattle have been shown successfully in local, state and national competition. Sara and Anne frequent the county and state fair 4-H contests and are active participants in Angus

junior shows — from the state level on up to the National Junior Angus Show held each July. The Iowa Beef Expo has been a winning arena as well, with Century Acres entries claiming champion or reserve champion bull honors in four out of the last six years.

Victories like those have generated interest among buyers that include commercial as well as other Angus seedstock producers.

Schmalenbergers sell their cattle at consignment sales and at private treaty. Nearly all of their sale heifers go into other registered herds and a considerable number of bulls do, too. The family is proud their buyer list now includes a growing number of commercial cow-calf producers from Nebraska, South Dakota, Missouri and Illinois.

"The biggest drawback to show ring success is that some potential buyers fear that our cattle will be too pricey," explains Steve. "But I think most of our bulls sell for prices commercial cattlemen can afford."

Steve and Nancy Schmalenberger strive to teach their daughters the importance of family values and support for one's community and industry. In addition to a myriad of local obligations, Nancy has been active in the Iowa Cattlewomen as well as in the awards program that recognizes achievement among Iowa Junior Angus Association members. Steve has served as president of the county cattlemen's group, Iowa Angus Association president, and as a member of the Iowa Beef Breeds Council. Sara and Anne are active in the Iowa Junior Angus Association; Sara currently serves as director and secretary.

"Steve and I believe in old-fashioned values," says Nancy. "Our Angus business and related activities have helped bring us closer together as a family. It's been a way to get our daughters involved in the family farm. We feel it's our responsibility to instill, in our kids, a desire to preserve the family farm and this way of life."

