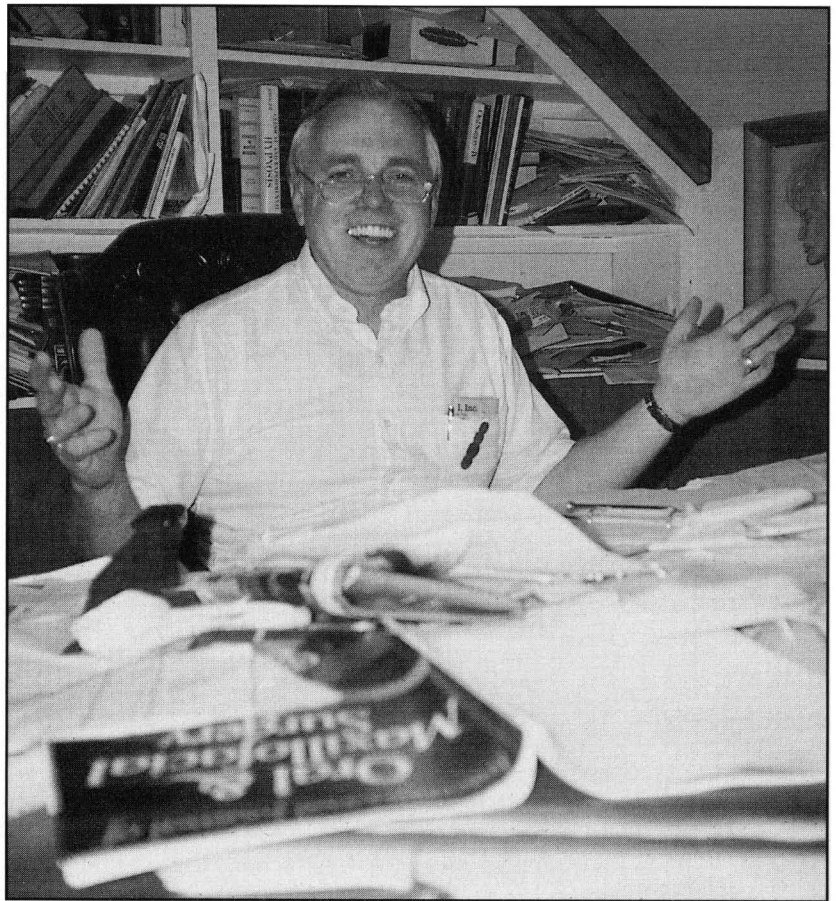


Battle for Beef

Raising Angus cattle on the famous Mason-Dixon line has been a challenge for the Rocky Forge Farm.

by Janet Mayer



Dr. Joseph Wiesenbaugh Jr. is a marketer as well as an Angus breeder.

"A maverick" is the term some cattlemen have used to describe Dr. Joseph Wiesenbaugh Jr. He simply describes himself as an individual who is trying to run a successful beef operation.

Wiesenbaugh and his wife, Kathleen, are the owners of Rocky Forge Farm in Maryland. The geographic location of the farm has created problems for the Wiesenbaughs which have forced them to speak up for what they believe is rightfully theirs, and also to be innovative in their marketing methods.

The fact that Rocky Forge Farm is geographically located in two states may not be all that unusual, but the fact it is separated only by the invisible Mason-Dixon line is somewhat unusual. The Rocky Forge Angus cattle are out on pasture behind the barn in Maryland, while only several feet away, their herdmates are grazing in Pennsylvania.

Two-thirds of the 147-acre main farm, plus the residence where the Wiesenbaughs and their four children reside, is in the state of Maryland. The remainder is in Pennsylvania, making the Wiesenbaughs taxpayers in both states. An additional 325-acre farm, which is part of the Rocky Forge operation, is located in Maryland about a mile from the main farm.

The Wiesenbaughs have found that

straddling the state line puts them in the position of being considered outsiders by both states. They have had some uphill battles to participate as a resident at the Pennsylvania Farm Show and at the Pennsylvania Bull Test. Even though they pay taxes in the state of Pennsylvania, the state didn't recognize them as residents because their actual home is over the state line in Maryland.

Wiesenbaugh explains, "we had a hard time getting into the Pennsylvania show when we first tried, but we pay Pennsylvania taxes, and our cattle walk in Pennsylvania every day."

After a great deal of letter writing and phone calls, they achieved their goal and have since been frequent winners at the Pennsylvania show. In fact, Rocky Forge Farm was named Premier Angus Breeder at the 1987 Pennsylvania State Farm Show and Premier Exhibitor of Angus cattle at the 1989 Pennsylvania State Fair Show. They were also named Premier Breeder at the 1984 and 1986 Maryland Breeders Show.

Another obstacle the Wiesenbaughs have had to overcome is the fact the farm is located in the middle of dairy country, which doesn't give Rocky Forge much of a market niche for their Angus cattle. Trying to advertise their cattle and get buyers out to the farm was very difficult,

so they had to devise a better marketing method.

Using their geographic locale as a positive marketing aspect, they conceived the idea of the Great Mason/Dixon Sale. On November 5, 1989, the 5th Great Mason/Dixon Sale will be held at the farm.

According to Wiesenbaugh, the interest in the sale increases each year. Last year it was one of the better attended Angus sales in the United States with more than 350 people attending. Selling at the event are some of Rocky Forge's finest Angus cattle, with cattle consigned by Royal Angus, Genetics Unlimited, Pennsylvania State University, Twin Oaks, Stonylonesome Farm, Frey Angus, Fox Hill and several other Angus breeders.

Measuring the past sale averages also shows the sale's monetary success. The first sale average was in the \$1,100 bracket; last year the sale average was \$1,754. Wiesenbaugh attributes much of the sale's success to the fact that Rocky Forge stands behind the animals they sell.

"The cattle are everything they are represented to be, and I feel this is the reason people return year after year," he says.

Rocky Forge tries to be diversified in



Rocky Forge Farm's R&J Austin cow with Rolls Royce calf.

its operation. Not only do they sell seedstock through their sale, but also 4-H club calves. The steers are preferred by many 4-H members and have provided the young people with numerous top awards in 4-H market steer competitions.

Tom Burke, the sale's manager, says the Mason/Dixon was possibly the best Angus steer sale in the country in 1988. The top-selling club calf brought \$1,275.

Rocky Forge also participates in the bull evaluations at Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Culpeper, Va. They had the high-indexing bull at Culpeper twice, and this year they have bulls entered in West Virginia and Culpeper.

Another sector of their operation which has proved to be successful is direct marketing of finished beef. According to Wiesenbaugh, they have a waiting list of buyers wanting Rocky Forge Angus beef.

The whole animal is sold to an individual, then it is shipped to a local packer where it is slaughtered, cut and wrapped to the customer's specifications. Steers are finished at 16 months of age, weighing in the 1,150- to 1,200-pound range.

An automatic feeding system is employed to make sure the animals are fed correct rations at regular intervals. Minerals are available free choice to all animals on the farm. No growth stimulants or antibiotic feeds are used. The animals are weighed regularly to keep record of their gain and condition.

Wiesenbaugh doesn't think the Angus of today are too big, but he is glad to see the trend toward thicker cattle. "I just

hope everyone remembers that the thickness has to be attributed to red meat and not fat," he says, "because if we go back to prime beef, as many of the old breeders would like, we will kill the Angus business. The American public doesn't need fat meat, and they don't want it."

Wiesenbaugh has always strived to produce the best Angus cattle available. He does this by keeping his operation efficient while combining good breeding practices with careful genetic planning. He readily admits that things haven't always gone the way he would have liked in his breeding program.

"When I began I was searching for the right bloodlines, as is every new breeder," he says. "I started with a lot of President cattle which resulted in very small cows. Tim Scholfield from North American Breeders came to the farm and looked at my herd of cows and burst out laughing. Had I been in business 20 years earlier, I would have been on top. These cows were healthy and produced a good calf every year, but they just weren't what they should have been."

Wiesenbaugh says the list of bulls he shouldn't have used is probably longer than the list of correct bulls. The bull he feels has had the most positive effect on the Angus breed is Pine Drive Big Sky.

"He did more good for our herd than any other sire, especially on the cattle with Wye pedigrees," he says. "Our success in the show ring has been directly related to him. We were late using the bull, but then we used him quite heavily for about three years. I am again thinking of using him on some of my cows."

Above all, a breeder needs to study pedigrees and also the market. He stresses to try to find cattle that are the most merchandisable, because ultimately they are the best cattle.

Wiesenbaugh also feels a breeder has to be cautious about becoming "herd blind." To prevent this from happening to him, he relies heavily on Regional Manager Bill Powell. He also uses the top bull listing by the American Angus Assn., and he talks to a lot of other breeders to find out what works well for them in their breeding program.

Other bulls that have played a big part in the Rocky Forge herd are Cracker Jack and Esso. Most years they use 10 to 12 different bulls on their herd in their A.I. program. Many of the 1989 calves were sired by William Henry, Solano, Dan Patch, Rolls Royce, Shocker and Casanova.

Also important to the breeding program is the quality of the clean-up bull. Wiesenbaugh believes in getting the clean-up bull in early because he wants all of his calves on the ground before the end of May.

"I feel it is better to have April or May calves from a clean-up bull than to have June or July calves from the top A.I. sires," he says. "They just thrive better. Therefore, I try to pick clean-up bulls with good pedigrees."

Another thing Wiesenbaugh feels strongly about are EPDs. "I feel EPDs are difficult to understand," he says. "They are good, but they are only a tool and sometimes I think they have grown too much in importance. You don't know about the quality of a female's udder, the animal's structure or if they are going to walk good, because EPDs don't tell you these things. I feel we already have a lot of udder problems in the Angus breed, and we have to be careful not to rely on EPDs too heavily."

Wiesenbaugh also considers AHIR a big resource. Their Angus operation has been enrolled in AHIR since 1978. "We have used it extensively as a tool, and it is a part of our program," he says.

Wiesenbaugh says they are striving for good beef-producing cattle that are not only structurally correct but also have good milk. "Above all, one of the most important aspects of a good female is the quality of her udder. If you have cows that have udders that won't hold up after four or five years, then people are going to become very unhappy with the Angus breed, especially the commercial breeder."

One line of cows Wiesenbaugh especially likes is the Blossom family. This line originated with a Churchill of Wye daughter from Black Watch, but

was originally part of the Kiwis herd. About a third of the Rocky Forge herd is related to this cow. From this family is RFF Kathys Blossom, who was Angus heifer calf champion of the 1989 Pennsylvania State Farm Show.

A part of the Rocky Forge breeding program that has not been successful is their embryo transplant (ET) program. Wiesenbaugh explains that he had some success in the show ring in 1984, but in 1985 didn't fare as well. He translated show ring success into marketing success, so decided to join the growing trend to ET and get some superior females. The Wiesenbaughs bought a group of about 40 Holsteins. They flushed a great deal, but had very little success.

"The amount of money we invested was not justified by the end results," he says. "Now we have ended up with almost 40 Holsteins, who have not calved for two or three years. They are eating our grass but producing nothing, and we are in the process of getting rid of them. We will probably still do ET, but I think we will buy the recipient already implanted."

Wiesenbaugh is trying to get the herd back to having 120 calves each year. A problem he is trying to alleviate is having 40 percent of the calf crop coming from heifers. This is due to the fact they are putting the early-calving cows through the sale. That amount of heifers calving is just too much, he says. Twenty percent is more realistic. It seems that the calving problems are always with the heifers, so they keep them at the main farm to be bred A.I. and closely watched until after they calve.

The calves at Rocky Forge are all creep fed, as Wiesenbaugh feels this gives them every opportunity to thrive. The 1988 calf crop produced 205-day average weights on bulls of 645 pounds, heifers 536.5 pounds, and steers 527 pounds. The 1989 Pennsylvania State Farm Show champion heifer, RFF Kathys Blossom, sired by William Henry, weaned at 700 pounds, and had a yearling weight of 1,140 pounds.

Wiesenbaugh takes great pride in the fact that Rocky Forge is self-sufficient in producing feed for the herd. All of the grains, hay and silage the herd eats is raised on the 462-acre farm; an additional 40 acres is rented for crops.

Crops manager Clarence Cook uses methods that have proven to be successful. His program includes keeping the proper pH level through the use of lime and the application of fertilizer for top production. A strict weed control program has been implemented for a number of years with the no-till method

of planting. Corn grows well in the region, so he takes advantage and grows silage for winter feed. When the farm was purchased, a lot of soil had been lost because of poor crop management; therefore, good crop management is of great concern.

The farm was aptly named Rocky Forge because of the many rocks in the fields which were used to construct the house and the location of a forge in close proximity. When the Wiesenbaughs purchased the farm in 1977, they found no reason to change the name.

Being something of a history buff, Wiesenbaugh became interested in the history of the farm and the region after he moved to Rocky Forge. Without a doubt, the region is definitely rich in history as many of the larger Civil War campaigns were fought nearby. The Antietam battlefield is about 10 miles away, and Gettysburg is about 25 miles east. When

Wiesenbaugh delved into the background of the farm, he found it was originally part of a land grant given to the Bell family.

In 1811, a barn was built at Rocky Forge. In 1812, Frederick Bell constructed the first section of what is now a magnificent field stone house. The original section is still intact and now houses the kitchen. At a later date, railroad stone masons who were working in the vicinity built the front portion of the house. This section has walls two feet thick.

The house contains a wonderful chimney which was constructed and signed in 1856 by John Bell, who was a nephew of the original owner. John Bell is better known as the original Shenandoah Potter, and according to Wiesenbaugh, "Shenandoah pottery is very valuable today, and if someone owns such a piece, they are lucky indeed."

Wiesenbaughs bought the farm mainly for the superb old house, but after living there awhile, they decided they would like to raise a few cattle. Neither had a farm background. Joe, an oral maxifacial surgeon, was from Philadelphia, and his wife, Kathy, was from Baltimore. They chose the Angus breed because the local meat packer told them they would get paid more for Angus across the scale. The herd was started

with four heifers purchased from a farm nearby. Until 1980, the Wiesenbaughs took total care of the herd, at that time they hired their first herdsman.

The Wiesenbaughs purchased the second farm in 1983. Here is where most of the 120 head of Angus cattle are pastured on the picturesque rolling green hills, which are divided by sections of very old grey stone fence. This farm also is the home of Rocky Forge manager Jon Schliebe and his family who live in another grand stone house dated at 1929.

Jon, a native of Oregon, came to the farm about four months ago. He was formerly employed at North American West Breeding Service, Kansas City, Mo. He has an extensive background in working with cattle. Prior to his employment at North American West, he worked in both Simmental and Polled Hereford operations.

Another recent addition to the Rocky



A productive Pine Drive daughter.

Forge staff is herdsman Darrin Mayer. Darrin, a native of Pennsylvania, is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University. He has a broad background with both dairy and beef cattle.

Wiesenbaugh is optimistic about the future of his operation. "Our optimum goal is to see the farm consistently operate in black ink," he says. "I think one dream every Angus breeder has is to produce a national champion bull that is accepted and respected by the breed in general. I think it would be great fun.

"I would also like to see every buyer that buys Rocky Forge cattle happy. This is an integrity business. I deal honestly and fairly with people every day, it was my dad's way and it's the way I live my life. Our pedigrees are honest, our dates of birth are accurate. When we give people honest value and represent the cattle to the best of our knowledge, they will come back."