

Nissley Bros. Feedlot:

Not Your Typical Pennsylvania Farm

Darwin and Bernard Nissley's 800-head feedlot thrives in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

by Sarah Hill, projects editor



It's not often that you see a farm with seven generations behind it, but Nissley Bros. Farm, Mount Joy, Pa., is one of those rare few. Operated today by brothers Darwin and Bernard Nissley, the land was purchased in 1795.

"Our dad built the feedlot in 1967 for 250 cattle," Darwin says. He and Bernard tore down an outbuilding and remodeled the existing bank barn and expanded the operation's capacity to 375 head in 1990.

Today, the Nissleys operate a successful feedlot on 177 owned and 273 rented acres, a

partnership that started in 1983.

The operation includes a bank barn with a roof, two feedbunks, a silo and a manure pit — a typical setup for a Pennsylvania farm. The entire feedlot accommodates 800 head and hosts tours through the Pennsylvania Beef Council and their local extension agent.

Considering they've worked together for more than 30 years, Darwin and Bernard still



get along very well. They say they've had their disagreements, but, for the most part, working together has been successful.

One of the first things the brothers did was contour their farm and eliminate the big fields that had rows running

up and down the hills. The result is less water runoff, and any runoff from the feedlot is contained.

"We have to be careful of runoff since we have a creek that runs through our land," Darwin says. They also use no-till farming practices to hold water and preserve the soil.

"More can go wrong with no-till," Bernard adds. "It requires more management — no rock picking, less wear on equipment and less stress. Planters today can handle no-till conditions better than they could before."

In 1997, the brothers built a slatted-floor barn with fans and a manure pit underneath to house 500 head of cattle. Rubber was installed on top of the slatted floors to

► **Above:** The Nissleys started their partnership in 1983 and operate on 177 owned and 273 rented acres of contoured farmland.

► **Left:** Darwin and Bernard Nissley, Mount Joy, Pa., feed out 800 yearlings on land that has been in their family since 1795.



prevent foot issues and provide cushioning.

The Nissley brothers compared cattle that were on the rubber floors to cattle that weren't housed on rubber and found that the cattle that were on the rubber floors had better feed conversion. This finding spurred them to install rubber flooring in the entire barn.

"We've virtually eliminated foot problems and knots on the cattle's knees," says Bernard.

Darwin states that the operation is at its maximum capacity and cannot expand more due to their land base.

Approach to finishing cattle

Yearlings weigh 850 lb.-900 lb. on average upon arriving from backgrounders in Virginia and West Virginia, an approach that minimizes stress and sickness, Darwin says.

"We let them rest a day before we start processing, depending on the weather," Darwin adds.

Processing includes implanting, vaccinating, eartagging, using a pour-on dewormer for flies and lice control, and cutting calves' switches. The brothers do all the work themselves.

Unconventional feeding

The Nissleys do grow some of their own feed, but also feed byproducts in a high-energy ration. They work closely with their nutritionist, Adam Zurin, to integrate byproducts including potato chips, wet potato waste and candy meal. In the past, they have fed cereal, Pop-Tart® filling, bagel chips, couscous, whole potatoes, sunflower seeds and whole-kernel popcorn. The Nissleys stick to a consistent schedule, feeding at the same times every day.

"We wanted a higher-energy ration with more fat," states Darwin. "Plus, it keeps the byproducts from going in the landfill."

Zurin adds, "By keeping the ration balanced, meat quality isn't affected at all."

The brothers switched to unconventional feed choices in the early 1990s because they wanted to reduce corn in their ration and make their ration less expensive. The brothers source the byproducts from local food processors through a broker by the truckload. The broker is also responsible for blending the candy meal for a consistent product.

"The broker knows what we want," explains Darwin.

Using byproducts has its challenges, though, such as the wet potato waste having a shortened shelf life.

"If you don't have the capacity to feed them fast, they will go bad," Darwin says.



►The operation is Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)-certified, and the Nissley brothers have won a state award for BQA in addition to hosting BQA training sessions.

Beef Quality Assurance focus

The Nissleys work to eliminate as much stress as possible for their cattle by providing fresh, clean water and bedding and free-choice hay upon arrival. Any animal that doesn't look normal or limps is immediately provided care.

The operation is Beef Quality Assurance (BQA)-certified, and the Nissley brothers have won a state award for BQA in addition to hosting BQA training sessions.

"We use a sorting stick with a flag for moving, sorting and loading cattle," Bernard adds. "We very rarely use a hot shot."

The brothers use the Hi-Plains recordkeeping software system to track all of their operation's data. They also created their

own eartag notching system as a visual reminder to check withdrawal dates during final processing.

Yearlings stay at Nissley Bros. feedlot for 120-140 days until they reach 1,325 lb.-1,350 lb. Nearly all of the cattle are sent to either a JBS packing facility in Souderton, Pa., or a local Cargill plant. Some cattle are sold in a local livestock market.

"Pennsylvania has two major processors and a lot of small ones," Darwin adds. "If we had to truck the cattle over a very long distance to a packer, we wouldn't be feeding cattle."

Do something you love

The brothers agree that they always wanted to farm.

"We like the independence of the cattle business," Darwin says.

"We're too stubborn to do anything else," Bernard adds with a laugh.

It remains to be seen whether the next generation will carry on the Nissley Bros. Feedlot. Darwin has two sons, while Bernard's 14-year-old son, Justin, shows interest in agriculture. Bernard acknowledges that there are several years before the handoff to the next generation, and a lot can change by then.

"If the next generation wanted to do it, I'd encourage them to do so, if they enjoy the challenge and love agriculture," Bernard says.

"I'd like to see it go to the next generation," Darwin adds, "but I don't know if livestock will still be profitable by then. There are always markets for crops, but I'm not sure about the beef market."

Challenging circumstances

The regulations around the Chesapeake Bay are a significant wild card for the future.

"They're a big challenge for us," Darwin adds. Another challenge is the area's heavy population.

"We get a lot of pressure from the outside," Darwin says. "We get a lot of people moving in."

"You go to move equipment on the road and people don't get it," Bernard says.

"We're fortunate because there's a lot of agricultural infrastructure very close to us," Darwin says, crediting Lancaster County's strong agricultural heritage.

The brothers say that the veterinary feed directive (VFD) will affect their operation.

"If cattle have been traveling in bad weather, we treat them with a broad-spectrum antibiotic when they arrive to help prevent sickness," Darwin says. "We don't like to give antibiotics, since it makes things more expensive, but having to get that through a veterinarian is just another cost that we can't recoup. More regulations typically hurt smaller operations."

"We like the independence of the cattle business."
— Darwin Nissley

Not Your Typical Pennsylvania Farm CONTINUED FROM PAGE 263

Another challenge for the Nissleys is that local veterinarians have more expertise in dairy than beef.

Love for agriculture

“We had one of the best years ever a few years ago, but it was followed by the worst year we’d ever had,” says Darwin. “It’s challenging. The markets move so much more quickly today.”

Both brothers have been active in the Pennsylvania Beef Council. Bernard is a

former chairman, serving on the council for six years. Darwin currently serves on the board as vice chairman, and will soon be moving into the chairman role. Darwin also serves as the Pennsylvania director and is a member of the Consumer Trust Committee for the Federation for State Beef Councils, the organization that represents the 45 Qualified State Beef Councils that collect the \$1 per-head beef checkoff under the Beef Promotion and Research Act and Order.

“If given the opportunity to serve on their

state beef council, every beef producer should take advantage of this opportunity to serve. One advantage of serving on the board is gaining knowledge and understanding of the beef checkoff,” Bernard says. Darwin agrees.

“The amount of people giving time to work for our industry helps the industry grow,” he adds. “There’s a lot going on on the national level benefiting every beef producer.”

