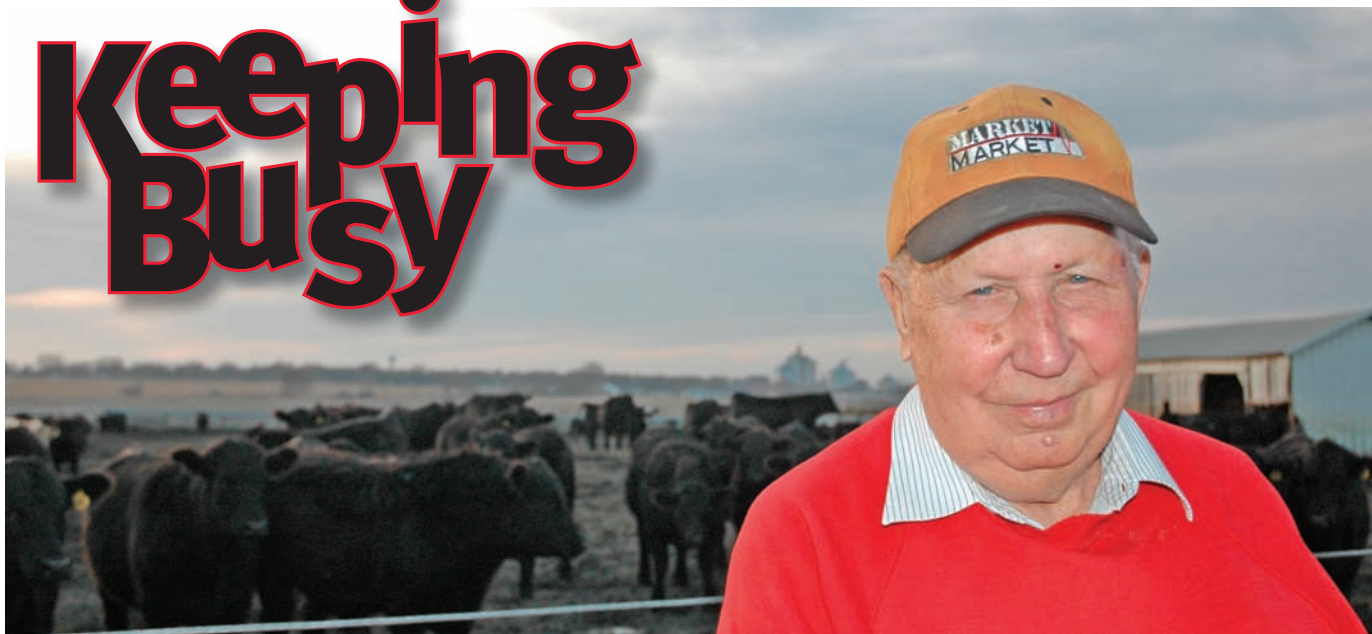


Keeping Busy



One producer continues his century-long cattle education.

Story & photos by **Miranda Reiman**

In a brick red, wooden, ranch-style house on the corner of Fifth and Fairlane in Ida Grove, Iowa, lives a man who knows a great deal about agriculture in the early 20th century. The one-time farm manager and retired ag lender lived it.

Hugh Septer's house, blanketed inside with shag carpet and dated furniture, is adorned with family pictures: The wife who has been gone for nine years. A son, now a doctor in Mason City, Iowa, with his family. A daughter who lost her battle with cancer nearly 20 years ago.

In the middle of one collage is a timeless black-and-white moment that Septer fondly recalls. A neatly groomed, short-legged Hereford steer stands with its showman. The year was 1929, and Septer took reserve grand champion at the Iowa State Fair and reserve grand champion at the Ak-Sar-Ben Livestock Show.

"I sold him in Omaha, and he brought 30¢ a pound," Septer says. "That was twice what the market was."

Now 96, Septer has three times as many years of experience as the young men who finish out hundreds of his cattle each year.

"People tell me I don't look like I'm 96," he says. "I hope I don't look like I'm 96, and sure hope I don't act like it. I don't feel like I'm 96."

The old days

Septer was born near Cumberland, in central Iowa. His earliest recollections of the beef industry were on his parents' crop and livestock farm.

"Back when I was a kid, we didn't have

trucks that would amount to anything," he says, telling of his dad and a couple neighbors driving cattle nine miles to town. "They always shipped them on the railroad to Chicago."

Septer followed the herd for the first couple of miles. Once the cattle settled down, he had to turn back to do chores at the home place.

There lived his parents and three sisters, one older and two younger than himself. His mother was a rare farmwife for the area, having had two years of college education.

"I went to country school in a one-room school house," he says. Passing the eighth grade exams, he began traveling that nine-mile road to town, graduating from high school in 1929. "My mother didn't push that we went to college, but we knew she expected us to," says Septer, who started at Iowa State University (ISU) during the winter term.

"I came back to farm in the spring and then the Depression hit," he says. "I didn't go back for five years."

When he was finally able to return, the animal husbandry major found success on the judging team.

"I took first in a horse contest and fifth in beef," Septer says. "I got the eye that everybody got on the judging team."

That and a strong work ethic landed him a job with his judging team coach, who also owned a purebred livestock farm near Ames, Iowa.

"He offered me a job to run the farm, and that's what I wanted to do: farm," Septer says. Not everyone thought it was the perfect fit. "I had a college degree and here I was going to run this farm."

Three years into his dream job, Septer fell in love with schoolteacher Evelyn, a 60-year romance still recalled in those photographs. But then Septer was called up to the Army and service in World War II. Working in the medical and veterinary detachments, he was eventually sent overseas to meet up with his newly assigned infantry division, Patton's Third Army.

"We got six weeks of training with weapons," he says. "When we got there we spent a week catching up to our group."

After a tour through Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Russia, the soldier was eager to return home — especially to Evelyn, who he married while he was serving stateside a year and a half earlier.

Septer worked for 17 years for Farmer's National Co., a farm management firm, before being hired by the Ida County State Bank. As an agricultural lender, he traveled to many cattle sales and always fed some cattle himself.

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"I would take a bunch of people with [me]. People who needed help buying calves, I'd try to help them," Septer says. "I brought a lot of new customers to the bank."

He worked there until he was 75. "So I retired, and that's been more than 20 years ago," Septer says. "I want something to do. I don't want to sit around and do nothing."

More than a hobby

The veteran producer may be buying cattle to keep busy, but it's much more than a hobby to him. Septer goes to the sales and tries to find cattle "with the right genetics." He still gets in the pen and sorts the market-ready cattle, and he has recently become interested in selling on a grid.

Members of the Raasch family, of Odebolt, Iowa, have fed Septer's cattle for 10 years, but they have known Septer virtually their entire lives.

"I was a 4-H kid raising purebred Hampshire pigs when I was 10 years old," says Curt Raasch, patriarch of the family-owned Raasch Beef Inc. "He came to our farm to purchase purebred pigs. That's how I got to know Hugh, when I was a 4-Her trying to market seedstock.

"I think all of us go through life to be mentors, or people to learn from," Raasch says. "We've found a real gem here in Hugh. He sets an example. He doesn't talk about doing it. He does it."

Raasch's sons, Scott and Greg, now run

the feedyard and work very closely with Septer.

"As a father, it really means a lot to me that Hugh has the confidence in these young people and what they're doing," Raasch says. "That's how we're going to make this transition in agriculture."

Septer has seen many generational transitions, of course. He calls his parents "progressive," and that seems to have been handed down.

"He has always had a thirst for knowledge and education that is absolutely remarkable," Raasch says. "He's figured out how to thrive in a very competitive beef finishing environment."

