

Work on shortcomings

# Wengers praise Brown Swiss' good points

BY SALLY BAIR  
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MANHEIM — "We are happy with them. They're a nice cow to work with," says Richard Wenger, R2 Manheim, of his herd of Brown Swiss cows, one of just three in Lancaster County.

Wenger has had solely Brown Swiss for just four years, having begun twelve years ago to work toward that goal. He says proudly, "We feel rather good about our herd. We started from scratch, and don't have a bought cow in the herd now."

Of course, he did purchase two Brown Swiss to get started, and had to purchase an occasional cow over the years, but he says, "We never bought top-notch cows, just average cows."

For two years the Wenger herd was the top Brown Swiss herd in the county, but it was edged out this year by Don Trimble's herd in southern Lancaster County. The Wengers' rolling herd average is 14,820 pounds milk and 600 pounds fat. Wenger says he hopes to make 15,000 pounds by fall.

Wenger grew up in a family which owned a mixed herd of cows, and he carried on the tradition until he learned that a Manheim dairy wanted milk from colored cows. To qualify, he purchased his Brown Swiss, never giving much thought to other colored breeds, although his herd had some Guernseys.

Wenger recalls, "We started getting more Brown Swiss and we liked them. Other colored breeds don't have the milk production."

Some of the things he likes about Brown Swiss includes their high butterfat test for which he gets paid a differential of 17 cents a point over 3.5. By the same token he gets docked for going under 3.5, but that is not a problem. He ships to Wengert's Dairy in Lebanon County.

Wenger adds, "Brown Swiss are much harder than other colored breeds. They milk similar to Holsteins, although they don't give quite the milk some Holsteins do."

"They are tamer. When we had both in the herds I liked the Brown Swiss better," he adds.

His son Donald, with whom he operates the farm, also is pleased with the Brown Swiss. He says candidly, "I was never around many others but Brown Swiss are 90 percent tamer than Holsteins. They are usually easier to work with."

One disadvantage is that Brown Swiss are slower to mature, but Richard points out that is one area the breed is working to improve and it is meeting with success.

Longevity is one of the Brown Swiss traits the Wengers like. Richard says, "It is the nature of Brown Swiss to be slower maturing, but to last longer." Indeed, they have one cow who is 12-years old and going strong and many others getting close.

Because they mature more slowly, culling must be postponed longer than for Holsteins. Donald says, however, "If they don't produce by their third calf, we cull them."

They are culling a little more heavily now than in previous years, paying close attention to the profit picture. Richard pointed out, "A person's going to have to cull because of the market."

A plus for Brown Swiss is that they don't take as much feed as Holsteins, according to Donald.

"We feed ours about 10-12 pounds of grain per day." He said they may go as high as 15 pounds for a cow milking 90 or 100 pounds, but says they find they cannot feed them any more than that.

The Wengers presently have about 65 head in their milking herd, and about 55 heifers for replacements. They farm 130 acres on the home farm and rent 100 additional acres, raising most of their own crops.

They choose their bulls for mating from a variety of studs, since no one stud seems to have a large selection. "We have no particular bull we used to build the herd," Richard points out. He adds they breed for "a good fat test, type,

size and production." He claims the image of the Brown Swiss has changed, and they are no longer the big and rugged animals they once were.

Donald says, "We have quite a few cow families, and we haven't as yet sold any from our good cows. We have to sell quite a few heifers now."

The market for Brown Swiss animals is "spotty" according to Richard. "You have to get known. Sometimes we can sell all the heifer calves we can get, and sometimes we can't. There is a good market for 4-H animals."

There is also a good market for the bull calves. And although Brown Swiss calves may average 90 pounds, there is very little calving difficulty in the Wenger herd.

In their most recent classification, the Wengers had 6 Excellents, 28 Very Goods, 17 Good Plus, and 11 Goods. One of the cows is EE.

The Wengers raise their calves in the main barn in a separate area, and Richard says, "As a rule we have very little problem with our calves. One of the secrets is keeping their areas clean and dry. We haven't lost any in the barn. We clean out every four days." He said they have an occasional problem

"if we don't get colostrum into the calves."

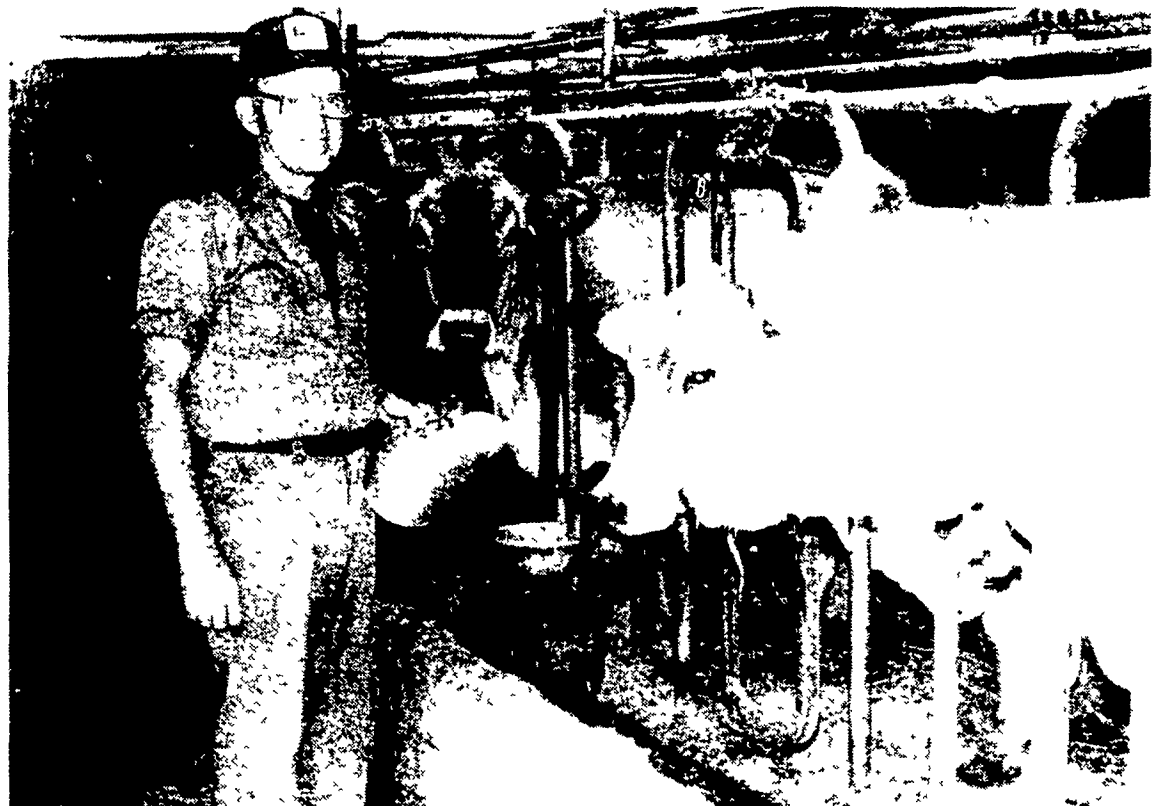
Asked about the future of the Brown Swiss breed, Richard says, "They have a future, and if they

start to pay for protein, Brown Swiss will shine. We're still getting better."

Donald adds, "We're competing (Turn to Page A29)"



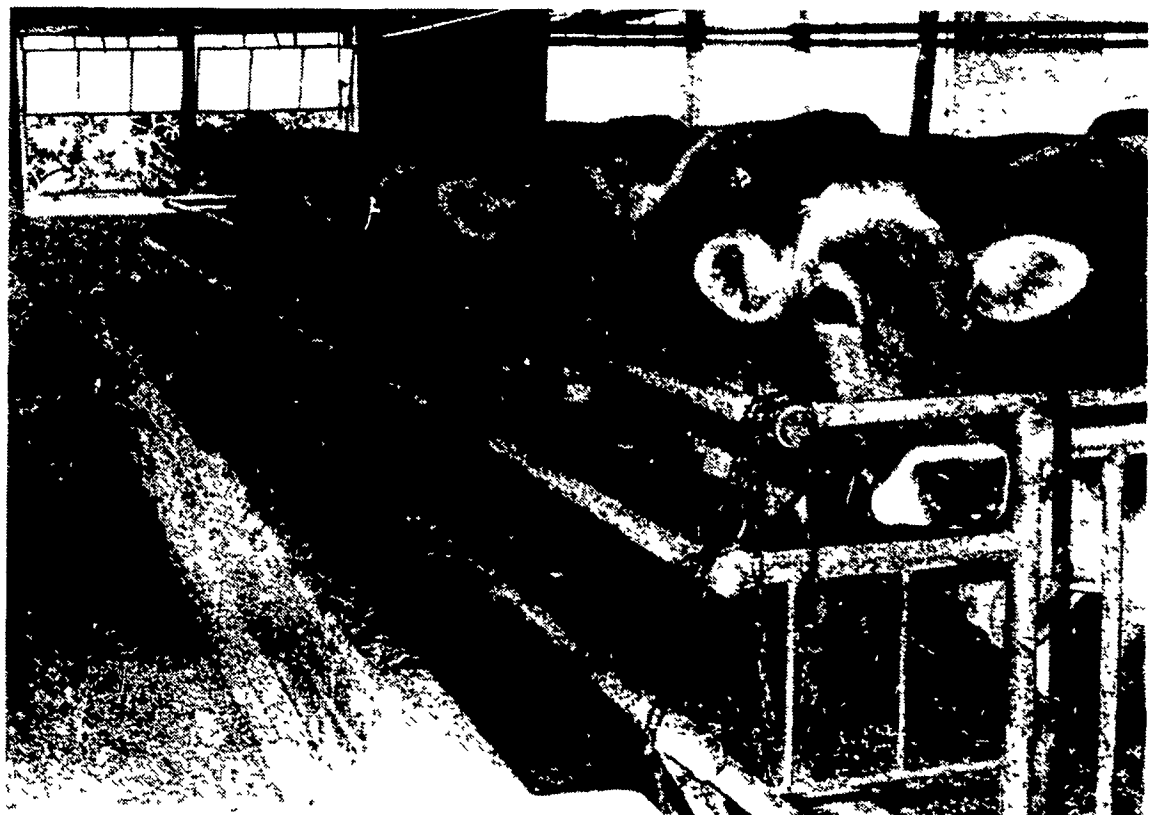
Richard poses with two of his special cows, Lydia, left, with a 347-day record of 26,000 pounds milk and 964 pounds fat, and Sugar, the oldest cow in the herd at 12 years of age.



Richard Wenger feeds a few of his herd of Brown Swiss cows. He has had solely Brown Swiss for the last four years, phasing over from a mixed herd during the past twelve years.



Donald Wenger keeps the records for the herd, because of a love of bookkeeping. DHIA and other records help them evaluate their herd.



These contented Brown Swiss are part of the herd of Richard Wenger and his son Donald of R2 Manheim. The cows make up one of three Brown Swiss herds in Lancaster County. Their rolling herd average had topped their breed's list until just this year.