



Mirroring the puffy clouds overhead, a herd of Charolais cows and calves take advantage of the lush summer pasture at Bratton Charolais Farm in Mifflin County.

Ray Bratton's only beef is Charolais

BY JACK HUBLEY

MCVEYTOWN — Jack's Mountain is wild country. Each spring, following a long central Pennsylvania winter, gaunt black bears emerge from winter sleep to stretch and blink in the bright new sun. Sensing the season's new strength, timber rattlesnakes come topside too, basking in the warmth that floods the steep, rock-strewn slopes.

The deer are there, too. Threading their way down the mountain as shadows lengthen, they tip-toe into the lush meadow. And along about the same time of year that their mountain is awakening, the deer will find that meadow dappled with a herd of snow-white cattle. The cattle and

the wildlife have been neighbors here in the Mifflin County mountains near McVeytown for two decades now, ever since Ray Bratton entered the beef business in 1964 with a small number of crossbred cattle.

Nowadays, from late April until the snow flies, the pastures of Bratton Charolais Farm are alive with more than a hundred Charolais cows and half as many heifers.

But even though the the breed's name has remained the same over the year's, Ray finds his farm populated with beef cattle that are vastly different than in years past.

It's in their genetics to be thick and heavily muscled," Bratton says, "but we've probably added

six inches in height to our herd since we got started. The longer the lower leg bone is, the longer the upper leg will be, and that's where the muscle is," he explains. "So all breeders have been pushing for taller and longer cattle."

But as with most trends, the size pendulum may be swinging back to favor a more middle-of-the-road meat animal, observes Bratton.

"I think in the past there's been too much emphasis on frame size," he says. "The result has been 1500 to 1600-pound steers, and it takes too much grain to finish them."

The ideal steer, says Bratton, should be mostly a roughage animal that finishes at 1300 pounds in 14 to 15 months. "You can't feed \$4 corn to 65-cent steers," he emphasizes.

Through the years, Ray has found the Charolais breed capable of producing the kind of beef animals that the market demands. They gain weight efficiently, he says, and produce plenty of red meat with comparatively little waste. Feeding about 25 head each year for freezer beef, Bratton finds his animals grade low-choice to choice and are popular with small butchers and housewives.

After spending a score of years producing beef for the American table, Ray knows exactly what he's looking for in his cow herd, as well. It's critical that a cow produces a healthy calf every year, and is ready to breed back in 60 to 90 days. She should be gaining weight

during the breeding season, and she ought to be doing it on roughage, says Ray. Regardless of what she weighs, a cow ought to be producing one-half her weight in calf at 205 days.

Bratton's emphasis on performance was cultivated during his 25 years in the dairy business, a chapter is his farming career that ended a decade ago. An advocate of performance testing, Ray currently has an Expectation grandson enrolled at the PDA's Meat Animal Evaluation Center, and a Bratton-bred bull, Royal Mischief, still stands as the Center's top gainer after posting a 4.76-pound average daily gain in the 1981 test.

Ray's current herd sire, Mr. Expectation 3298, was 1982 Pa. Farm Show grand champion, and continues a Bratton tradition of producing top quality examples of the breed, including BCF Excell 494, the 1983 Farm Show grand champion owned by Ray Grimes of South Mountain Farm.

Promotion of the Charolais breed as well as the home operation has always been a family affair for the Brattons. While still living at home, the Bratton's three daughters, Carol, Diane and Rhonda were all active in 4-H and the show circuit. Eighteen-year-old Scott currently handles the show responsibilities

as well as much of the farm work.

In an effort to interest more 4-H'ers in steer projects, the Brattons started a Charolais feeder calf sale in Belleville six years ago, and this past July, Bratton Charolais hosted the first Charolais Field Day to be held by the Pa. Charolais Association.

Both Ray and his wife, Susan, are active in their breed's organizations, with Ray serving as a director and Susan filling the position of executive secretary for the Colonial Charolais Association, serving 11 states in the Northeast. Ray has also served as president of the Pa. Charolais Association.

Though Ray feels that the Charolais breed is in step with consumer demand, he is continually evaluating other beef breeds with respect to performance. "If something comes along that's doing the job more efficiently, that's what I'll be breeding," he asserts.

But for now, he feels that Charolais is the winning team. "We've heard a lot of talk the last few years about eating leaner beef, and Charolais is the right breed for producing lean meat, as far as I'm concerned."

So on this Mifflin County farm where meadow meets mountain, a herd of white cows will likely polka dot the grassland for many years to come.



Ray and Susan Bratton review some of their bull test records. A Bratton-bred bull holds the daily gain record at the Penn State bull test center.



Bratton's current herd sire is Mr. Expectation 3298, the 1982 Farm Show grand champion.



A firm believer in the value of performance testing, Bratton enrolled this Expectation grandson in the Penn State Bull Test at the Department of Agriculture's Meat Animal Evaluation Center in State College.