

Woman Pioneers Raising Beef For '90s Market

LOU ANN GOOD

Lancaster Farming Staff
STRASBURG (Lancaster Co.)

— When Luann married Don Brubaker, a poultry and pig farmer, she quit her office job with the intention of having her own farm project.

She considered several options. The thought of raising pigs brought a nose wrinkle. Chickens were OK when it came to helping her husband, but it wasn't what she had in mind for a project she could call her own.

Luann, who grew up on a Blair County dairy farm, had a special affinity for calves so when she heard about a carefully monitored program that results in producing tender, lean beef, she quickly became enthusiastic. She is now one of Lancaster County's pioneers in a new breed of cattle raising to fulfill consumer demands for low-fat meat.

Luann raises about 350 head of Holstein bull calves annually for Tend-R-Leen Beef. The simple grain and pellet feeding program has no roughage and results in beef that is lower in calories but has the same tenderness and eating quality of ordinary beef.

Luann said, "The concept is to have a genetic beef breed that is consistent in taste and appearance with no fat and lots of flavor."

This type of program was used in the midwest as early as the 1930s, but only recently has been introduced by Pennfield Feeds in this county. The Brubakers researched the pros and cons for about six months before deciding to invest in the project.

"I love doing this. The calves are just like children. All have their own personalities, some are easy to handle, others stubborn and difficult, but they are so personable and want attention," she said.

The calves chew on her clothes, nuzzle her, and follow her around.

"They think I'm their mother," Luann said as one of the calves attempted to crawl into her lap.

Calves are bottled at 6 a.m. and again in late afternoon. Weaned calves are fed a corn and pellet diet, which is made from the corn Brubaker raises and mixes with the purchased pellets. Luann uses a golf cart to transport the milk and the feed to the hutches and the feeding lot.

When things go smoothly, it takes two to three hours for morning feedings and about 1½ for afternoon feeding. There is always the unexpected. A calf with scours,

blizzard-like conditions, respiratory problems, or a calf that refuses to be weaned. Nonetheless, it has been Luann's experience that bull calves are much easier to wean than heifers. And the calves have good appetites with an average daily weight gain of 2.9 percent.

The Certified Tend-R-Leen is a U.S. Patented Program and requires that all animals sold as Tend-R-Leen must follow stringent requirements.

Calves must receive four quarts of colostrum within 12 hours of birth.

Calves must wear an ear tag and a health feeding card is kept to enter in a computer tracking program that follows through to marketing.

Bulls must be castrated, dehorned, and vaccinated before four weeks of age. Luann holds the calves and her husband does the cutting and the shot giving.

The Brubakers have a contract with Robert Rohrer, who operates a 700-head dairy in Washington Boro, to purchase all bull calves, crossbreeds, and twin offspring. The program, which is closely monitored, requires that only Holstein bulls can be used. Therefore, the cross breeds and twin heifers are sold elsewhere when they reach 200 pounds.

"I can't ask for better people to work with than the Rohrers," Brubaker said. "They always cooperate with the colostrum feedings and we pick up from three to 15 calves weekly.

Luann raises the bulls to they reach about 350 pounds or at four months, when they are sold to a Mt. Joy farmer for finishing.

Although the calves are Louann's project, Brubaker lends a helping hand and was instrumental in preparing the operation.

He built two rows of hutches so that the newborn calves can be raised separately until they are weaned. Weaning averages 35 to 40 days.

Then, they are transferred to a super hutch, which Brubaker also built. It holds 16 head. Later, the animals are moved to a feedlot.

Ideally the pens should not need to be cleaned out but are designed to dry out. However, the pens are often refilled within the day, which requires Brubaker to clean out the pens.

The operation has about 4 percent fatalities at this point, but that was due to the extremely cold winter.



Don and Luann Brubaker stand in front of one of the super hutches where calves are transferred after weaning. Luann oversees the largest county operation of calves being raised to market under the Tend-R-Leen label, which uses Holstein bull calves that are strictly monitored and fed to produce lean and consistent top quality beef.

Although the Brubaker farm has only 28 acres with 90,000 chickens that produce 700 ton of manure annually, it was easy to receive township approval for the calf expansion to 450 head. Manure from the chickens is sold to a local mushroom processing plant that hauls it out about six times a year.

At this point, the Brubakers have the largest starting operation in the county for the Tend-R-Leen program. They have a buyer for every calf that they raise and another buyer waiting in the wings if the first one should renege.

"Raising the calves is not physically hard work, but it takes patience and not everyone wants to do it," Luann said.

Some dairy men who raise their own replacements are experimenting with putting their bull calves on the Tend-R-Leen plan, as it offers an opportunity to make another one or two hundred dollars per head. But most farmers prefer to sell the bull calves rather than take the time required to closely monitor them and to followed the restrictive feeding program.

Although Brubaker refers to the calves as "Luann's project" he grudgingly concedes that he has fallen in love with the calves as much as his wife has.

This was a surprise to him, because Brubaker's mindset was whole hog on raising pigs, which he did for many years.

Although he grew up on a chicken farm and enjoyed it, when he graduated as the top ag student from Lampeter-Strasburg High School, there wasn't room on the family farm for him. He started working in Pennfield's hog barn and later became assistant manager of the hog operation for Keener Enterprise.

When his father died in 1989, Brubaker returned to help his mother Miriam with the poultry operation.

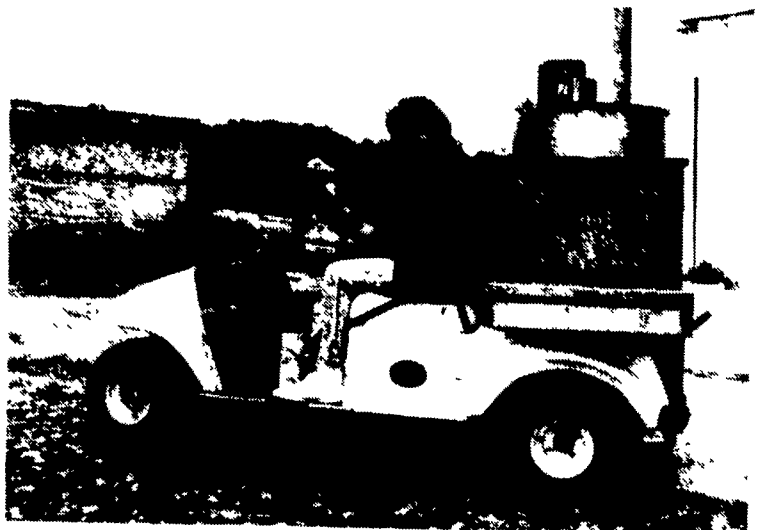
"It was a really tough decision to give up working with pigs, but one that I don't regret," he said.

After updating the existing three chicken houses and adding a fourth one to raise 90,000 broilers, Brubaker purchased the farm from his mother.

"I'm really thankful for my mother and for my brothers and sisters who were willing to let me buy the farm cheaper (than market price) so that I could farm," Brubaker said.



"These coats saved many a calf," Luann said of the coats she had made to protect calves from cold weather.



A golf cart easily transport the milk and the feed for morning and afternoon feeding of the calves being raised to market under the Tend-R-Leen label.



Does this say anything about technology? Don said that after nine major renovations of two of the chicken houses, the last house he built has round feeders, dirt floor, and curtain sides just like the previous ones had when he was growing up on the farm. Don now has 90,000 broilers on his Strasburg farm.

Homestead Notes

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