

Home Where The Buffalo Roam

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LEBANON (Lebanon Co.) —

Give Sonny Hitz a home where the buffalo roam and he's a happy guy.

Sonny grew up on a dairy farm in Lebanon. "I hated milking cows but I loved farming," he said.

For years he was fascinated by the big, shaggy Bisons commonly referred to as buffalo. But it wasn't until he was off the farm for 10 years that Hitz took the plunge and purchased some Bison to graze on his parents' farm.

Four years ago, he purchased four head of breeding stock and chose the name, Majestic Bison Farm.

"I wanted to raise bison for meat to sell directly to customers and to restaurants," Sonny said.

Ironically, Sonny had never tasted bison before he took the plunge. When he did sample it, he wasn't disappointed. He said, "It's great meat. I prefer it over beef for taste and texture."

According to research, bison is considered an excellent red meat source that is low in fat, high in protein, and rich in flavor. It has less calories, fat, and cholesterol per serving than turkey, beef or chicken.

"I believe a health- and environment-conscious society will make bison's popularity grow," Hitz said.

Current research shows that a 3-ounce serving of bison has 93 calories, 1.8 grams of fat, and 43 mg of cholesterol. That's considerably less compared with the same amount of turkey that has 125 calories with 3 grams of fat, and 59 mg cholesterol. Or, beef with 183 calories, 8.7 grams of fat and 55 mg of cholesterol.

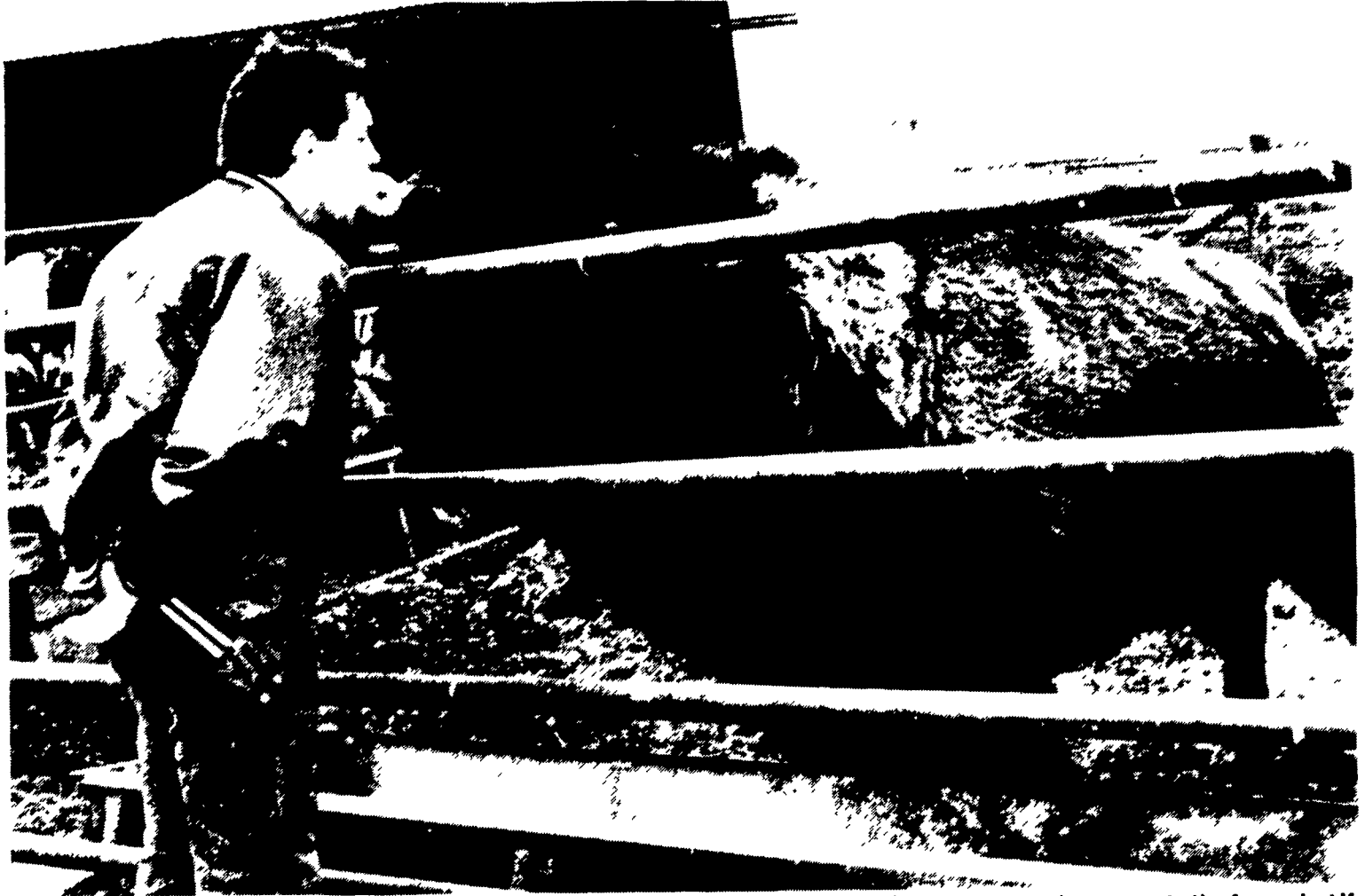
"Bison is more tender than beef unless overcooked," Hitz said. "If it is overcooked, it is too tough to eat."

He suggests that cooking temperatures and time be kept 50 percent lower than comparable beef cuts. He roasts a 2½ pound boneless roast at 170 degrees for 15 minutes and then serves it.

About one year ago, Hitz purchased a bull that he allows to run with the cattle. He's expecting two offspring in August. Bisons have a nine-month gestation period.

"I'll need to take the bull out before the calves are born because the bull can't tell the difference between a cow that is calving or one that is in heat," he said.

Although bison are considered wild, one of the cows will allow Hitz to touch it. In fact, when Hitz holds an apple in his mouth, the



Although bison are considered wild, this one takes an apple straight from her master's mouth. Sonny Hitz said, "I

can pet her one time whenever she comes to the fence, but if I try to do it the second time, she'll try to charge."

bison will come up to the fence and take it from his mouth.

"But I can touch her only once. If I try to touch her the second time, she'll charge," Hitz said.

He is anticipating taming the offspring. He plans to remove it from the cow as soon as its born.

Hitz said that he knows a guy out West who tamed a bull buffalo to do stunts and race race horses.

"The bull never loses," said Hitz of the buffalo's established reputation for speed.

Buffalo easily break through fences if they start running and hit the fence on a dead run.

Hitz, himself, made sure he installed a sturdy seven-strand high tensile fence.

His herd has never escaped, but Hitz was concerned last year when a neighboring farmhouse burned to the ground.

Three fire companies responded and needed to drive and park next to the fence that borders the buffalo's pasture. The noise, people, smoke, and commotion terrified the bison.

"They ran around the perimeter of the fence for three days, but they didn't break through. I feel really confident of the fence, but they could possibly jump it. Bison are

known to jump six-foot high," Hitz said.

Although the fence was previously electrified, it no longer is necessary because if fed and contented, bison normally stay within the boundaries.

Hitz's dream is to have a white buffalo. He said, "Any one who raises bison hopes to get a white one."

The albino bison is extremely rare. Hitz said that it is rumored that Hank Williams Jr. paid \$100,000 for one, but that price isn't confirmed.

Care for bison is quite easy according to Hitz. They graze year around with some corn silage and hay added in the winter. Breeders should allow one acre per head for roaming and supplement it with hay.

"Bison are resilient and resistant to diseases that beef contract," Hitz said.

He doesn't medicate at all other than deworming twice a year.

"If the cattle were allowed to free-roam, deworming would not be necessary," Hitz said.

At one time, bison roamed the plains in numbers so great that early explorers described it as "the plains were black and appeared as

if in motion."

American Indians used bison for food, clothing, shelter, and many culture activities. By the late 1800s, bison were close to extinction because of white men's indiscriminated hunting practices. Through efforts of conservationists and ranchers who knew the value of bison, they are no longer an endangered species. They are known to have increased to more than 80,000 in public and private herds.

When purchasing breeding stock, Hitz said it is important to avoid close bloodlines. That is a potential problem because there are relatively few buffalo compared to beef.

The butchering weight is 1,200 to 1,500 pounds for a two- to three-year-old.

Bison have a 30-year lifespan and healthy cows are known to produce calves that long.

Drawbacks about raising bison are that they can't be herded, they won't tolerate confinement of any

kind, and they can't be coaxed to load.

One time, Hitz patiently stood by for three hours waiting for a bison to finally walk up the ramp to the truck.

But he's not complaining. "I love them. They're much better than beef for raising."

Hitz sells bison meat to individuals and to several restaurants.

"Some people are hesitate to try the meat because they think it will taste gamey," Hitz said. "But it isn't at all gamey tasting. It's sweeter tasting than beef. I always say, 'Bison tastes like beef wishes it did.'" Hitz said.

Hitz said that bison meat appeals to people of all ages.

"The demand for it is phenomenal. The baby boomers like it because they are health conscious. People my parents' ages and older like it because they need to cut down on their cholesterol."

Hitz may be contacted at Majestic Bison Farms, 2105 S. 5th Ave., Lebanon. Or call (717) 270-9107.

4-H Camp Shehaqua Accredited For 1995

LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — The Eastern Pennsylvania 4-H Camping Group has announced that their resident 4-H Camp Shehaqua has received accreditation by the American Camping Association (ACA).

"The Eastern PA 4-H Camping Group has always been committed to providing our 4-H members with the best camping experiences as possible," said Richard S. Kauffman, 4-H Coordinator for the Berks extension office and chairman of the Eastern Pennsylvania 4-H Camp Group. "By being ACA accredited, Camp Shehaqua exemplifies that commitment. The standards set by the A.C.A. are a large task and an important message to parents that tells them we care about our prog-

ram, and most importantly our campers," said Kauffman.

This is the first 4-H camping program in Pennsylvania to receive ACA accreditation. The Eastern Pennsylvania 4-H Camping Group, which organizes and runs 4-H Camp Shehaqua located in Hickory Run State Park near White Haven, consists of 20 counties. The camp operates from June through August and sessions last five days. The program offers a wide variety of activities, such as shooting sports, nature, crafts, recreation and a specially designed ropes challenge course. The program provides opportunities for the entire age range (8-18) of 4-H membership as the junior members (8-13) attend as campers, and the senior members are trained as counselors.



This sign greets visitors to Majestic Bison Farm, where bison, more commonly known as buffalo, roam.