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Diversification, Old-Fashioned Way Key In Long-Term Family Business

MICHELLE RANCK
Lancaster Farming Staff

FREEBURG and MIDDLEBURG (Snyder Co.) — To market, to market... The Troutman family has been not only traveling to but also supplying the market for meat products for years.

Harry Troutman began not only a slaughterhouse business but also a retail store, operations which are still in place today and run by succeeding generations of Troutmans.

A farmer before moving into the meat-moving business, Harry Troutman began the company in 1917 on a small scale by working out of the barn and taking poultry to the nearby Sunbury Market. Later he added veal and then finally cattle.

"He used to go to Lancaster Stockyards to buy cattle and send them by rail," said Harry's grandson Sidney Troutman, who partners with his brother in N.S. Troutman and Sons. "They (Harry's son Norman and Harry's brother Charlie) would unload the cattle in Selinsgrove and drive them on foot to Freeburg, about five miles."

In 1946 Harry built a slaughterhouse, the same year his sons, Norman and Chester, took over the business and changed the name to NS and CH Troutman. The partnership processed approximately 15-20 animals per week.

"We've always done custom killing for farmers and wholesaled to local mom-and-pop stores," said Sidney. "He sold to mom-and-pop stores and to people that tended market. A lot of people don't have that anymore."

The business delivers to retail meat stores, restaurants, and bologna manufacturers.

In 1972 Lynn and Sidney bought the enterprise from their uncle Chester and went into business with their father until he retired in 1978.

"When my brother and I stepped in in '72, we were gung-ho. In the first five years we were up to 60 head a week, then we continued to grow to 80 to 100 cattle a week, which is what we try to maintain now. That's about as big as we want it to get. It's a whole new ball game when you get beyond 100 cattle a week. The size we are at is nice. We're a big little guy."

"We buy a lot of animals directly from the farm," said Sidney, who also buys cattle from cattle auctions.

As with all sectors of the agriculture industry, changing times mean a changing business and new challenges. "In the beginning, my brother and I were selling all our meat within a 20-mile radius," said Sidney. "Now we're reaching out and have expanded to a 100-mile radius to do the same amount of business. We find ourselves going further and further. We're also doing more and more micromanaging to make things work."

"From day one, the talk was that 'You're never going to be able to make it in the wholesale business,' so we figured out a way to do it," said Sidney.

"There's a right way and a wrong way to do everything. We do a lot of finding out how to do it the right way and sticking with it."

Diversification has been the management key to for a

smaller company competing against bigger businesses. "We didn't give up custom slaughtering, and that helped," he said. "We feel that it was important for us that we hung onto custom slaughtering."

Sidney and Lynn also expanded the wholesale business to handle lean bull boneless. "We're one of the few places left to buy quality lean bull boneless," said Sidney. The boneless bull beef is sold for hamburger or bologna production. "There's a lot of bologna makers around Pennsylvania."

The brothers also lay claim to being one of the few places to sell swinging steer beef. "There are people out there that still like to buy beef and cut it down themselves," said Sidney.

The smaller stores which were a mainstay of the business when it was founded are still important to the Troutmans.

Sidney is also proud of the business' track record with their 20 employees, some of who have been with the business for many years.

N.S. Troutmans is also certified to kill organically, another way to diversify and make their own corner of a niche market. As a certified business, the facility must be inspected for cleaning procedures and products. Organic animals must be slaughtered before the other beef, kept on a separate rail, and processed first. The meat can then receive the special label.

He and his brother doubled the size of the kill floor and more than quadrupled the size of the cooler for hanging beef when they inherited the business.

The larger cooler allows for

another specialty item for the Troutmans — aged beef. The beef is tagged and held three weeks to a month for customers who request it. "There's a fair amount of demand for it," said Sidney. "Most people don't know about the aging process and the packers don't have the facilities for it."

Selling boxed beef also has helped diversification.

Custom killing, which accounts for 10 to 15 percent of the total slaughter, varies seasonally, with Thanksgiving being busiest time.

Although modern refrigeration has taken care of the need to slaughter at this time of the year, tradition dies hard for

farmers who aim to have their cattle finished at Thanksgiving, according to Sidney.

The Troutmans do their own grading in-house. Two cattle trucks and three meat trucks transfer the live animals and finished products.

Besides spending two days a week at the auctions, Sidney spends time farming. "I also personally check each animal I buy for yield and cost," he said. Lynn takes care of plant management responsibilities.

"We've always farmed along with this business," said Sidney, who handles the 120-acre farm. Corn, oats, barley, and hay are grown and sold for feed. "We also hold slaughter cattle with



Sidney Troutman, partner in N.S. Troutman and Sons, stands in front of one of the company's trucks. The Troutmans supply steer and lean boneless bull beef for custom and wholesale markets.