



# Partial To Red

*The Johnson crew, left to right: Jeremy, Wayne, Keith and Chris.*

## **A commercial breeder from North Dakota is adamant about his preference for red-hided cattle.**

**By Dan Rieder**

**K**eith Johnson and his two sons, Chris and Jeremy, maintain a 500-head commercial cowherd in eastern North Dakota while farming 6,000 acres of wheat, corn and soybeans.

The Johnson cowherd is a mix of Simmental and Red Angus. "We like the Simmental because they bring calving ease and milk production and we like the carcass qualities and the hair color of the Red Angus," he said.

"The biggest frustration I've had in raising cattle involves any discussion of color. It has never made any sense to me why red, spotted cattle are discounted as feeder cattle. I believe the buyers just want a reason to buy them cheaper," he lamented. "I don't know of anybody who has ever eaten a piece of steak with the hide still on. We were aware that we had to get rid of the spots because the market dictated it, so we went red. I'm a little stubborn on that and most of our cows are solid red or red baldy. We don't have any blondes, but we still have a few spotted cows left in the herd. I won't cull a good cow just because she has a few spots on her."

Historically, Johnson's father had rented their family farm for a number of years before purchasing it in the 1960s. "My dad's main occupation was as a cattle trucker and he farmed on the side. He always kept a few Hereford beef cows around, but mostly milked between 14 and 18 Holstein cows. Starting in 1969, I came home from college after my sophomore year and farmed with one or both of my brothers over the next 33 years, building our dairy herd up at one time to 82 cows. We finally phased out the dairy in 1998 when we dissolved our partnership," Johnson explained.

Johnson, 58, is the middle of three boys and is very close to both brothers. Following the dissolution of their partnership, the youngest brother, Chuck, left the farm and built his own pregnant mare urine (PMU) business, collecting more than 100 Belgian mares. The urine is processed to remove the estrogen which is then used in the production of birth control pills. "Unfortunately, the Food and Drug Administration stopped his primary buyer from buying it any more because they had failed to submit the proper paper work, and he was forced to fold that business a few years later. Chuck and his son have since bought back into the beef business, starting all over from scratch," he reported.

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Keith is extremely grateful to his older brother, Wayne, 62. "After Chuck left, Wayne and I farmed separately for a few years, although we still worked together. My oldest son, Chris, had already come back to the farm," he recalls. "Wayne had two daughters and neither wanted to farm, so he took a step back and gave my youngest son, Jeremy, all his land and half of his cow herd on shares, and now Wayne works for us for wages. It was very generous of him — he knew it was the only way that both of my boys could come back to the farm. I guess you could say that my sons are his sons—they talk to him about stuff they don't even talk to me about."

Johnson and his wife, Becky, who holds a degree in dietetics from North Dakota State University and works off the farm for a hospital/retirement home, also have one daughter, Laura. Laura is married to Joel Foss and is the mother of Brett, 7, and Alisha who is 2½. Chris and his wife, Shannon, have a one-year-old daughter, Shaycee. "I finally figured it out," Johnson laughs. "The only reason we had kids was to get to the grandkids!" Jeremy isn't married, but does have a steady girlfriend.

They receive their mail in Sharon, but the Johnson farm is equidistant between the trio of small towns of Sharon, Northwood, and Hatton, roughly 85 miles northwest of Fargo and 50 miles southwest of Grand Forks. "We're located 30 miles from the Minnesota border and about 150 miles from Canada," he said.

Their Simmental connection dates back to the early 1970s, when Johnson's father purchased a half-blood bull out of King Arthur and used him on his Holsteins. "I can verify the fact that bull had to be the hardest calv-

"For the last six or seven years, we've been concentrating on breeding Red Angus and Simmental. We'll buy 5/8 Simmental x 3/8 Red Angus bulls or bulls that are 3/8 Simmental x 5/8 Red Angus. It's a combination of genetics that fits our herd," he says. "We try to mix it up a little bit, but basically, we're breeding percentage bulls to percentage cows which gives us consistent hybrid vigor. Back when we were breeding purebreds to purebreds, we had bigger calves that showed a definite lack of vigor. Some wouldn't even get up to nurse, and we also seemed to have more problems with scours."

All heifers are bred artificially to Red Angus bulls. Johnson also provides recipient females for Bata's embryo transfer program. "His donor cows are flushed and the resulting fresh embryos are transplanted here on our place. We watch over the pregnancy and the calves until they're weaned and Joe pays us \$200 over the market price for each embryo calf. Last year, the two highest selling bulls sold at their sale were from embryos born right here," he says. "That's been a very fascinating and beneficial endeavor for us."

## Fierce Winter

Following years of drought, mild winters and blazing-hot summers, the winter of 2008-09 has been bitter. "We've had a terrible winter, December and January temperatures went down to more than 30 below zero, with deep snow and a lot of wind," he said.

"We do a lot of things to stretch our winter feed. We use cornstalks and other crop residue until the snow gets too deep and try new ways all the time. We can get beet screenings and potato waste fairly cheaply and the cattle do well on them. Potato waste is the best feed—they get fat on it, just like people who eat a lot of potatoes," he commented. The Johnsons have a contract which allows them to put up more than 1,000 big round bales of grass hay from the airport grounds at Grand Forks. The hay is free simply for cutting, baling and removing it from the airport.

For most of the grazing season, Johnson cows and calves are pastured in the Cheyenne Valley, 21 miles to the west of the farm headquarters. "We calve in February and March and truck the cows and calves out there as soon as we can. Then, in the fall, we wean the calves out there, haul them home and put them directly into our feedlot. In early November, we trail the cows home over a two-day period," he said.

An abundance of volunteer cowboys and cowgirls (up to 60 people on occasion) has prompted them to make a holiday-type event out of the trail drive. "Those friends of ours bring their own trailers and their own horses and they wouldn't miss it for the world. Becky goes to all the work to feed them and a couple of months later, we invite them all back for a big dinner to celebrate. It has been an enjoyable tradition for at least 15 years," he says.



ing bugger that was ever born in the Simmental breed," he proclaimed. "It's a wonder we didn't develop a permanent bias against the breed."

The Johnson beef herd was bred up from that Holstein background, using primarily Simmental bulls. Bulls were acquired from several North Dakota sources, but over the years, the Bata Brothers, Adams, and Olafson Brothers of Edinburg supplied more than 70 of them.

*Steers being grown out in the feedlot before going to market.*



Johnson puts his feeder calves on a thorough vaccination regimen, working closely with Pfizer Genetics. "We've had very good success with that program, weaning 500 calves a year and have hardly ever had to treat them. I credit our herd health to using the recommended vaccinations and then putting the calves back on the cow for three to four weeks before weaning," he said.

Their calves spend several weeks in the feedlot with a goal of putting on a daily gain of 2 to 2 1/2 pounds. "When they're ready, usually sometime in mid-January, they go to the stockyards in West Fargo. My dad hauled cattle to those yards on a regular basis for 40 years and I've have a built-in loyalty to that facility," he says.

The Johnson family maintains a fleet of three cattle trucks and five semi-tractors. "We need them to take our cattle out to the pasture and to market. We have grain to haul and because a lot of our hay is put up some distance away, we utilize several flatbeds. We'll occasionally haul

other people's cattle if they can come up with a full potload," he explained.

He has served on the boards of several beef industry organizations, including the Central Livestock Association, headquartered in St. Paul, Minnesota; the West Fargo Union Stockyards; and the North Dakota Stockmen's Association.

In 2006, the North Dakota Simmental Association honored the Johnson family as the state's "Commercial Simmental Producers of the Year."

"During the peak of our farming season, we work hard, putting in some 16 to 18-hour days and we just about ignore the cattle during that time," Johnson concluded. We run cows because I've had a passion for them my entire life, but they have to get by on their own during the planting and harvesting seasons. That's why we like vigorous, trouble-free cattle."

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*Johnson's cow herd being trailed home in the fall.*