

*Growing Up on
Blue Ridge Farm*

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Favorite Van Calcar Family Memories
As told by Nellie Oehler and John Van Calcar

The Business Evolves

FROM GRADES TO PUREBREDS

In about 1948, as I was just about done with high school, Papa decided we ought to have purebreds. So one night a truck came from Puyallup, Washington and brought us four purebred Jersey cows. They were pretty darn good cows, and with the addition of a few more over the years, we built a herd of about 100 milk cows and 20 to 30 heifers and calves. Papa and I formed a partnership and named the dairy Blue Ridge Farm.

Then we got into the sales business, and Papa decided he wanted to be an auctioneer. You know where he learned to be an auctioneer? In the barn while we were milking. Just about drove me nuts. But pretty soon he got it down. I clerk a 4-H sale every year, and the old timers still come up and say, “Gosh, we miss your father, we so enjoyed listening to him because he put that Dutch sense of humor into it.” He could sell cows like nobody’s business.



Papa and John

We sold a few cows for other people, but our sales were basically all our own. When you’re producing 20 or 30 heifers a year, pretty soon you’re going to get cows all over the place. Papa always said you have these sales to get rid of the ones that aren’t worth a damn, but they were still better than the ones owned by the buyers.



*Blue Ridge Farm
auction*

We'd have room for 24 at a time in the stanchions. Some guy would come in and walk up and down, and sure enough he'd pick out the best cow we had. So Papa would say, "You've got a pretty good eye, but you sure didn't pick the best one. Let me show you – now this is a cow." She was totally useless. Good enough to stay in the herd, but nothing special. But I'd meet those people 10, 15 years later and they'd still have the offspring of that cow, and they'd say, "That was the best cow I ever bought." Papa always said you sell them the cow that's going to make them happy. You never sell the best one. He was pretty shrewd with all that monkey business. He taught us a lot of things, some we never should have known.

The offspring of purebreds are all sold on the basis of how much milk they produce. So that became the most important thing, and the most important day of the month was the day the guy came around and weighed and tested the milk. You didn't mess with those cows on that day. We were milking 100 cows at that time, and they had to be milked at this precise moment in the morning and at this precise moment in the afternoon — you couldn't be a minute late.

One time Dick went out fishing with Papa Ike, and they came upon a dead porpoise. Dick, who was training to become a doctor, thought it sure would be fun if he could dissect that animal and put the skeleton back together. I said, "Why don't you take it up the canyon to the dump, and it will rot by itself. All you'll have to do is go pick up the bones." So Dick loaded this porpoise in the wheelbarrow, ran it up next to the dump and left it. About once a week, he'd go back and see how it was coming along. Finally, he decided the porpoise was ready to bring home. He got the wheelbarrow and went to get the porpoise, but what he forgot was that this was the day the cow tester was coming. And you didn't screw around when the cow tester was coming. So here comes Dick, proudly wheeling this pile of the most God-awful smelling crud you can imagine, and at the very same time, the cows were all coming down for milking. He was just about 40 feet from where the cows were crossing to go to the barn when they got a good whiff of that stuff. Those cows took off running and didn't quit running till they got clear to the other end of the farm, a mile away. I think that day would have been an all-time low for milk production, but tester agreed to come back a few days later.

GRADE-A SECRETS

Eventually, we realized we could make more money in the Grade A business, selling fluid milk instead of milk for butter. When you do that, you're inspected and your water is tested on a regular basis. Our water came out of a hole that someone had blown into the top of the mountain and dammed with concrete. When it rained real hard, it was muddy. Animals would die and fall into it. We'd clean it out once every couple of years and find all kinds of stuff in there.



John and the classifier

We knew that wasn't going to work with this new Grade A business, so we got ourselves a beautiful chlorination system. But chlorine costs money. So underneath the washtub, we put a switch. When you threw the switch, the water would come out of our tank. We had an electric fence across the road to keep the cows in, and when the inspector came driving up, he had to stop and open the gate. That gave Papa time to run in there and flip the switch.

One day, though, we somehow missed the inspector coming through the gate. The guy was standing right there before Papa could flip the switch. To make matters worse, at that time we were getting the water directly out of the creek because we were short of water on the hill. And just then, this big old bull decided it was time for a bath. He waded into the creek and started having a party there in the water, screwing around like nobody's business.

We were a little nervous, waiting for the results of that water sample. But would you believe that somehow it came out OK? He must have gotten it just before the muddy water came down. After that, we built a bridge so the bull could get over the creek without going through it. It was a big sturdy thing with 2x12s and spikes in it. But the bull didn't like that bridge. He single-handedly tore the entire structure apart till there wasn't a piece of wood left that was any longer than your hand. You just don't realize how powerful those creatures are.

THE ART OF ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION

Around that time, we started reading about this new technology called artificial insemination. Nobody else in southern Oregon was doing it, and Papa decided, you know, that would be kind of fun. We started with just our own bulls. Papa went to school for a week, and I went to another school for three days.

One of the things they told us was to build a dummy for the bull to mount. We had an old horse barn we weren't using anymore, so we decided to build the dummy in there. We built it out of 2x4s and 2x6s, just the way the instructions said. When we were done, I said to Papa, "Old bull ain't gonna like that much. Why don't we put Oma's old mattress on top."

So we did, and we put a set of deer horns on the front to make it pretty for him.

The idea was you were supposed to get underneath that thing, which had an opening in the back, and the bull would breed the opening, and you'd catch the semen from down below. So Papa got underneath the dummy, and that big old bull got up on top. Well it got to creaking and groaning so as he was thoroughly convinced the whole



Papa breeds a cow

thing was going to come down on top of him. He got the heck out of there pretty fast. And from that point on, he collected semen holding it off to the side. That was OK with the bull. Once he was ready, he didn't care where you were.

So then there was the question of how to get this fellow ready to go. You could just use a cow, but the cows didn't like it unless they happened to be in heat, so they weren't very cooperative. Finally we got wise, and got ourselves a burlap bag. Whenever a cow came into heat, we would tie that bag under her tail for a while. After about 10 or 15 cows, all we'd have to do was take the bag out to the bull pen. Those Jersey bulls are meaner than a wildcat. You watch the color of their eyes — when it's not pure white, they are just plain cantankerous — until they smell that sack. It worked wonders.



We took the old milk house and turned it into a laboratory. These were the days when it was all fresh semen, there wasn't any such thing as frozen. You'd mix the semen with egg yolk and sodium citrate and store it in the refrigerator. Then you'd take a tube of that stuff, put it through a cork and into water that was the right temperature. Then you took out your syringe and drew out enough to breed the cow. When all of this first started, you used a speculum with a flashlight in order to find the cervix. Later on, you put your arm in the rectum and felt the cervix with your fingers — it has a corrugated feel.

Papa putting milk in the cooler

People in the community were so intrigued with all this, we'd have groups of them coming over to watch. They really thought it was fascinating. Eventually the local veterinarians started using our semen. We added more bulls till we finally had about seven or eight of them, to give us more variety.



One day the vet couldn't come out, so he asked me to bring the semen into town for him. I knew where he lived, and the door was open, so I put the thermos bottle into the refrigerator and went home. About a day later, the vet called and said, "John, I didn't get the semen, did you bring it over?" and I said, "Yeah, I put it in your refrigerator." He says, "Oh my God, I forgot to tell you, I moved." When we went back there, the lady of the house answered the door. I said, "Mam, I'm terribly sorry, I left something in your refrigerator the other night not knowing the vet had moved." She said, "Would that have been a small thermos bottle? What in the dickens is it?" I told her it was bull semen, and she gave a little squeal. She thought it was orange juice.

Some appliance company had a contest: Send in the story of the strangest thing that ever happened to you and we'll give you a new refrigerator. Papa wrote this up and sent it in, and they called him and said, "We can't give you the prize because we can't publish the story, but Henry, you win hands down."

We had more fun with all that stuff than you can shake a stick at. It was all new, so we were learning all the time. If you aren't in the lead on those things, there's no sense being in the business. You can't let the Joneses get ahead of you—you want the Joneses coming to find out how you do it.