

Angus, produce and children are all homegrown at this West Virginia farm and market.

Farm Fresh at Flying W



Flying W Farms is a family project for Jessica, Margaret, Don, Rick and Will Woodworth.

Story & photos by
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While pilots are generally known for taking the direct route, that's not the case with the Woodworths. Their journey from Angus breeders to farm market and deli operators has been anything but straight. However, in their defense, it has been perfectly logical.

"The front door was open," Rick Woodworth says. "We had the opportunity to direct market."

The open door was to a farm shop turned produce stand. But the story actually started long before. When Rick's

father, Eugene, got out of the Air Force in 1955, he started the registered Angus herd. By the 1980s he quit keeping up the registration papers, but the 120-cow herd was and is 100% Angus.

Also in the 1980s, 1987 to be exact, the family went into the produce business, direct-marketing from their farm shop. In 1988, Rick graduated from West Virginia University and married fellow graduate Margaret in 1992. Both helped on the farm after hours, while Rick taught agriculture at Potomac State College of West Virginia and Margaret worked at the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Margaret left USDA in 1996 after their second child was born and stayed home

to help on the farm. At about the same time, Rick's sister Patty built an honest-to-goodness farm market.

But 2001 was when the Flying W machine set its true course. Rick and Margaret bought the farm store. In 2002, child No. 3 joined the family, and by December Rick left the college.

"We went from an operation with off-farm income to a family of five with no off-farm income," he says.

Diversifying the farm business

As part of their effort to increase their income, the beef part of the enterprise gradually evolved. They started by finishing 20 head and selling halves and quarters of beef, which they still do, but they also added their own processing plant (housed in the same building as the store) and began selling retail cuts. The deli, open every day for lunch, is also an outlet for their cattle. Plus, the Friday and Saturday night prime rib dinners draw an average of 60 customers a night to rural Burlington, although the Woodworths do have to supplement their own beef with purchased product on those nights.

Their 120-head Angus herd is now up to 180 cows. "We had to get our total gross income up to generate enough dollars," Rick says. Of those calves, 100 to 120 head now go through the Flying W farm market.

It isn't simple on the farm or market or between. There is a fall and spring breeding season, both 72 days long, to keep calves funneled into the pipeline. And since time isn't short enough, Rick artificially inseminates (AIs) a small group of spring calvers to supercharge the herd's genetics.

There is also feeding. The spring-weaned calves graze fescue, orchard grass and clover pastures until fall when they go to the feedlot for corn silage and grain. The fall-weaned calves go straight to the corn silage and grain ration. All cattle are grown and finished without antibiotics or growth implants and minimally processed after harvest so they can be marketed as natural. They are fed to the equivalent of at least Choice.

"I feel very strongly about cattle grading Choice," Rick says. "It provides a more consistent eating experience." While the cattle are state-inspected, they aren't graded by a federal grader. However, Rick uses his eye to assure his customers get high-quality beef.

He also feels very strongly about his father's choice of breed.



The West Virginia State Beef Queen, Megan Webb, worked as a waitress at Flying W before leaving for college at TAMU.

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—Rick Woodworth

"There is the ease of marbling. Angus are also in the ideal weight range at Choice grades. Exotics are way too large and too hard to get to Choice. And I'll admit — Angus is a plus for marketing

purposes," says the cattleman/feeder/processor/retailer.

Harvest, which is done at a local plant, is the only time the cattle leave Flying W. The carcasses come straight back to the on-farm processing plant and are dry-aged a minimum of 10-14 days.

"I also feel very strongly about dry aging," Rick comments. "That's what gives it that beefy taste. It is hard to charge enough of a premium to cover the shrink from the dry aging, though, when you're competing with a wet-aged industry."

On a weekly basis, Woodworth and his employees process either 12 beeves or 10 hogs (bought locally) and eight beeves through their plant.

"I spent a week in Kansas City at Koch, a manufacturer of meat processing equipment, to learn how to operate a smokehouse and further process meats," he notes.

He also processes another 600 head per year for other producers. "The cost of the processing facility is too great to hang on 120 head," he explains.

Not all easy

Not surprisingly, the Woodworths and their growing business have their share of turbulence.

"The hardest thing is finding good



Rick Woodworth breeds the Flying W heifers AI.

labor,” Margaret says. Their workforce now numbers 18.

“We hire 10 to keep one,” Rick says. “But we are very proud of our employees. They are much better than they were five years ago, or even two years ago.”

There is also the money part. “The capital outlay is horrendous,” Rick says. “If you can’t manage your farm, don’t get into the direct-marketing business and think it is going to pull you out of it.”

The husband-and-wife team also had to give up the security and benefits of their off-farm careers.

Then there is the obvious — the horrendous rise in feed prices. “When we started feeding cattle, the cost of gain was 36¢ a pound. Now it is 96¢,” Rick says. “Feed costs have taken much of the profit out of it even with direct marketing.”

He credits the Cattlemen’s Beef Promotion and Research Board (CBB) and the beef checkoff for a bright spot, though.

“We applaud the beef checkoff for the value cuts. We keep them now, the flat-iron steaks and tender medallions,” he says. “When we started, we could grind those and put them in hamburger, but we can’t afford that now. The checkoff has helped us as direct marketers and helped consumer awareness.”

There is also the not-so-little drawback of pure and simple overload. The farm market is open seven days a week from the first of April until Dec. 20. Hours are 10 a.m. until 7 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and until 9 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. After Dec. 20 the market

is closed for two weeks. It reopens Wednesdays through Saturdays from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. until they crank up full-time again in April.

Family perks

“It isn’t easy,” says Margaret, who keeps the deli and restaurant going.

As for Rick, who inherited his father’s love of flying, he’s parked his plane.

They’d both do it all again, though.

“We like to be in charge of our own destiny,” Margaret says.

“We like to think and make our own decisions,” Rick says. “And I don’t mind suffering the consequences of my decisions.”

Then there is their other enterprise. “We like to raise our own children,” Rick says.

Jessica, 13, is a strict taskmaster in the deli and processing plant. Will, 12, is a top hand with cattle and processing. And Margaret says Don, 6, “has grown up here. He doesn’t know a stranger.”

The Woodworths also make partial claim to Rick’s niece, 18-year-old Megan Webb. West Virginia’s Beef Queen and Beef Ambassador, Megan waitressed at Flying W on weekends before she headed to Texas A&M University (TAMU) this fall to major in animal science.

As for the future of the multi-tasking family and operation, Rick says, “We’re ready to level off now. And we really believe when we get through the growing pains we’ll be all right.”



Direct marketing: Think it through

Penn State agricultural marketing educator John Berry is in the business of helping producers grow into direct marketing. Here is a sample of his tips, along with those of West Virginia farm market owner Rick Woodworth:

Berry says by necessity the first thing producers need to consider is money. “People don’t allow enough capital investment to get through the first couple of years. It takes time to build repeat business and get in the black.”

Woodworth agrees. He says one of their more expensive transitions was going from selling weaned calves to finishing out cattle and selling them as beef.

“We lost most of our cattle income for a year,” he notes. Even though they were adding value to the cattle, the switch brought their cash flow from the cattle operation to a halt.

While finances are often underestimated, Berry says location is a factor that can be overemphasized. “Most people think a farm market has to be near a populated area or a well-traveled road. That isn’t necessarily the case. Farm markets have become a destination in themselves.”

Even though the Woodworths are in a rural area, they find that being on the side of busy Highway 50 doesn’t hurt business one bit.

“During the summers, 80% of our customers are from out of state,” Woodworth says. “They are weekend and retirement people, tourists and people going to the lake.”

To draw and keep those who aren’t from a rural area, Berry suggests, “Remind them with props, farm items and displays that the market is part of the farm.”

At the Woodworth’s Flying W, numbered cattle ear tags identify tables in the restaurant.

Berry also says, “If customers bother to stop once, make sure they come back with a wide variety of products. Meals are a great way to expand the product mix, too. They really drive customer sales.”

Besides selling top-quality all-natural Angus beef from their refrigerator case and in meals, the Woodworths sell smoked sausage and hams, their own seasoning for meats, produce in season, tantalizing baked goods like strawberry pies, and locally made handcrafts.



Rick Woodworth uses a refrigerator truck to transport beef and pork.