

Experience Pays



Ninety-six-year-old Hugh Septer is feeding cattle a new way.

Story & photos by
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Hugh Septer has 85 years of experience in the beef industry, and he is still learning new things.

The 96-year-old from Ida Grove, Iowa, got his start by showing cattle in his hometown 4-H club at Cumberland, Iowa. For nearly six decades, Septer held jobs ranging from farm manager to agriculture lender, always maintaining ties to the beef industry.

"There was a four-year period while I was in the service and while I was in college that I didn't have any," he says. "But most of the rest of the time, I had some cattle." Septer

retired from the Ida County State Bank in Ida Grove in 1986 and has been a full-time cattleman ever since.

Each summer Septer fills his pasture with 600- to 700-pound (lb.) Angus calves. He backgrounds them, feeding each calf 1½ lb. of grain per 100 lb. of body weight with 5-gallon buckets. Then he sends them on to nearby Raasch Beef Inc. for finishing.

"Recently I've gotten interested in feeding cattle that will grade on a grid," says Septer, who has used that marketing method for the past three years. "I think that's the way to go. If you can get a premium, it helps your bottom line."

Picky buyer

Septer adds, "The cattle that work on a grid are usually nice cattle — they're fun to look at."

Not just any nice-looking cattle will work for the goals Septer has in mind.

"You don't go to the sale barn and just buy black cattle," he says. "You find somebody who looks at the genetics a little bit and go to the cow herd that has the genetics that will work."

Septer turned to Roger Bowers of Dillon, Mont., who helps sell Angus bulls for Ida Grove neighbor Mason Fleenor. Septer knows the quality is built in when calves are sired by Fleenor's GG Genetics bulls. The purebred producer is a two-time National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC) champion.

"We're fortunate to have Mason here who has worked with his herd for many years, using many of the good bulls that are available from across the country through semen," Septer says. "He's upgraded his herd and kept upgrading."

Group effort

Bowers put Septer in touch with his Montana neighbor Jim Hale, a commercial producer and longtime bull customer.

"Mason's been breeding for carcass, and that's what I wanted," Hale says. "I wanted to have a product that would suit the buyers and still work good for me in the country."

Hale, who had been selling his cattle through an internet sale, liked the idea of linking with a producer

who would get him some information back on his calves.

"They look good to us, but we don't know what they're doing in the feedlot," Hale says. Septer shared feedlot performance and group carcass data. "That helps because you know what your product's doing after it leaves the ranch. You know if you're on the right track."

Septer also "stumbled upon" some calves from a straightbred commercial Angus producer from Lamoni, Iowa. After the calves proved themselves the first year, Septer has tried to buy them back consistently, too.

Three loads of last year's Montana- and Iowa-bought cattle averaged \$7 per hundredweight (cwt.) in grid premiums.

"When you find a bunch of cattle that have the right genetics, then you just kind of stick with them if you can," he says.

Septer expects them to have the performance to back up their quality.

"If you get the cattle that grade well, I would expect them to gain well," he says, noting last year's gains were nearly 3.7 lb. per day.

"We've been custom-feeding cattle for 10 years now and Hugh's been a customer with us about right from the start," says Greg Raasch, who manages the 1,800-head yard with his brother, Scott.

"I kind of got him interested in trying to sell cattle on a grid, so we experimented with it a few times," Raasch says. "Once we focused on asking around and knowing more of the history on the cattle and the genetics, he bought into that. He thinks it's pretty valuable."



While his calves are at the feedlot owned by the Raasch family, Septer visits them every day. The feedyard is a 12-mile drive to nearby Odebolt, Iowa. Above, Septer is shown with brothers Greg (center) and Scott Raasch.

Septer, a graduate of Iowa State University, says he's in the beef industry because "it keeps me busy." At any given time he has a couple hundred head of cattle on feed.

This year he rode out in the semi to get his Montana calves. "That's a long ride, about 1,100 miles," he says. His summer routine includes feeding cattle every morning, fixing fence and keeping the pasture clear.

"I exercise every morning for a half an hour in the winter," Septer says. "In the summer when I'm chopping thistles I don't need to do that."

While his calves are at the feedlot, he visits them every day. The feedyard is a 12-mile drive to nearby Odebolt, Iowa.

"They're good operators," Septer says. "We get along really well."

Sorting for market

The Raaschs hired Cherokee, Iowa, veterinarian Mark Carlson to ultrasound scan and sort Septer's cattle this year. They were placed in three different groups: those that were ready, ones that needed 30 more days on feed, and the cattle that should be sold on the cash market.

"That was helpful on marketing," Septer says. "Some of the cattle they said weren't ready, I'd have picked to go."

The sorting has helped avoid discounts and gain premiums, including the monetary bonus for producing *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand carcasses.

Raasch agrees. "In the beginning he would just go by visually sorting the ones that he thought were ready," he says. "We'd still end up with heavy cattle and Yield Grade (YG) 4s."

Septer has a view that many cattle feeders have not yet embraced.

"The cattle industry has changed a great deal in the last 20 years," he says. "We didn't used to look at genetics. We looked at the quality of the cattle, but we didn't have the information on the herds

of cattle. An awful lot of people haven't recognized the importance of that yet."

Septer adds, "I would encourage anybody to find cattle that have the genetics to work on a grid, because they don't cost much more than other cattle, and there's a chance you could get a pretty good premium."

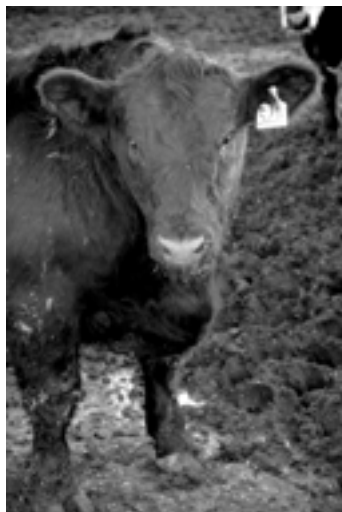


Keeping busy

In a brick red, wooden, ranch-style house on the corner of Fifth and Fairlane in Ida Grove, Iowa, lives a man who knows a great deal about agriculture in the early 20th century. The one-time farm manager and retired ag lender lived it.

Hugh Septer's house, blanketed inside with shag carpet and dated furniture, is adorned with family pictures: The wife who has been gone for nine years. A son, now a doctor in Mason City, Iowa, with his

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Septer shares the feedlot performance information and group carcass data with commercial producer and calf supplier Jim Hale, who says, "That helps because you know what your product's doing after it leaves the ranch. You know if you're on the right track."

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family. A daughter who lost her battle with cancer nearly 20 years ago.

In the middle of one collage is a timeless black-and-white moment that Septer fondly recalls. A neatly groomed, short-legged Hereford steer stands with its showman. The year was 1929, and Septer took

reserve grand champion at the Iowa State Fair and reserve grand champion at the Ak-Sar-Ben Livestock Show.

"I sold him in Omaha, and he brought 30¢ a pound," Septer says. "That was twice what the market was."

Now 96, Septer has three times as

many years of experience as the young men who finish out hundreds of his cattle each year.

"People tell me I don't look like I'm 96," he says. "I hope I don't look like I'm 96, and sure hope I don't act like it. I don't feel like I'm 96."

The old days

Septer was born near Cumberland, in central Iowa. His earliest recollections of the beef industry were on his parents' crop and livestock farm.

"Back when I was a kid, we didn't have trucks that would amount to anything," he says, telling of his dad and a couple neighbors driving cattle nine miles to town. "They always shipped them on the railroad to Chicago."

Septer followed the herd for the first couple of miles. Once the cattle settled down, he had to turn back to do chores at the home place.

There lived his parents and three sisters, one older and two younger than himself. His mother was a rare farmwife for the area, having had two years of college education.

"I went to country school in a one-room school house," he says. Passing the eighth grade exams, he began traveling that nine-mile road to town, graduating from high school in 1929. "My mother didn't push that we went to college, but we knew she expected us to," says Septer, who started at Iowa State University (ISU) during the winter term.

"I came back to farm in the spring and then the Depression hit," he says. "I didn't go back for five years."

When he was finally able to return, the animal husbandry major found success on the judging team.

"I took first in a horse contest and fifth in beef," Septer says. "I got the eye that everybody got on the judging team."

That and a strong work ethic landed him a job with his judging team coach,



who also owned a purebred livestock farm near Ames, Iowa.

“He offered me a job to run the farm, and that’s what I wanted to do: farm,” Septer says. Not everyone thought it was the perfect fit. “I had a college degree and here I was going to run this farm.”

Three years into his dream job, Septer fell in love with schoolteacher Evelyn, a 60-year romance still recalled in those photographs. But then Septer was called up to the Army and service in World War II. Working in the medical and veterinary detachments, he was eventually sent overseas to meet up with his newly assigned infantry division, Patton’s Third Army.

“We got six weeks of training with weapons,” he says. “When we got there we spent a week catching up to our group.”

After a tour through Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Russia, the soldier was eager to return home — especially to Evelyn, who he married while he was serving stateside a year and a half earlier.

Septer worked for 17 years for Farmer’s National Co., a farm management firm, before being hired by the Ida County State Bank. As an agricultural lender, he traveled to many cattle sales and always fed some cattle himself.

“I would take a bunch of people with [me]. People who needed help buying calves, I’d try to help them,” Septer says. “I brought a lot of new customers to the bank.”

He worked there until he was 75. “So I retired, and that’s been more than 20 years ago,” Septer says. “I want something to do. I don’t want to sit around and do nothing.”

More than a hobby

The veteran producer may be buying cattle to keep busy, but it’s much more than a hobby to him. Septer goes to the sales and tries to find cattle “with the right genetics.” He still gets in the pen and sorts the market-ready cattle, and he has recently become interested in selling on a grid.

Members of the Raasch family of Odebolt, Iowa, have fed Septer’s cattle for 10 years, but they have known Septer virtually their entire lives.

“I was a 4-H kid raising purebred Hampshire pigs when I was 10 years old,” says Curt Raasch, patriarch of the family-owned Raasch Beef Inc. “He came to our farm to purchase purebred pigs. That’s how I got to know Hugh, when I was a 4-Her trying to market seedstock.

“I think all of us go through life to be mentors, or people to learn from,” Raasch says. “We’ve found a real gem

here in Hugh. He sets an example. He doesn’t talk about doing it. He does it.”

Raasch’s sons, Scott and Greg, now run the feedyard and work very closely with Septer.

“As a father, it really means a lot to me that Hugh has the confidence in these

young people and what they’re doing,” Raasch says. “That’s how we’re going to make this transition in agriculture.”

Septer has seen many generational transitions, of course. He calls his parents “progressive,” and that seems to have been handed down.

“He has always had a thirst for knowledge and education that is absolutely remarkable,” Raasch says. “He’s figured out how to thrive in a very competitive beef finishing environment.”

