

# The West Virginia Connection



## *Family-style model, Iowa feeding builds Appalachian herds.*

*Story & photos by*  
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Central West Virginia is a land of wooded clay hills, rocky ridges and wet winters. Great for deer and grazing cows, but a quagmire for any corralled stock. It's a land where most folks know their neighbors well and don't mind trading labor for borrowed equipment or mutual hunting rights.

At least, that's the impression you'll get if you spend time in Joe Painter's porch swing, on the farm just outside of Gandeeville. His friends Larry Cottrell and Jim

Dever, from just around the corner or over the ridge toward Walton, will stop by to talk about cattle.

In between, there will be discussions ranging from last Sunday's church service to memories of Walton High School or Young Farmers tours in the years that followed. The 50-something trio share bonds as deep as any family.

"We grew up hunting, fishing and going to church together," Jim says. "It's natural that we started cooperating with cattle."

When Joe's son, Matt, stops by to talk about their registered Angus

herd, you know he represents the can-do labor generation. Larry's son, Ricky, and Jim's son, Philip, round out the crew when needed. The Painters have 80 cows between them; Cottrell, 60; and Dever, 30. Matt lives just up the road in Spencer, W.Va., the town that once boasted the biggest cattle auction east of the Mississippi.

### **Changes in the hills**

Things have changed in these hills. As the Spencer market declined a bit, buyers from Ohio and Indiana moved in to make direct deals. They would buy spring-born calves in

the fall and feed them on Corn Belt farms. "We'd gotten to where we could sell a 500-pound (lb.) calf in the fall for \$500, and we liked that," Joe recalls.

"But as we tried to improve our herds, we were penalized by a 'slide' [lower price per pound (lb.) as weight increases] on the 550-pound calves," Larry says. "Our best cows were costing us because they did well. Yet, we saw that somebody was buying our calves and making money."

In 2001, the buyer who had bought their calves for seven years suddenly announced he would buy



The Painters manage more than 750 acres in an area where high rainfall keeps some of it "like a jungle."

no heifers. That was a turning point, Jim says. “We needed to sell most of our heifers, and didn’t want to sell just steers,” he says. “So, we talked about it, and finally we agreed to have them fed for us up in Ohio. We got by, but the next year, we decided to go out to some Iowa feedlots.”

West Virginia University (WVU) had cattle on feed with Roger Chambers at Silver Creek Feeders, a Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB)-licensed feedlot near Council Bluffs, Iowa. That’s the first place the group would go when they drove to western Iowa the next January with another neighbor.

“It snowed all the way there and all the way back,” Joe says.

“And we had to pull three calves while they were gone,” Matt recalls.

Still, the trip changed many things for the better.

Silver Creek Feeders set the standard for their tour. Joe says, “I remember Jim telling me when we got back in the truck at Roger’s, that this is our standard — somebody’s got to beat him or this is it. We didn’t even know our criteria, but we all felt good about his family approach.”

Nobody could beat that in the eyes of the West Virginians, whose informal alliance started with a handshake and a telephone callback. Their fifth calf crop went to Silver Creek last fall, and several other neighbors from the Mountaineer State have become feeding customers.

From the start, it was clear that these were good cattle, Roger says.

He enrolled steers from Cottrell, Dever and Painter Farms in the 2005 National Angus Carcass Challenge (NACC). They were fourth-high in a contest with more than 8,000 head, with 61.6% *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand or Prime, and they gained nearly 4 lb. per day. In the 2006 NACC, their heifers finished in eighth place with 32% CAB and Prime, and the 2006 steers made 37% CAB.

### Young Farmer days

Roger had flown out to speak at producer events in West Virginia, and he toured his customers’ farms. Joe and Larry reciprocated by driving out to the Iowa feedlot last summer, the first time they had seen their calves at near finished weights.

“Roger sent us pictures different times, and those helped us see how

they change, too,” Jim says. “We retain full ownership and trust Roger with everything. We finance 100% of the feed.”

Larry is the primary contact for the group, but they let Roger’s eye and their cattle dictate marketing. As Joe says, “Roger is the one with the expertise, and our cattle are 1,000 miles away. If we can’t

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trust him to market them, why are we letting him feed them?”

Several other neighbors have begun feeding at Silver Creek, or as everybody calls the 3,300-head feedlot, “Roger’s.” People used to be “more or less independent, but anymore they are learning to bunch their cattle up and work together,” Jim says.

Some roots of cooperation go back to their Young Farmer days. “We had a lot of speakers come in and talk about grazing, cow-calf production and bulls,” Larry says. Wayne Wagner of WVU Extension and Francis Fluharty from Ohio State University were leading influencers. “That was a lot of help for a long time, but

then we realized we were getting old and needed to make changes.”

Jim adds, “The Young Farmers Co-op used to buy fertilizer, twine, medicines — everything we needed. And now we have started doing that again. Things have evolved right around again.”

## Finding a way

Negative attitudes don’t find root in this group. “When I hear talk about what you can’t do, that just infuriates me,” Larry says. “If we need to do it, we’ll find a way.”

They needed to improve facilities, health management and genetics, and find ways to deal with the wet winters, bulls and replacement heifers.

“I was feeding cows here one winter evening,” Joe recalls, “and I could see that a cow needed help delivering a calf. She was a tame cow, but we went up and down the hill many times before I could get a good hold on her. I vowed that night to build a better facility, and now Jim and Larry have modern chutes, too. It was one of our co-op buys where we could get a real good price buying three of them.”

They also got a good price on 70 wire cattle panels and three rotary mowers. “It’s a way we can survive by throwing in together,” Joe says.

Coordinated calf health is a key to success in the feedlot. They learned that from Chambers. Following his advice, the calves get early vaccines for bovine respiratory and blackleg diseases in May, when any bulls not cut at birth are steered. A week before weaning, calves get another round, then a booster a couple weeks after weaning. When they have been weaned at least 45 days, the top end is ready for the semitrailer ride to Silver Creek. Every operation that takes labor is a joint venture.

If veterinary skills are needed, Larry and Matt usually fill in. That came from helping when the local doc who responded to calls had heart surgery that restricted his physical ability. Larry gets the more demanding tasks, such as palpating. Most of the veterinarians in the county specialize in small animals.

No surprise, bull buying is another community affair, and that aspect could grow. Better bulls are the fastest route to better calves, and the group began purchasing at WVU-tested bull sales in Wardensville and Henderson, W.Va., several years ago. In fact, they often buy a few more than they need and supply extras to other neighbors. For many small producers, bulls are a management problem. The Roane County trio is working on a solution.

“We could build a facility on one farm just for bulls, and on a certain day, everybody would bring their bulls in for the fall and winter,” Jim says. “They could all get to know each other while their owners get to know other options.



The West Virginians, whose informal alliance started with a handshake and a telephone callback, sent their fifth calf crop to Silver Creek last fall.

“Come spring, my bull could go out to somebody else’s place, and I could use his if that suited our needs better,” Jim ventures. “And not everybody would have to own a bull.”

Maybe the idea came from the three families having rotated bulls among themselves. “We’ve even switched heifers for steers after weaning,” Larry says.

But wintering is a worry. “Roger was encouraging us to get calves out there by mid-October, and that means earlier weaning,” Joe says. “But we also recognize that’s the start of elk season — we want those calves out of here, as we all enjoy hunting trips to Wyoming and Idaho.” This year, it happened.

### Like a jungle

Regardless of when the feedlot calves leave, replacement heifers must stay through the winter, right? Not necessarily. That’s something the group is debating and exploring.

“We bought a trailer load of bred heifers the last couple of years at an association sale in Hardy County and have had good luck with them,” Joe says. “This is not a place to feed calves in a lot; you get a tractor stuck up to the axles — that’s just the way it is here.”

A few years ago, the group contracted with a custom heifer developer to the south, but costs soon increased beyond what they wanted to pay. Matt still keeps some heifers as part of the growing registered herd, but Larry is looking at breeding for terminal traits and buying all replacements. “We have to work through this stuff,” he says, noting the lost opportunity to develop cow families. “We’re not sure yet.”

Roger helps them work through the issues, but “mostly, he tells us not to change much,” Jim says. Culling is the exception. “All of us have culled cows for giving us Select calves twice,” Larry adds.

“We don’t let something bad happen more than twice,” Joe puts in.

“We’re surprised by the good news, too,” Matt says. “We’ll get a Prime out of an old cow we never thought much of; she stays in the back fields where nobody can see her.” After four years of data, they are still excited to see what will turn up next. Progeny of one sire in the 2005 NACC pen went 100% CAB. Another produced three Primes his first year and bred 40 head in 2006. “I want to see what he’s going to do,” Matt says.

In the future, the group wants to try artificial insemination (AI) on heifers, and may try heat synchronization on some cows to increase calf consistency. They would like to get scale load cells under each chute to capture individual weaning and cow weights, too.

The network could expand through the seedstock herd, Joe says. “We sometimes buy calves back from people who bought our bulls,” he says. “I’m on the idea of supplying my bulls to more people if they give me the option of buying their calves. Being 58 years old, I’m not one to get involved in a lot more land.” He and Matt already manage more than 750 acres, and high rainfall keeps some of it “like a jungle.”

“But if we can help somebody else out, that’s what we’re thinking about right now. I followed my dad when I was old enough to go out; Matt did the same; and his boy, J.D., is just 4, but already wants to be like his dad,” Joe says. “We have to find ways for more people to make that happen.”

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Matt and Joe Painter, Larry Cottrell and Jim Dever are working together to buy inputs cost-effectively, market cattle more profitably, and learn how to improve their genetics.