

Settling on Simmental in South Dakota

By Lilly Platts



Bonnie Noziska (left) and Betsy Senter (right) partner to raise high-quality Simmental seedstock genetics for South Dakota commercial producers.

A commitment to continued improvement, quality management practices, and a love for breeding beef cattle makes B&B Simmental a small, but powerful producer of seedstock. Betsy Senter and Bonnie Noziska both took unique paths to South Dakota, and each were driven to the farm by a passion for agriculture. For over 20 years, they have used a well-rounded approach to developing bulls that are ready to thrive for commercial producers.

Building a Business

"We're keeping an eye on what the customer wants," Senter explains, "Some people are skeptical of Simmental in this area because it's not widely used. So, what we're trying to do is keep that half to three-quarter type bull that will give them a calf that's at least a quarter to half Simmental. That gives them some comfort, in dealing with a breed they're not familiar with. Pretty soon they come back and say they're not worried about calving ease and that they can see what the breed does."

Senter first got into the cattle business when she moved to South Dakota with the USDA, after growing up and attending college in North Carolina. She worked in several towns in South Dakota, before settling in Burke. Living in town eventually drove her to find a farm to rent, and soon she was in the cattle business. Along the way, Senter acquired more cows, rented more land, met Noziska, who is from New Hampshire by way of California, and the two were able to join their resources and purchase more farmland.

After 32 years working for the USDA in the Farmers Home Administration as a Farm Loan Manager, Senter retired and jumped full-time into raising Simmental cattle. Noziska was right there with her, ready to commit her energy to the seedstock business. The herd was originally commercial, but after a conversation with a neighbor and other considerations, Simmental was brought into the program with a three-quarter blood J&C Black Maximizer son from John Volk and Sons in Battle Creek, Nebraska. "We bought our first three-quarter Simmental bull in 1997 and started breeding and keeping heifers back" Senter recalls. "We were really interested in developing our females. We purchased some Angus cows that were young cows through the sale barn, and we really haven't purchased anything since then."

At the root of this decision was a desire to improve docility and take advantage of Simmental's maternal power. "We were impressed with the growth, docility, and maternal qualities of the Simmental breed," Senter recalls.

The quality of their cattle improved dramatically, and with the encouragement of friends, family and neighbors, they started keeping back replacement females, started registering animals, and quit castrating their top bull calves.

Quality Over Quantity

Today, B&B Simmental runs around 80 cows, selling an average of 15 bulls per year. Like many in the beef industry, limited resources guide the structure of the program. Land is expensive, as is labor, and with their current self-sustaining program, expansion doesn't necessarily make sense. With that, they have chosen to focus on quality over quantity. "We know we can't do volume — we're limited with land resources — so we decided to put our money into quality," Senter says.

With that scale in mind, B&B Simmental is able to dedicate more attention to detail and is committed to making sure the herd is constantly improving and that each customer is happy with their purchase. All bulls are fed and developed at the farm with a focus on making sure each animal is getting the best nutrition possible without becoming too fat.

Senter has always been inclined to place value in data and numbers, and upon becoming involved with Simmental, she immediately became familiar with the available tools. A trip to Chappell Feedlot and conversations with Tom Williams peaked Senter's interest in data collection even more. "The part that interested me was that they were doing carcass ultrasound to see if cattle were ready to be harvested," Senter recalls. "Williams told me, 'The science is there, you just have to trust it'".

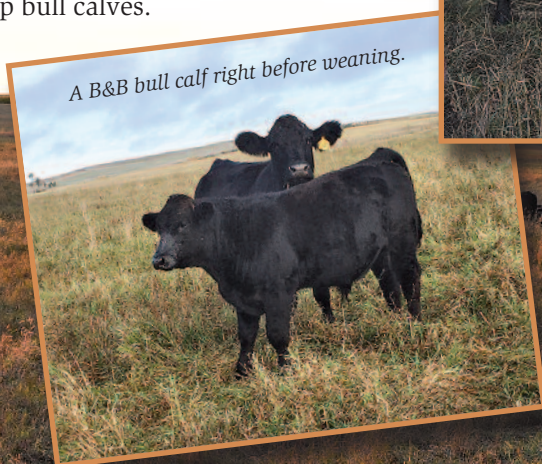
Marrying the principles of science with the no-nonsense needs of the customer are at the core of the B&B Simmental program. "I think the \$API is really helpful to a lot of bull buyers. It gives them something to hang their hat on and not be worried about," Senter explains.

DNA testing is also a tool B&B Simmental uses to validate both parentage reporting and enhance EPDs. Senter wants to know that customers can trust both the pedigree and numbers behind each bull. "I DNA test all of my bulls, even though it's expensive. I do the uLD (ultra-low density) on all of my yearling bulls we plan to sell."

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A B&B female, sired by In Dew Time and out of a New Design 878 female.



A B&B bull calf right before weaning.

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B&B Simmental also participated in the Cow Herd DNA Roundup with the goal of furthering the strength of the data backing their herd. Maternal traits have always been a focus, but recently, Senter has made it a goal to begin marketing females. This year, they bred 30 heifers, which is more than normal, and have been getting ultrasound carcass data on all of the young females, in addition to pelvic measurements. “If you’re going to do all of the testing on your cows, it doesn’t really make sense to sell all the heifers at the sale barn,” Senter says.

One of the challenges of running a small operation is the risk involved with trying unproven AI sires. The success of B&B Simmental has relied heavily on the predictability of data-backed bulls. “When they have 80-90% accuracy, we can have confidence in that,” she says. “With using those proven high-accuracy sires, I have seen our EPDs change in our cows. Our younger cows are so much better than the older cows. You can see that their calving ease, or yearling numbers, have improved and you can see it in the cattle themselves.”

Running a small operation also comes with some distinct advantages, one being customer interaction. All of B&B Simmental’s bulls are sold private treaty, and many of their buyers place value in being able to spend time looking at the cattle and discussing their purchase. “There are a lot of people who still like to go out and do things one-on-one. They like the personal touch,” Senter explains.

Noziska and Senter own and operate B&B Simmental and are responsible for everything from breeding decisions to daily work and farming. They both take great pride in their cow herd and the business they have built.

Community is at the Core

Community is central to Senter and Noziska, and plays a number of roles in their operation. Neighbors are always eager to help Senter if she has equipment questions during haying season — she puts up all of the hay required to feed the B&B cows through the winter — and in general, the community is there to help out with cow work and whatever is needed. Noziska’s granddaughter also comes every weekend during calving season to help with the work and night shifts. “We have a good support group in our neighborhood,” Senter says.

Both are members of a local CattleWomen’s group — the Rosebud Rancherettes — and the active group has recently helped put local beef in the Burke school. Senter helped manage the processing and delivery of the first three animals, and they recently delivered a new batch of locally-grown beef for the kids to eat at lunch. Senter explains, “We’re one of the few schools in South Dakota feeding the kids local beef. We’re really promoting local food in that way.”

Senter also served as an advisor when agricultural and vocationally-focused classes were added to the course options for Burke students. At the ranch, a local family — also breeders of Simmental — helps out during the summer. Ages 16, 15, and 10, the kids are a helpful and an enjoyable part of the B&B operation.

Both Senter and Noziska are quick to emphasize how much they enjoy the challenges and successes that come with raising cattle on the South Dakota plains. Simmental have been an irreplaceable piece of their success. “I think it’s a great life,” Noziska concluded. “It’s a lot of hard work, but it’s really satisfying.” ♦

