Thirty-year-old Ryan Hecksel of Mayer, Minnesota, realizes that he is more fortunate than many young cattlemen in that he is in the process of purchasing the family farm from his parents, Marlow and Darlene. “I know that it is extremely difficult to get started in agriculture today because of the high costs of land and equipment. I am very grateful to have this opportunity,” he said.

Still single, he is the youngest by 13 years, in a family of four siblings. His oldest brother, Doug, works in agricultural sales and lives just a few miles down the road from the farm.

Second brother, Lonnie, resides next door to the farm, maintains his own small herd of Simmental cattle, and makes his primary living as a stone-and-brick mason.

Wanda, the lone girl in the family, lives in “the cities” (Minneapolis-St. Paul) where she works as controller and head accountant for a restaurant chain with outlets in Minnesota and Florida.

“We’re a very close family and everyone pitches in to help when the need arises, like taking pictures of our sale cattle — it’s a real family deal. My parents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary this past December and my dad is still actively involved with the farm work, although he’s cutting back a little,” he explained. “We do hire a custom combine outfit, but pretty much handle everything else ourselves.”

In addition to his farm responsibilities, Ryan works part-time for USDA’s Farm Service Agency, doing fieldwork such as measuring grain bins, using a GPS on crops, and spot-checking compliance with various USDA programs. “They give me a call whenever they need me but is has been kind of sporadic lately,” he says. He also spends a considerable part of his summer assisting a neighbor harvest more than 300 acres of horse hay.
A Proud History

Hecksel Simmental Farm can be traced back to the early 1900s, when Ryan’s great grandfather originally acquired the land, and earned the coveted Century Farm designation a few years ago. That program, co-sponsored by the Minnesota State Fair and the Minnesota Farm Bureau, recognizes farms that have been in continuous ownership of one family for 100 years or more.

“As I was growing up, we ran a Holstein dairy, milking 55 cows,” Ryan recalls. “We acquired our first Simmental heifer in the fall of ’91, when I had a 4-H project as a nine-year old. That led to membership in the American Junior Simmental Association and I had a great learning experience attending several Regional and National Classics. After Dad decided to sell the dairy cows, we redirected our time and resources into beef cattle, which is what we’ve been doing ever since.”

Following graduation from Watertown-Mayer High School, and secure in the knowledge that he wanted to stay in agriculture, Ryan enrolled at Ridgewater Junior College, earning two-year degrees in Farm Operation/Management and Ag Business.

Their 240-acre home place, located about 40 miles west of the Minneapolis-St. Paul metro area, is primarily tillable land, and is utilized for corn, soybean and hay production. Most of what the Hecksels produce is used for cattle feed, with excess corn and soybeans sold as a cash crop. Summer pasture for their 90-head Simmental cow herd is in the form of leased parcels that range, in distance, from two to 45 miles from the farm.

When the summer grazing season concludes, cattle are hauled home, with mature cows going directly to cornstalks until the snow gets too deep. Heifers are separated to receive extra care and nutrition.

Herd Building

“Since that first exposure to Simmental through 4-H, we’ve worked steadily to build and improve our herd. Our first sizeable purchases of Simmental females were mostly red-and-white spotted and yellow traditional colored, just because we didn’t know any better. During those first few years, we ran beef and dairy cows at the same time. After selling off the dairy herd, we got a lot more serious about our Simments,” he emphasized.

“We began to realize that the trend was toward solid reds and blacks, so we quickly changed our herd around. We calve out about 80 head in the spring, and 10 in the fall. We do that for two reasons: if a real good cow comes up open or loses her calf, we can give her another chance by moving her to the fall-calving group, and secondly, age differences give us more flexibility to meet the demand for our show heifers,” he continued.

Genetics For Sale

Hecksel points to the farm’s comprehensive embryo transfer program as the key element in their ability to successfully market their genetics. “Our breeding and marketing programs are based on extensive use of AI and ET. At any given time, we may have 10 or more active donor cows and we use about 75% of our cow herd, along with some of Lonnie’s cows, as recipients. We haven’t used any cooperator herds because we’re leery of introducing diseases, such as Johne’s, from outside sources,” he elaborated.

“One of the most lucrative outlets for our genetics involves selling eggs. We sell enough to cover all of our flushing costs for the year and still make a nice little profit from that aspect,” he reports. Embryologist Dr. Doug Lain has handled the technical side of flushing, freezing and insertion of fresh eggs for several years.

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For the past two years, the Hecksels have teamed with Hilbrand Simmentals of Clara City, and AJE Cattle Company of Marshall, plus a few guest consignors to conduct the Jewels of the Northland female sale at the Hilbrand barn. That sale, held the first Saturday in December has exceeded their expectations — with great crowds and enthusiastic bidding. “We sell 25 to 30 show heifers, and the bulk of those are sold through the Gentle- men of the Northland although we also sell some private treaty,” he commented.

“We’ve sold a few herd bulls along with the females, but now we’re in the process of planning a separate bull sale for the first Thursday in April, involving the same breeders,” he said. “The bull sale will be held April 5, at the Fergus Falls sale barn. We have traditionally sold between 12 to 15 bulls each year, and we intend to sell most of this year’s crop through this April’s sale.”

In the past, Hecksel has consigned live animals to the Minnesota State Association (MSA) state sales, but was limited to offering eggs during the most recent MSA events.

He is cognizant of the fact that potential customers must be aware of the product being offered. Advertising is placed in the Register and in SimTalk, in selected local publications and on-line.

Networking also plays a big role in promotion of their genetics. “We exhibit cattle at the Minnesota State Fair, at the Black Hills Stock Show, at the North American and the National Western and I recently completed six years on the MSA Board of Directors. We get exposure, meet new people from all across the country, and raise our visibility — all good for public relations,” he concluded.◆