Simmental cattle have played a prominent role in the lives of Jerry and Barb Lee ever since the 1970s when both of their families established Simmental cowherds. Both were raised around the breed and have been enamored with them ever since. “We even met at a cattle show where we were both showing Simmentals,” Barbara explained. “I was raised on a small farm at Hermann, Missouri, about 80 miles west of St. Louis. My dad started with Angus, but he switched to Simmental after my brother and I started showing Simmental-Angus crosses that we obtained from my dad’s uncle,” she continued. “My parents have passed away but my brother, Mike Engelbrecht, continues to run the family farm. Mike’s two children are also enthusiastic about Simmental and show in 4-H. He maintains a small registered herd and Jerry and I run some of our heifers down there with his cattle.”

Jerry was born and raised in Columbia, where Lee Simmental Farms is located. “My dad was in the construction business, but started our farm in the ’70s with the traditional spotted Simmentals just like everybody else back then,” he said. “We had no experience with other breeds before that; we’ve had only Simmentals. We’ve been loyal to Simmental all along and the breed has been very good to us.”
Early on, Jerry was heavily involved in the family construction business, working with the cattle in the evenings and on weekends whenever he could find time. “Now, I’m a full-time cattleman, I don’t work construction any more,” he says.

“Our first Simmentals got too big on us. Then, we used Red Angus bulls on our females to produce F1s and to bring their size down. When the market began to call for black-hided animals, we got rid of the F1s. From there, we went to purebred Simmentals, breeding up from an Angus base,” he recalled. “We actually went through a SimAngus™ phase before there was a conscious effort to do that.”

The Lee cowherd currently numbers 200 registered females, predominantly purebred with a few SimAngus. “We moved to black-hided cattle in the early 1990s, and continue to use Angus bulls on purebred Simmental females to meet the demand for halfblood bulls,” he continued. “Our commercial buyers really like the 50-50 crosses and with our herd composition we can oblige them very easily.”

Tommy and Karen Lee, Jerry’s parents, maintain a commercial Simmental-cross herd that is closely intertwined with Jerry and Barbara’s registered animals. “We use quite a few of their cows as recipients in our embryo transfer program and they utilize our genetics for breeding purposes,” Barb says.

Their breeding program is heavily dependent on embryo transfer and artificial insemination. “We have 6 to 10 donors that we flush up to three times a year before breeding them back to get a natural calf out of them,” Jerry reported. “We generate 100 to 200 embryos annually and place them in my dad’s herd along with other cooperator herds. We also market some eggs private treaty and through the SimMagic Sale in Denver each year.”

Jerry handles his own AIing with Barb’s assistance. They synchronize and breed their donors and line up the recipients so that when embryologist Stan Huels arrives, he can flush and place the embryos as needed. “Stan is based in Illinois, but makes a circuit through this area every couple of weeks, so his schedule meshes with ours very conveniently,” he said.

Breeding emphasis has put calving ease first and foremost. “Our focus on that trait dates back to the early days of the breed in North America when we had calving issues. We know that Simmental don’t have those problems any more, even though some of these commercial guys seem to think that we do,” he stated. “We realize that one poor-calving bull could seriously jeopardize our business, so we really stay after that trait. Of course, we also concentrate on soundness, depth and growth. We shoot for 6.0 to 6.5 frame cattle with performance.”

Their genetics are currently marketed through three separate sales. “This year, we scheduled an open heifer sale in November, a bred heifer sale in December and our bull sale in March,” Barb reports.

“For the past 4-5 years, we’ve been selling everything on-line through Breeder’s World, a sales service firm headquartered in Bellevue, Ohio,” she continued. “This method works very well, and has it been well received.”

The Lees have hosted an open house before the open heifer sale so potential buyers could view the sale offerings in advance and have any questions answered. “Many of our customers are repeat buyers and they help spread the word to other breeders,” he says.

She explained how the on-line sale works. “Bidders pre-register with Breeder’s World and receive a buyer’s number. Buyers, through their computers or phones, start bidding on all sale animals at the same time and bidding continues until a pre-set deadline,” she said. “It could be from 11:00 a.m. to 7:00p.m., for instance. Breeder’s World oversees the entire bidding process and communicates primarily by email. Following the close of bidding, the company then handles all transactions, sending us a updated sale summary throughout the process.”

From that point, Jerry arranges transportation for delivery of all sold lots. “We’ve sent cattle to dozens of states, from Texas to West Virginia, from Oregon to Minnesota,” he said.

“We are in the process of building our own sale facility on the farm, aiming eventually toward live cattle sales. One of the drawbacks with on-line sales is that you are limited in the number of animals you can sell without losing buyer interest. We generally sell 20-25 head through on-line sales. With production sales, we can sell more cattle,” he added. “We’ll also be able to help our seedstock customers sell their genetics by inviting them to consign to our on-farm sales.”

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Grazing land in the Columbia area is difficult to find, leading to leasing of parcels that may be as far apart as 30 miles, necessitating considerable transport of cattle. The Lees home place consists of 100 acres, and the entire herd is brought home for the winter. Calving is geared to start in January and end in April. “We don’t do much farming, except hay and some limited corn. We grind the corn for feed,” he says.

“We also sell some show animals and do a little showing ourselves,” he commented. “We go to the North American in Louisville and to the National Western in Denver every year. We won the Denver pen of five purebred bulls competition this past January. We show primarily for the exposure and the contacts we make.”

Among their proudest accomplishments are two prized bulls: LLSF Pays to Believe and LLSF Uprising. Both animals are being heavily used in A.I., and their semen and embryos have topped several sales.

Barbara works off the farm for Shelter Insurance Companies, based in Columbia. In addition, she has responsibility for all records, registrations, sale footnotes and advertising.

They’re the parents of two grown children. Kaitlyn, 23, graduated from the University of Missouri (MU) with a degree in Biochemistry and is presently working on her Ph.D. in Pharmacy. Zach, 20, works for a large grain farmer while taking classes from Mobley junior college, Mexico branch. He intends to transfer to MU with the intention of earning a degree in Ag Management.

“We’ve enjoyed the on-going relationship we’ve had with Simmental,” Jerry summarized. “We have always focused on those calving ease numbers while also emphasizing enough growth to pump up our customer’s weaning weights.”