

**Lisa Zirkle of Quicksburg, in northwestern Virginia not far from the West Virginia border, has been enamored of Simmental cattle ever since her late father gave her a bottle calf back in 1976.**

Typically, her present day cowherd of 200 purebred Simmentals carries genetics that can be traced back to her father and uncle's cattle — with an occasional infusion of purchased purebred genetics.

Zirkle enthusiastically embraces the rich history of her surroundings — from her own storied ancestry, to the lineage of her cattle, to her idyllic Simmental farm, located in the fertile, picturesque Shenandoah Valley.

“My ancestors came here in the 1760s, and I am the ninth generation to make a living on the land of this beautiful valley,” she explained. “My family

endured the hardships associated with two significant conflicts, the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, not to mention occasional skirmishes with roaming bands of Indians. It is said that Peter Jefferson, a surveyor and father of President Thomas Jefferson, stayed in the original cabin on this farm.”

She lives in a house that is just a half mile from where the Zirkle family built and operated a mill. The house, which is described as ‘Greek Revival Style,’ was constructed in 1859. During the Civil War, Union soldiers burned the barn but spared the house because the people living there posed no threat. “The Yankees swept through the valley, burning all food sources since their objective was to starve the Confederate troops into submission,” she said.



# True to Her Roots

By Dan Rieder

**A Virginia breeder manages her Simmental cowherd based on modern science even as she honors the past.**



Shenandoah Valley Simmentals has evolved over time, from a self-sufficient early American family farm, to an apple and peach orchard, to range turkeys, to a chicken grow-out, to a dairy, to a commercial cattle enterprise until the present, when it has become a highly respected and widely known source of seed stock genetics.

“My great grandfather bought this farm in 1902, and it has since been designated a Century Farm by the State of Virginia. When my grandfather took over, he established a peach orchard and a Holstein dairy herd before converting to a commercial beef operation, using mainly Hereford breeding stock,” she reports.

“In the early 1970s, my father, Blair, and his brother, Bill, introduced Simmental, by purchasing ‘Caesar,’ a Canadian purebred bull acquired via the famed King Ranch of Texas. I’ll never forget him — he was a huge, red, white-faced monster, but as gentle as a lamb. We crossed him on commercial Angus and Hereford x Charolais cows and bred up from there.”

Lisa grew up firm in the knowledge that she was going to be a farmer and a cattle breeder. “It is all I ever wanted to do,” she exclaimed. “The first four calves produced by that heifer my dad gave me were bulls. Now, I’m patient, but I figured I couldn’t wait for her to start producing heifers, so I went to Bannister Simmentals at Charlottesville and bought two females — and that’s how I got started.”

She continued to expand her Simmental herd while attending Virginia Tech, Among her classmates, incidentally, was Bill McDonald, Blacksburg, who recently completed a year as Chairman of the ASA Board of Trustees.

Armed with a degree in Animal Science with a pre-vet option and a minor in biology, she accepted a job in laboratory

management for a large poultry company, a position she held for 20 years. At the same time, she continued to grow her Simmental herd while working side-by-side with her parents, Blair and Maxine, mornings, evenings and on weekends and holidays. Blair passed away 10 years ago, but Maxine still lives on the farm. Her identical twin, Madeline, lives in nearby Mount Jackson. Lisa’s only sibling, Michael, is a management consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton in Leesburg.

“For years, I worked closely with my dad, and the two of us pretty much comprised our labor force. He taught me so much but I wish I had listened a little more,” she lamented. While Lisa continues to perform much of the labor she also calls on several part-time workers for assistance from time-to-time.

“Finally, a few years ago, I decided I was going to do what I really believe I was born to do. I said ‘goodbye’ to corporate America and went to farming full-time. It was a wonderful move that I wish I had done sooner. I haven’t regretted it one bit.”

She has teamed up with Barry Armstrong, a local fencing contractor. “Having Barry as a part of this operation has been a blessing. He has helped take this operation to the next level. Without his assistance it would have been impossible to have on-site production sales and to grow the herd to this size.” She also leases and farms Armstrong’s beautiful mountain home place.

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Lisa’s mom Maxine and her identical twin, Madeline.



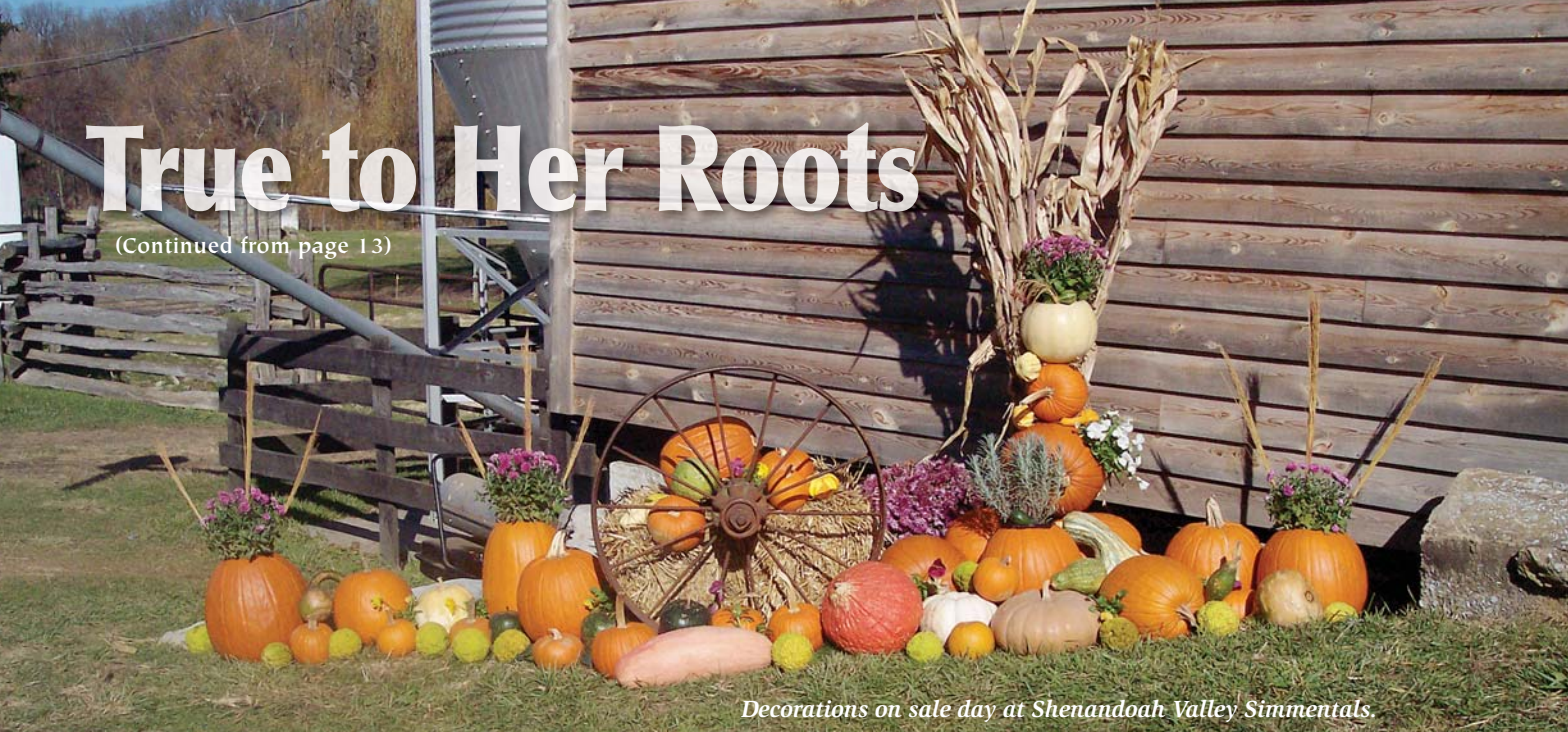
The farm layout, dating back to the mid-1700s.





# True to Her Roots

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*Decorations on sale day at Shenandoah Valley Simmentals.*

## The Cowherd

"I could have chosen any breed, but in hindsight, I wouldn't change a thing. Simmentals have been very good to me; they are so docile. My goal is to raise productive, efficient, performance-oriented, practical cattle. Our cattle must be very efficient on grass, which fortunately, we typically have in abundance, including fescue. The calves have to come with a lot of vigor since we can have wicked winter weather and summers can be stifling hot and humid. Plus, our cows must have strong maternal ability with plenty of longevity," she commented.

"We never chased any of the fads that come and go in this business, and avoided the large, raw-boned animals of the late 80s and early 1990s," she continued.

"Because we graded up partially from Angus, we had some of the earliest black Simmentals. I was a little hesitant to go all black because so many of the black-hided cattle just didn't appeal to me. Mistakes were made when the blacks first took hold, anything that was black was retained for breeding stock regardless of quality," she says. "I waited until I found blacks that would work — but I still breed red cattle, both females and bulls. Our black-red ratio is about three to one. I defy anybody to tell me the color of an animal's hide when looking at a good steak!"

Although her cowherd is primarily purebred, she has begun to experiment with SimAngus™. "We sold our first set of yearlings in 2012 and they were phenomenal!" she said. "We will have some SimAngus calves for sale this fall and many more next year. It's a very popular cross."

She is committed to using all available science and technological tools in conjunction with cattle herd improvement, including extensive use of artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and incorporation of progressive ASA programs such as Total Herd Enrollment (THE).

Until the last few years, feed had been largely purchased. Development pressure, from living within two hours of Washington, D.C., makes renting crop and pastureland extremely difficult. But, with the addition of Armstrong's farm, they are now farming 1,200 acres, primarily hay (timothy, orchard grass, brome and clover) and corn, most of which will be consumed on the farm. The homegrown corn will be utilized in growing out sale bulls.

Her 5th Annual Sale is scheduled for November 23, at the farm. "We'll be offering more than 70 head, including a fancy set of 40 to 50 bulls, bred and open heifers and young cows with calves at side, as well as top-end embryos," she reports. "Some of those calves at side will be SimAngus, out of purebred Simmental dams and Angus bulls. Last year, cattle sold into 15 states and the feedback I've received on the performance of our cattle has been very positive and we have many repeat customers."

## Reflecting on the Past

Zirkle applies extra effort to maintain her ties to the history of the farm.

As an example, she decorates her 1860s bank barn, which doubles as a sale ring, adjacent to the footprint of the original barn that burned during the Civil War, with antiques and other relics. These include horse-drawn implements, a cider press, grain cleaner and milk churn, to name a few. The sale-day meal may include such old-time delicacies as homemade rivel soup (a hearty combination of flour, eggs and beef broth); cherry, apple and blueberry cobbler all made in Dutch ovens right on the farm; and hot mulled apple cider.

In honor of their rich farming heritage, she created Shenandoah Heirloom Produce, a small business specializing in growing vegetable, fruit, herb and flower varieties similar to those that may have been grown on the farm as far back as the mid-1700s. "These beautiful old varieties are not only tasty but may provide more nutrients than their commercially produced counterparts. There's something special about planting seeds that have been handed down from generation to generation. It's a tradition I plan to continue. I love to preserve the harvest, too. We all pitch in to can, freeze and dry everything from



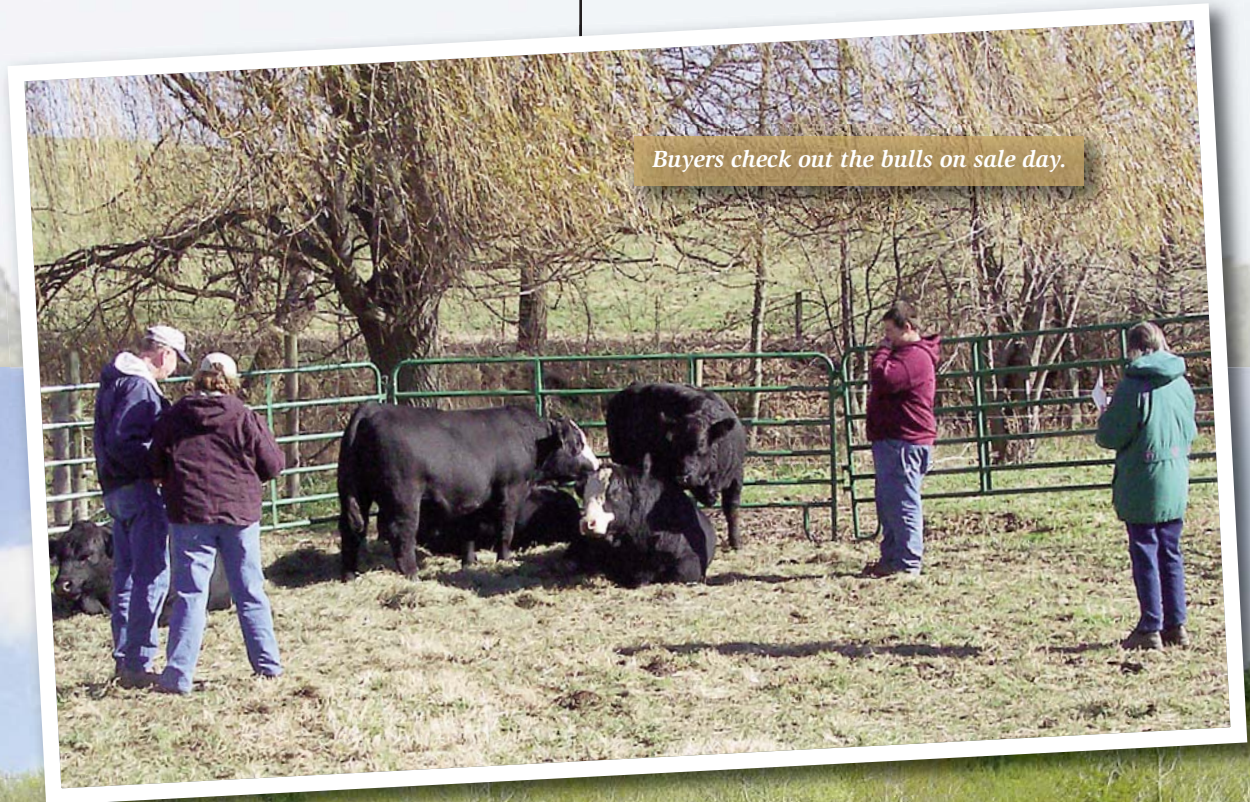
sauerkraut to rhubarb to peach snits. In these uncertain times, there's a great sense of security going into winter with a full cellar and pantry."

In addition, she has stocked the farm with heritage live-stock breeds such as brown egg laying hens (Dominiques and Buff Orpingtons), Pilgrim geese, guineas and Tunis sheep, with pasture hogs to be added next year.

She continues to search for and discover plentiful arti-facts, including pottery shards, glass plates, eating utensils, fishing gigs, tomahawks, arrowheads, and recently a mint-

condition Confederate belt buckle. "I've only just scratched the surface of what is here. It's amazing what can still be found in good condition after all of these years."

"I greatly enjoy mixing the past with the present. While cattle are my greatest passion I take pride in pre-serving traditions used by my ancestors on this old family farm" she concluded. "I get up every day and love what I'm doing and that makes every day exciting. There is no question in my mind that this is what I was born to do." ♦



*Buyers check out the bulls on sale day.*



*Lisa with Barry Armstrong, neighbor and business partner.*