

Country Folks

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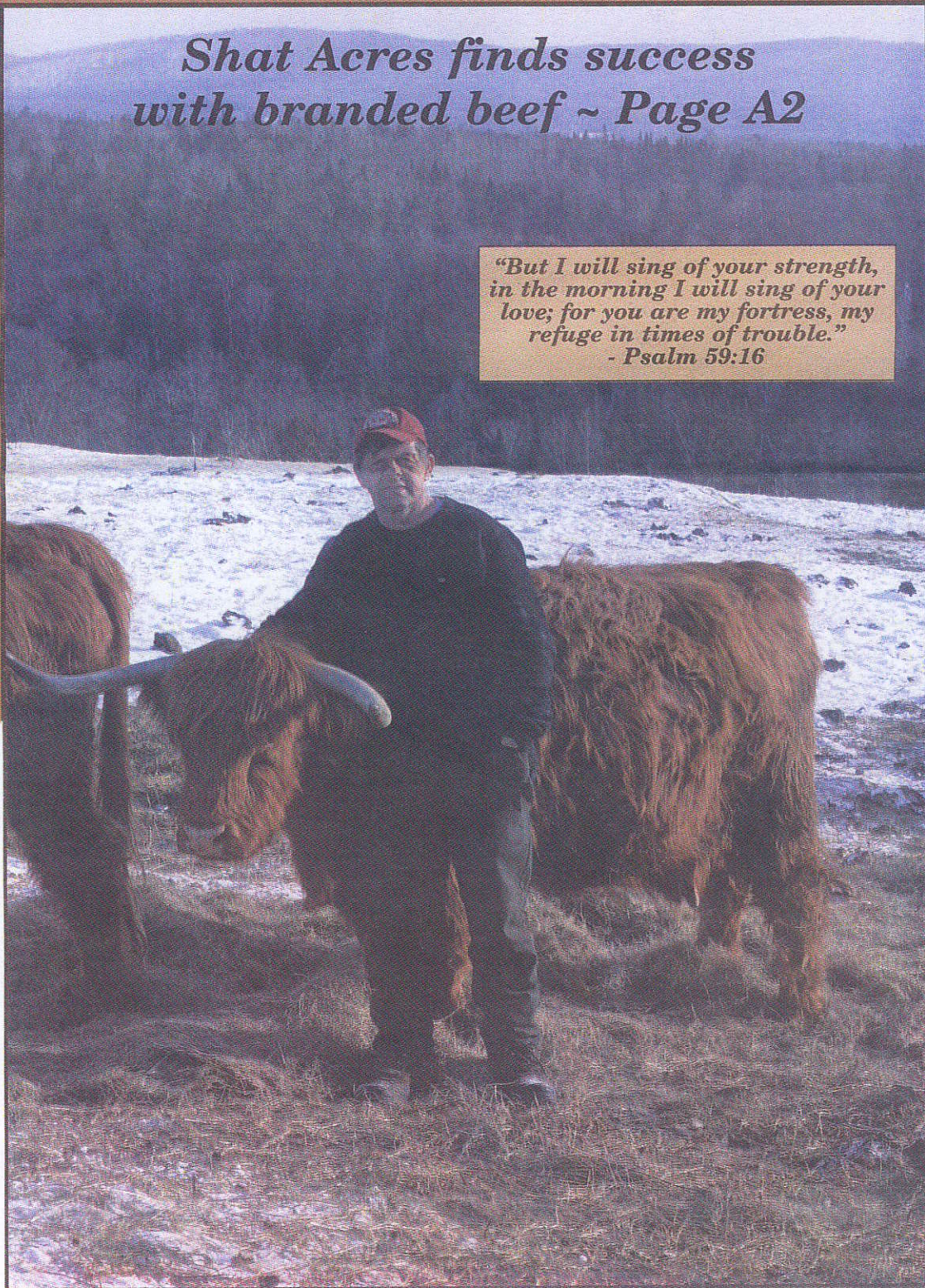
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with branded beef ~ Page A2*

*"But I will sing of your strength,
in the morning I will sing of your
love; for you are my fortress, my
refuge in times of trouble."
- Psalm 59:16*



Shat Acres finds success with branded beef

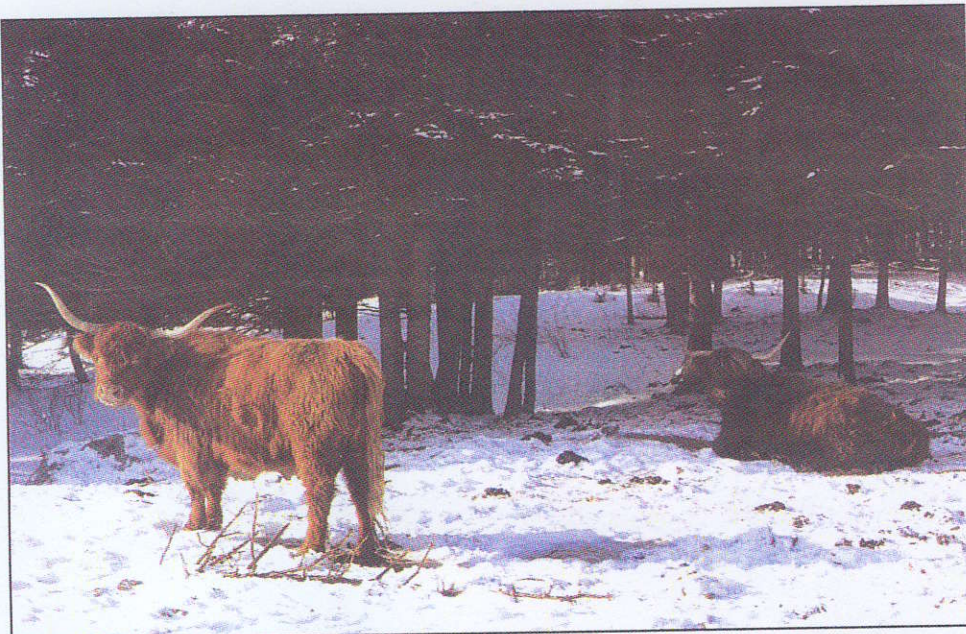
by Sally Colby

Carroll Shatney spent more than 40 years raising and improving his herd of Highland cattle in Greensboro Bend, VT. But when he could no longer manage the work involved in raising beef cattle, he decided to disperse. When the herd veterinarian learned of the plan, he took Carroll's son Ray aside and told him, "These animals cannot be sold. They are too special."

Ray took over the herd 1998 and has continued to improve the herd of Highland cattle his father had so carefully developed. Today, the herd of 90 includes several cow families whose offspring have garnered numerous regional and national awards. More importantly, however, is that Greenfield Highland Beef — the name brand under which Shat Acres beef is sold — has gained a following among both consumers and chefs.

Janet Steward, Ray's business partner, says that Ray's family had always marketed animals through local slaughterhouses, but the Highlands brought low prices as 'non-conforming animals'. "We had been selling some halves and quarters," said Janet, "but in Vermont, that isn't how people want to buy beef." Shat Acres' direct marketing idea was conceived when Janet, a teacher and photographer, was selling her greeting cards and matted and framed prints at a farmers' market. People would come by and compliment her work, then line up to purchase beef from a nearby vendor. "I told Ray that we have 65 animals and they're all grass-fed - it's what people are asking for."

A USDA plant in St. Johnsbury was willing to turn out custom cut, vacuum-packed beef with the Greenfield Beef label. When they started, Ray predicted that they'd sell two or three animals a year. "That was two years ago in December," said Janet. "We sold 24 that year, and 50 this past year." Although Greenfield Beef was popular at the farmers' market, some cuts weren't selling as well as others so Janet explored additional options. "My goal was to figure out how to sell every piece of every cow, every week," said Janet. "We now have a restaurant that buys every tenderloin we produce for \$19.50/pound. A local restaurant purchases strip loin roasts for strip steaks, and a pizza place buys hamburger." Another restaurant buys short ribs, and a restaurant in Brooklyn, New York buys 50 pounds of burger and one heart every week. One surprising market has been soup stock bones, which sell for \$2/pound. For every restaurant that serves Greenfield Highland beef, Janet provides a doorknob that has a picture of 'Vickie', Shat Acres'



The Shat Acres herd has access to wooded areas for shelter.

2006 National Role of Excellence Cow, and information about the beef. "We are amazed at what has happened," said Janet. "People ask which restaurants have our beef."

Shat Acres cattle are raised on two farms with plenty of pasture for the cattle. The main farm includes 177 acres, all of which is fenced for grazing, with ample wooded areas for shelter. The other 42-acre farm and neighboring fields provide additional acreage. "Here in Vermont, if you fence someone's field, they are happy to have animals in there," said Janet. "It keeps the fields open and opens the fencerows." Hay is cut from acreage that isn't being grazed, and in winter, the round bales are unrolled for cattle. In spring, the leftover hay and manure is collected and spread on the fields.

Since Highland cattle are somewhat slow to mature, females are bred for the first time at 3 years. Breeding is natural and timed so that calves are born on pasture in March and April. The tough culling and selection by Ray's father for so many years has resulted in

highly productive, quiet cows that are easy to work with. A newly constructed barn provides shelter as well as a safe handling area. "We have to be able to handle those animals and have them calm enough to go to the slaughterhouse," said Janet, who designed the handling area. "With the gates, we can create about 15 different pens. The key to efficient handling is the 4' alleyway around the back. It makes routine work such as tattooing and eartagging easier on both animals and people."

With slower growth than the other beef breeds, getting Highland beef to market — or table — takes somewhat longer than other beef breeds. "They grow a lot slower," Janet explained. "We can't butcher at the same age as other beef breeds; usually at 30 months. But we can get a premium price for the beef because once people taste it, they're willing to pay more for it — particularly because it's grass-fed and finished." To get beef to the market faster, Ray and Janet are experimenting with a Highland x Shorthorn cross. So far, they're pleased with the extra frame and faster growth of that cross.

Each year, Ray selects three to five young Highlands that have show potential and raises them with additional grain to keep them competitive. "Every year, it's been a calf out of Cinnamon Swirl and Scorpio," said Janet. "Scorpio puts long legs and frame on them and Cinnamon Swirl is a great mother." Several Cinnamon family members were exhibited at the 2010 National Western Stock Show in Denver. Shat Acres cattle are shown throughout the northeast and finish up in Denver at the National Western Stock Show.

Shat Acres is the oldest closed herd in the country — they haven't added a cow in over 30 years. The herd includes cows, their daughters and granddaughters; with cows remaining productive into their teens. One herd sire, Lance of Gordon's Fold, is the sire of many of the cows in the Shat Acres herd. "We're unique in that we do both a show string and beef," said Janet. "People can come and see the animals and see how they're raised."

Ray and Janet have made a commitment to return a portion of what they raise to their community through the Hardwick CAE (Community for an Agricultural Economy). This organization brings farmers and community together to improve the region's image. Greenfield Highland beef is combined with local vegetables and herbs, packaged as spaghetti sauce or chili then appears at the food bank in quart containers as value-added beef. "That has been a commitment from the beginning," said Janet. "That we would tithe a portion of an animal every month."



Shat Acres' new barn and handling area makes routine herd work less stressful for both cattle and their handlers. Photos courtesy of Janet Steward