

# 2012 Agweek

## Rural Meat Market

Clyde Reister has built a meat processing and catering business that involves his extended family and has found success on the home farm.

Clyde Reister seems as happy as any North Dakota farmer/rancher can be.

And why not?

At age 55, he's often been on the harsh side of economic whipsaws — the booms and busts in agriculture and energy industries. At each turn, he's reinvented his career. This time, he has built a meat processing and catering business that involves his extended family, and has found success on the home farm.

The surprise is that the business is succeeding south of Medina, N.D., in one of the state's low-population regions, and 54 miles from a major town.

“If we'd have listened to everybody, this would never have happened,” Clyde says with a smile. “They said, ‘who's going to come out into the country to buy meat?’ But it's worked fine. Farmers and others will travel 50 miles to buy something good.”

### **Economic ups, downs**

Clyde is at home in western Stutsman County, N.D. He was born about seven miles south of Medina. His parents, Wilbert and Darlis, moved north of Streeter, N.D., in 1966. He was the eldest of six siblings. He had two brothers and three sisters. His youngest brother, Craig, stayed home and farmed and operated a 45-cow dairy with their father.

He graduated high school in 1974 then struck out on his own.

“There was no work on the farm for me,” Clyde recalls. “I offered some people \$200 an acre to buy a farm. They accepted it but a couple of weeks later, they said a neighbor had offered them \$400. I'd even gone to the FmHA (Farmers Home Administration) to get approved for it.”

With his immediate farming hopes dashed, Clyde initially went to work as a carpenter. He had his own business for a year, and worked with a friend. But then loan interest rates went to 18 and 19 percent, and that market dried up.

“So I decided to go to Gillette, Wyo., and spent four years there in the oil fields,” he says. “And — you guessed it — that boom went bust, too. Bad luck,” he says, laughing.

In 1986, Clyde returned home for good.

## **Home for good**

Things had changed. Clyde had married his wife, Penny, in 1977, and they had a young family. In 1978, Lance, their oldest, was born, followed by Wade in 1979, and Matthew in 1983.

In his first year back in Streeter, Clyde rented 320 acres of land from his father. It had a dairy barn, but late summer of 1987, an electrical fire burned the barn down. Suddenly, he had to build a new barn.

The FmHA loan officer told him to move the cattle into another barn he owned more than a mile from his farmstead. But he disagreed. He got a loan with the State Bank of Streeter, and started building a new barn. With the help of neighbors, he soon was milking again.

By the late 1990s, he was up to about 60 cows, but FmHA was going to kick him out of the chattel loan program. “The only way I could stay with FmHA was to borrow even more money to buy either cattle or machinery. I said I don’t want to do that.”

It was 2002. His youngest son, Matthew, graduated from high school, and Clyde decided to sell the cows. Penny, who had worked part-time at a retirement home in Gackle, N.D., took a full-time job as a certified nursing assistant at the then-Anne Carlsen School in Jamestown, N.D.

## **Truck or smokehouse**

Clyde still farmed.

He bought 800 acres and was frugal, investing only in used equipment. He bought an International 1066 tractor for \$6,000 and used it to seed his 432 acres. He had 30 beef cattle, and sold calves. After two years he rented another 160 acres.

Lance graduated high school in 1996 and went to North Dakota State College of Science in Wahpeton for refrigeration. He lived in Tower City, N.D., and worked in Fargo, N.D., eventually at Drayton Industries, an industrial bakery where he learned food processing plant procedures, including Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point or HACCP. He was married to Jami in 2002 and moved home in 2003.

Clyde put most of his land into the Conservation Reserve Program and bought a pickup — “the first new one I ever had” — but soon traded it off.

Why? He wanted to buy a smokehouse.

To Lance, it was a sign that his father was serious about a new business they both could be a part of.

Living on a farm, the Reisters traditionally did some butchering for their own use. Sometime in the 1980s, they started doing some for neighbors, when asked. It turned into a whole new career for them.

They became known locally for making sausage.

“I had an old family recipe that I tinkered around with until we got it good enough to sell,” Clyde says. Eventually, they knew they had to make their efforts more formalized and businesslike.

### **Feasibility study**

In about 2004, Reister had a feasibility study conducted for a meat business. The study cost \$14,000, but it was instrumental in acquiring financing. He initially attempted to build a facility and store in Streeter. That deal was inches from completion, but all of the pieces didn’t come together, so Reister eventually decided to retrofit their dairy barn back home.

That year, they borrowed \$250,000 to build the project. Formed as an “S corporation,” Reister Meats has 100 shares, currently owned by Clyde and Penny.

With their carpentry and refrigeration skills, Clyde and Lance did much of the building themselves. Reister Meats has a walk-in freezer and five walk-in coolers. Clyde’s mother, Darlis, who had previous restaurant experience in Jamestown, runs a bakery and coffee shop in Medina, in addition to the meat case. Penny does the major bookwork for the various parts of the business.

In about 2006, they added a catering wagon. Particularly instrumental in this business are Clyde’s sister, Tina Reister, and a niece, Natasha Reister. Sons Matthew, who works with Applied Engineering Inc. at Lisbon, N.D., and Wade, who works in a tire shop at Jamestown, help with the big catering jobs. They’ve handled small and large catering jobs — as many as 1,000 people — and as far away as New Salem, Bismarck, Sykeston and Woodworth, all in North Dakota.

### **Niche business**

“That’s my ace in the hole,” Clyde says. “When I talked to other locker plants, they said summers always slow down, so you have to have some kind of ‘niche’ to make it through those times. Some butcher houses have a greenhouse or a grocery store. We have the catering.”

Reister Meats acquires their beef cattle from Clyde’s brother, Craig in Medina and other neighboring ranchers.

They handle up to 400 deer, but those numbers were down more than 35 percent this year. Clyde says he’s fortunate because other butchers he’s talked with have seen 50 percent declines.

Lance is fond of listing the products the company produces, often finishing with a “boy-you’d-like-that-one” kind of smile. Reister Meats produces 14 bratwurst recipes — the standard ones and then unusual ones such as blueberry. Apple cinnamon seems to be doing well and sauerkraut. He lists four kinds of beef sticks. The products have expanded. They have gotten to know some of the spice suppliers, who have been helpful with recipe ideas. “You kind of tweak it until it is right,” Clyde says.

There have been recent developments, but the Reisters have been gradually growing the business to where they want it.

In March 2009, they built a bakery in Medina in a former drugstore.

In 2010, the Reisters completed a remodeling and expansion that included a new catering kitchen.

In 2011, they started a Facebook page for Reister Meats, but handle orders by phone. Occasionally, some traveler will pull up at their door — new customers they've never met, from all over the country.

It's all been a dream come true, Clyde says.

“And I would say that if you have a dream, go for it,” Clyde says. “I didn't want to expand on the cropping, all the land and machinery. But this was a way to have my son here at the farm, and have my grandchildren grow up close. It's great.”