

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Bill and Velva Notter were named 2013 Historical Master Breeders by the Brown Swiss Historical Society at the recent National Brown Swiss Convention July 3-6 in Milwaukee, Wis.

It would be hard to find any couple in any era of Brown Swiss history that has given more of themselves to the breed for over 60 years. Locally and nationally they served the breed well. Velva was at the convention to accept the award. Bill died in 2011.

“I never thought we’d be voted in,” said Velva, noting she and Bill received the most votes out of the 11 nominations. She is very honored to receive the award after being nominated by Marc and Janel Wailes of Double W Dairy in Holyoke.

“Farming is hard—dairy farming is worse!” said Velva, noting just how much there is to consider when running a dairy operation.



Velva Notter, pictured in front center, and her late husband Bill are named the 2013 Historical Master Breeders by the Brown Swiss Historical Society. Pictured from left are Rich Hill, chairman of the awards committee; Russ Giesy, chairman of the historical committee; Notter; Notter’s daughter Jennifer Kumm and husband Marlin; and Roger

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Nietzel, head of the preservation committee.

She said after people retire, they wonder what others will remember about them and their work. "People do have a long memory ... People must have found something good in what you did," she said.

"Something like this gives you a warm, fuzzy feeling," she added with a chuckle.

The Historical Society was organized in 2006 and this is the fourth year for the award. The Notters are added to the breed's elite list of the most influential breeders and leaders of the industry's hallowed past.

The Notters were involved in the dairy business at their farm a couple miles east of Holyoke on Highway 6 from 1978-2000, but their dairy history goes back much farther than that.

While neither of the New Jersey natives lived on a family farm, they both got involved in the industry while still in school.

Young Bill started work at Lee's Hill Farm, New Vernon, N.J., when he was 13 years old in 1941, working with that world-renowned herd on vacations and weekends until he graduated in 1950 from New Jersey College of Agriculture in New Brunswick, N.J.

Even though they lived on opposite ends of the county, it was at college that he met Velva Meyer, who had taken the 4-H route to a dairy career. She said as a girl she was allowed to keep some cows on the farm where her dad worked. "I just liked the farming—much to my mother's dismay!" said Velva.

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

4-H helped Velva get into college, where she made a deal with the college to stay at the women's school but take classes with the men, since at that time women weren't allowed to study that degree. Velva's degree in dairy and animal husbandry in 1948 was the first awarded to a woman in that venue at the college.

Following college, Bill was herdsman at High Meadow Farm in Wallingford, Conn. Several years were spent there working to improve the herd.

To widen the scope of experience, Bill accepted the job of manager at the newly-set-up Hillwinds-Ladderlook Farm in Greenfield, Mass., helping its owner establish a top-notch Brown Swiss herd. The breeding was such that when the Notters started their own herd, they depended heavily on these genetics.

The dream of their own herd would not go away, and when the opportunity came in 1959 to rent a farm near Gladstone, N.J., they took the plunge, starting with 23 Brown Swiss and their son's 4-H calf.

Venture Farm animals appeared on the new Bell Ringer list and were members of the N.J. state herd to Waterloo in 1962.

In 1965, the herd was moved to Cobleskill, N.Y., when the Notters purchased a farm in the heart of Brown Swiss country. Here for the next 11 and a half years, the herd grew and developed. With the Eastern Breeders Sale in Cobleskill each year (the longest continuous dairy sale in the nation—77 years), the Notters became unofficial hosts for activities and visitors as well as working committee members.

Production was paramount. In 1975 they pictured their "Five-Cow Million-Pound Herd"—five living cows with a total production of 1,076,778 pounds of milk and 45,203 pounds of fat within a herd of 55 cows. And from that time on, there could always be one or more "herds" that could be assembled with lifetime credits over a million pounds of milk.

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

One quart is 2.15 pounds, so it means the farm has consistent production, said Velva. “We like strong cows.”



In 1975 in New York, the Notters pictured their “Five-Cow Million-Pound Herd,” which was five living cows with a total production of 1,076,778 pounds of milk and 45,203 pounds of fat.

Bill served as president of the New York Association and then as national director for the Brown Swiss Association from 1973-78. He later served as national president from 1980-83. He was most proud that during his term the National Youth Program was established.

Velva chaired the Cow Recognition Committee in 1975 that designed programs still in effect today.

Bill and Velva’s kids “learned to be tough” while showing Brown Swiss, according to Velva. Velinda (Notter) Kirschner resides in Schoharie, N.Y., and Bill Notter III and Jennifer (Notter) Kumm are in Holyoke.

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

While in New York, Velinda was named Brown Swiss Girl of the Year in New York. Velva said son Bill Notter III also always had top cows.

In 1978, the Notters gave up the fight with the urban development around Cobleskill and New York state politics, moving the entire herd west to the high plains of Holyoke. “Every time you turned around, there was something different,” said Velva. She noted part of their farmland in New York is now a Wal-Mart Supercenter parking lot.

“Holyoke was a place we could bring the cows without having to build a barn,” said Velva. “The cows loved it!” Environment changed many breeding decisions, but with generations of strong cows as a nucleus, the herd size increased to 350 head.

The farm was incorporated to include Bill III and wife Pat and Jennifer, who in 1984 was named the National Outstanding Brown Swiss Junior.

The Notters bred two bulls that were popular in the A.I. industry—Ventures ESP Babaray and Ventures Sunny Bruce.

Velva served on the state Dairy Herd Improvement board and became secretary/treasurer of the Rocky Mountain Brown Swiss Association in 1980. She continued to serve in that position for three decades and still serves as treasurer today.

Velva has served as an integral member of the Historical Society since its inception in 2006. The Brown Swiss breed came to America in 1869, she said, so the society is collecting history to compile a book about Brown Swiss’ important past.

Velva is also the chairman of the publicity committee, which publishes four Brown Swiss Chronicle issues each year.

Brown Swiss honors Bill and Velva Notter

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

When Bill developed some health issues in 1997, Venture-West held a reduction sale. The rest were merchandised privately or in sales until 2001.

In 2000, they pictured their last “Five-Cow Million-Pound Herd” with totals of 1,076,960 pounds of milk , 41,382 pounds of fat and 36,411 pounds of protein.

After being involved in the dairy business from 1941-2000, it was hard for Bill to give up his love, so he would go over to Double W Dairy of Holyoke to “keep the boys straight!” said Velva. He especially loved to mentor young kids over the years.

Looking back on the decades of dairy farming, Velva gave much credit to her charismatic husband and her kids. “Without them, we couldn’t have done it!” she said. “It was a good life for all of us.”

Jennifer, her husband Marlin and daughter Morganne accompanied Velva on her trip to Wisconsin to accept the award.

One of the main traits of serious purebred breeders is their true love of working with their animals—making every generation just a little bit better than the last. No one loved their cows more or did it better than Bill and Velva Notter.

Holyoke Enterprise July 18, 2013