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4-H project becomes Moyer family showpig business

BY KYLE SHARP

Florida, Maryland, Arizona, Iowa, Texas, Minnesota ... the state names rattle off the tongues of brothers Andrew and Ben Moyer as they try to recall all the states they've sold pigs to over the past few years.

"We've sold to quite a few states — more than 20," Andrew said. "We just had some people from Montana in who bought some bred gilts."

That's a rather impressive accomplishment for a family business that originated as the brothers' 4-H projects back in 1985, when Andrew was 12 and Ben only 9. Now at the ages of 34 and 31, respectively, Andrew and Ben both work full-time on the family operation, Tom Moyer and Family, which produces quality showpigs near Wauseon in Fulton County.

The current operation consists of about 115 Hampshire, Yorkshire and crossbred sows and is owned by the brothers' parents, Tom and Jane Moyer; Andrew, his wife, Jacki, their son, Payton, 7, and daughter, Addison, 3; and Ben and his wife, Jessica, and their son, Trenton, 2.

"When it comes to the day-to-day operation, Ben and I are mainly in charge," Andrew said. "But obviously everybody chips in."

Andrew specializes in genetic advancement, sales, customer service and nursery management. Ben concentrates on daily herd management tasks such as farrowing, breeding and continued advancement of the purebred animals. Their dad is involved, but on a lesser basis.

"We've always got along doing things," Ben said. "We kind of have our specialty areas in the business, and it works out good that way."

It helps that their parents instilled in them a strong work ethic, made them detail oriented, taught them to get along and then gave them the freedom to grow the business as they saw fit.

"Dad's interest in this whole thing has been to help us do the best we can. He's never really told us we have to do it this way or that way," Andrew said. "I guess we've been fortunate that he and Mom have provided us with the opportunity to do this."



Ben, left, and Andrew Moyer have experienced a lot of success since they started their Tom Moyer & Family show pig business in Fulton County. The operation originated from the brothers' 4-H projects.

The whole family also has the same final goal in mind.

"We all want to make the best prod-

uct possible and have as many satisfied customers as we can," Ben said.

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LIVESTOCK

From page 1

Considering the strong family nature of the current business, it's only fitting that another member of the extended family initially peaked the Moyer brothers' interest in pigs. Their dad grew up on a traditional family farm and hogs weren't his specialty. The passion for pigs started when Andrew traveled to Michigan and helped his uncle, Wayne Stutzman, with hog production sales.

Andrew showed chickens his first year of 4-H, but switched to hogs in year two after buying some Durocs from "Uncle Wayne." In 1985, they bought their first boar and within a year were breeding and raising their own pigs.

"We've always been interested in buying and raising pigs for show," Andrew said. "We enjoyed the shows and showed at the state and county fairs. We never really had an interest in the commercial side of it at all."

In 1989, the brothers bought their first Hampshire and the main focus became showpigs and Hampshire breeding hogs. They started selling their first showpigs in the early 1990s. The Moyers had about 15 to 20 sows at the time.

Andrew went to college at Ohio State University, majoring in animal sciences, and while there decided that raising showpigs was what he would like to do someday full time, if he could. While Andrew was in college in Columbus, eventually graduating in 1996, Ben stayed closer to home, helping their dad on the farm, and attending and graduating from Defiance College in 1999.

Once Andrew was out of college, the Moyers began expanding the pig operation, while also holding off-farm jobs. They went to more shows and in 1999 got their first big win with a Hampshire boar at the National Swine Registry's Showpig Extravaganza in Richmond, Ind. It sold for \$7,000.

"That got us excited about it, so we started buying gilts and making them better," Andrew said.

They started expanding the facilities in 2005 with the addition of a heated show barn.

"In the spring, the pigs we sell go in there. There are 20 pens with shavings, and there will be 10 to 15 head per pen," Andrew said. "That's basically the barn we sell out of. It's like a showroom for a

furniture store. People come and look at our pigs and buy them from there."

Their dad owns all the facilities, which, in addition to the show barn, consists of a farrowing house, nursery, enclosed sow barn and a recently completed finishing barn. They also are renting a second farrowing barn from a neighbor this winter.

The Moyers sell about 300 showpigs in the spring, predominantly to customers from Ohio, Indiana and Michigan. This local market really took off after the 2005 Ohio State Fair. That year, pigs from their farm won seven classes and earned grand champion barrow in the junior and open shows.

"That opened a lot of doors for us," Ben said.

In the fall, they sell pigs into a rapidly expanding southern market, mostly into Oklahoma, Texas and Louisiana.

"For the past three years, the fall market has grown significantly. We made five trips to Oklahoma and Texas this past fall taking showpigs down and selling them," Andrew said. "We do have some that we call 'pre-solds' that we'll deliver, but we took probably 70 head to auctions."

Four years ago, the Moyers sold about 20 showpigs to the southern market in the fall. This past fall, they sold 200.

"We had a couple pigs down there do really well, and I attribute much of our fall growth to winning," Andrew said. "But being down there, I've also gotten to know a lot of people, and like any business, you need to build relationships."

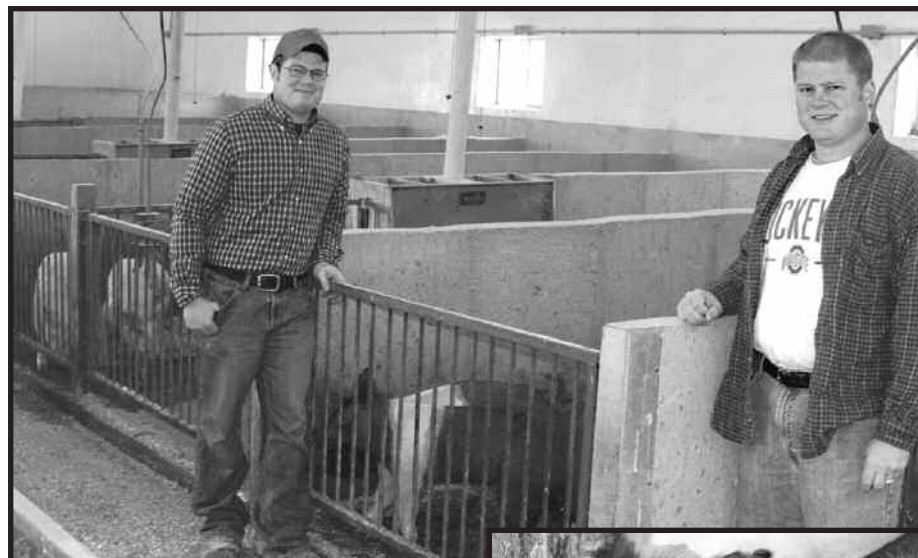
A pig from their farm earned reserve grand champion white cross barrow at the 2007 Houston Livestock Show, and that really opened up what is a potentially huge market.

"We think of the Ohio State Fair as being a big show, but in Texas they have 4,000 head go to one show, and they have three or four shows that size, and the kids can only show one pig each," Andrew said.

The Moyers' national exposure got an even bigger boost this past November, when one of their crossbred barrows won the North American International Livestock Exposition (NAILE) in Louisville.

"That was a sight unseen pig," Andrew said. "I delivered it to Iowa for a family in Texas."

Because of their expanding operation and customer base, Ben was able to make



Ben and Andrew stand in the showpig barn on their Fulton County hog operation.

the farm his full-time occupation last January. Andrew dropped his off-farm job just this past month.

"It got to the point where there's plenty to do here to try to grow this more," Andrew said.

It hasn't been easy. The challenges getting started were raising the necessary capital for facilities and establishing the sow herd.

"You go through a lot of gilts to find that one that truly is a really good one," Andrew said. "It takes time. You have to have a lot of luck to win the right shows, but you also have to have a good product and take care of people."

The biggest current challenge is constant genetic improvement.

"We cut 50% of the sows last year and replaced them, and we'll probably cut another 30% to 40% again this spring," Andrew said.

The farm uses 100% artificial insemination. They sell eight to 10 boars to boar studs each year and rely heavily on the known genetics of those boars when purchasing semen. Replacement gilts are primarily raised from within the herd. Sows are kept through two litters then evaluated based on dollars of pigs they've produced, plus farrowing and nursing ability.

When deciding which animals to keep, the Moyers want an animal that is as wide, square and heavily muscled as possible, without being out of proportion. A good balance of those attributes is key, Andrew said.

The rewarding part from the showpig angle is the relationships that are built with customers and sharing in their success, the brothers said. In terms of breeding stock, selling an animal for a high price is nice, but the real satisfaction is developing one that everybody likes and wants to use.

"Yeah, the money is nice, but that's not what it is," Andrew said. "It's making that product that everybody wants a piece of."

While most of their showpigs are sold from the farm, the Moyers do go to a couple sales. They also hold the Tom Moyer



Most of the show pigs raised at the Moyer farm are Hampshires, with some Yorkshires and crossbreeds.

Family Pig Sale in April — Saturday, April 12 this year — where they sell a group of 50 pigs that were born roughly from Jan. 20 to Feb. 15. Breeding stock, primarily Hampshires at the moment, are taken to shows across the country. They sold about 50 breeding animals this past year.

The family's Web site, genetice.com, is their primary source of advertising. The Moyers get a lot of e-mail inquiries from it, and it's easy to update and maintain.

Their increasing popularity means the brothers are always on call. It's not unheard of to get a call from potential customers visiting from Texas or Oklahoma and meet them in the barn to look at pigs at 3 a.m., Andrew said. Plus, there are no vacations when it comes to raising livestock. Someone has to do the chores.

But that is the life they have chosen, and Andrew and Ben Moyer wouldn't have it any other way.

"You have to love it," Ben said. "You have to truly have a passion to do what we do, or have to be insane, I'm not sure."



Ben and Andrew (left and right), worked with their father, Tom (center), to get the business started.