

Little extras take time, but they build the herd

BY CURT HARLER
MILLERSTOWN — It's lots of little things like home grinding feed and doing all the AI work on a farm that can spell the difference between an average herd and a good one.

At Santee Acres Jane and Kenneth Benner have taken a 25 cow herd with a 3.2 percent test and 500 pounds fat to today's rolling herd average featuring 804 pounds butterfat with a test of 4.0 percent on 23,044 pounds milk.

It took just over 10 years to make the improvement. At the same time the herd size more than doubled.

The impressive changes in the Santee Acres herd won the Benners the 1980 Maryland and Virginia Young Cooperator Award. They were honored last Thursday at the Pennmarva Cooperative meeting at Hunt Valley, Maryland.

The trip from a struggling farm in Perry County's Pfoutz Valley, just over the Juniata County line in Pennsylvania, to receiving honors at Hunt Valley, Maryland, was a long one. It had its start in a third state, Virginia.

Back then Jane was a senior studying dairy science at Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

She had been the 1962 Virginia Holstein Girl, now called the distinguished junior member. She also earned the state 4-H dairy achievement award.

Kenneth, who had been graduated from Penn State in ag education, was working as herdsman for VPI's dairy operation.

They married their fortunes and spent a short time working for Woodacres

Guernseys in Princeton, N.J. before returning to buy a Perry County farm near Ken's homeplace.

They'd had their eyes on the farm for several years but needed to save up enough money to buy it.

Shortly after they moved in they put up a 60-stall barn and a concrete stave silo. That was in October 1970.

The operation today consists of about 400 acres, 200 in cropland, the rest in woodland or permanent pasture.

The Benners had purchased Ken's father's cows to get started.

For a long time, they recall, there were a lot of empty stalls in the barn. Today only one of the 60 is vacant.

At a Virginia Holstein sale, they managed to buy the cow who had been Jane's 4-H calf. They also kept daughters of Ken's first project calf in the growing herd.

From there they built on what they had. They chose the Santee Acres prefix, naming the operation after Jane's parents' farm. Santee, they were told, means "healthy mountaintains."

Ken took an artificial insemination course, purchased a semen tank, and started doing his own breeding.

Today their favorite bulls include Conductor, Milestone, and Liftoff, a Perry County syndicate bull. One Liftoff daughter from the Benner herd, Santee Acres Liftoff Secret will go to the ABS sale in Madison this fall.

Jane keeps an eye on the heifers looking for heats since the heifer barn is right



Kenneth, Jane, and Irene Benner post in front of their farm sign. Santee Acres includes 200

out the back door. Timely breeding has helped improved their conception percentage.

They've gotten some fine calves on the ground. While the calf facilities certainly are not modern, the individual stalls in the old bank barn seem to do the job well.

Benners have lost just one calf in the past seven years. "I'm always there," Jane explains. It takes time, but it pays.

Still, they are planning to put up a better calf facility in the near future. That project waited until after the inside of the home was remodeled, a project paid for by sale of breeding cattle.

Calves get good care from birth. The first few days they are fed fresh colostrum.

Gradually the colostrum is diluted with Vigortone milk replacer until the calves are on a full milk replacer diet.

The dairy herd gets fed well, too. Cows see feed three times a day. Again, it takes time, but the payoff is in the bulk tank.

Benners raise all their own grain, ear corn, and haylage.

Daily ration includes 30 pounds haylage, 40 pounds corn silage, and about 5 pounds hay per day to keep the rumens going.

Two years ago the Benners started grinding their own feed. That fact, they say, accounts for a large part of their increased herd average.

Grain is mixed on the farm. A 15 percent protein supplement is added to the basic homegrown corn and oats.

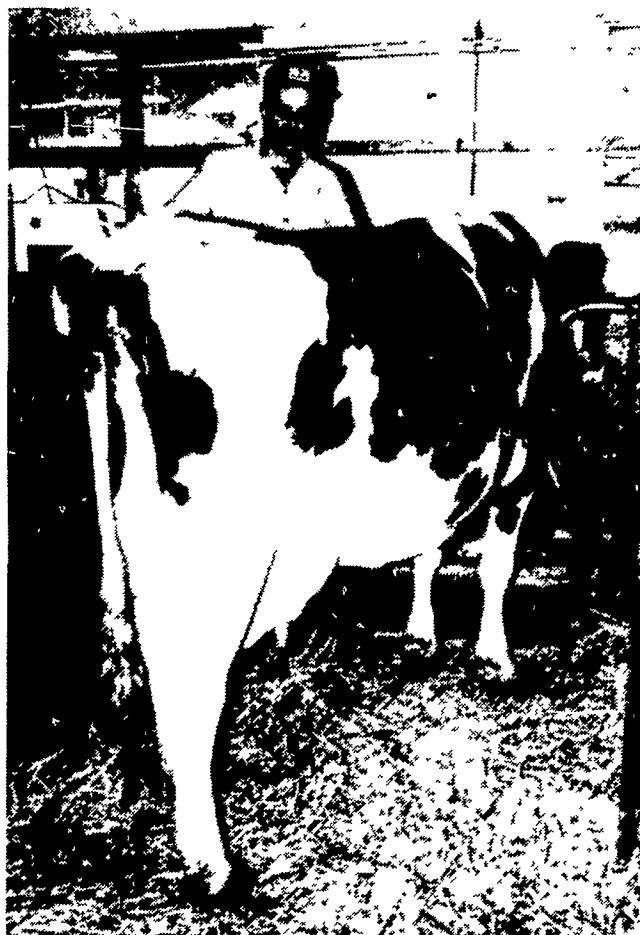
Milkers are fed individually. High producers are offered as much as 32 pounds grain per day.

That's one factor helping butterfat test. Another is keeping the cows in good condition.

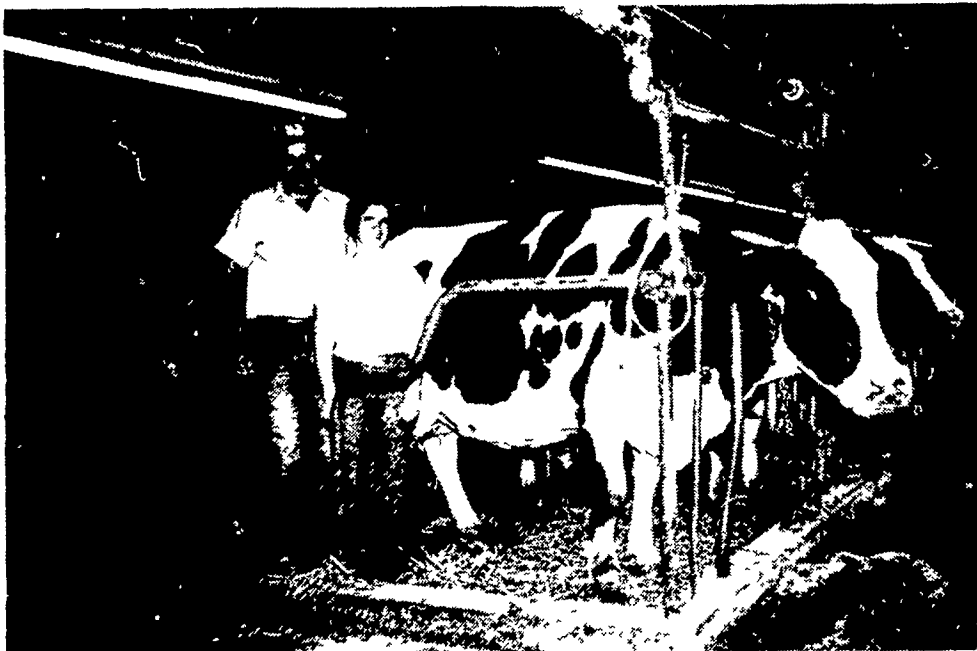
During the summer months Benners greenchop for the cows—usually giving them some sorghum-sudangrass over the top of the ration

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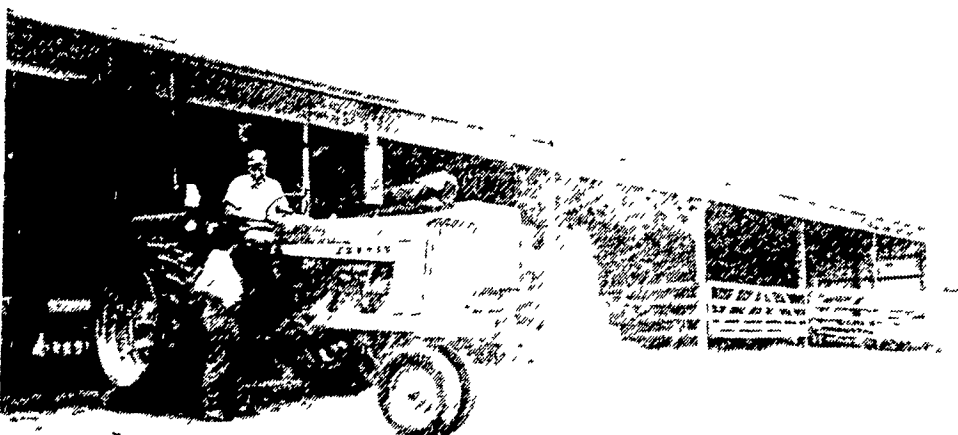
cropland acre in addition to one of Perry County's better milking herds.



Due to Astronaut, Santee Acres Liftoff Secret will go to the ABS Americana sale this fall but will sell dry. With DHIA records of 20,114 milk and 966 pounds fat at 4.8 percent test, that should make little difference. Kenneth Benner has three of her daughters in the herd.



Both cows in the foreground are Monitor daughters in Jane and Ken Benner's herd. Katie, closer to the camera, is projected at 27,000 pounds milk this year.



Heifers share the right of this pole barn which shelters machinery on the left. Here Jane and Ken Benner take a moment to discuss afternoon chores.



Santee Acres Bootmaker Nice, rated Very Good 85 as a two year old, is the seventh generation of Ken Benner's 4-H calf. Nice is daughter Irene's 4-H animal. Shown with Jane Benner at the halter, Nice's current record is 17,248 pounds milk, 779 fat, with a 4.5 percent test.