

# Lancaster County's Wilbur Houser talks 'testing' for quarter century

BY SHEILA MILLER

**LAMPETER**—What's the difference between a milk tester and a DHIA supervisor? About twenty-five years of service, according to J. Wilbur Houser, who's in his twenty-sixth year of sampling Lancaster County dairy herds for production records.

Fifty-nine year old Houser explained that when he first started his career in the county's Dairy Herd Improvement program in 1955, he used to be responsible for testing each cow's milk that he sampled. Now, he said, Penn State does all the testing and he is officially called a "supervisor" rather than a milk tester.

What else has changed in those twenty-five years of sampling milk in Lancaster County herds?

With a grin that never seemed to leave his face, Houser recalled, "Back when I first started, there was only one milking parlor operation on my circuit. The rest of the farmers milked with bucket and pail and we weighed the milk with scales. And, only one farmer had a bulk tank."

Now, it's the other way — all the farmers have either pipelines or parlors and everyone of them has a bulk tank."

Houser also remarked that in the quarter-century he's been on the job, he's seen the size of the milking herds increase dramatically.

"In the 1950's, if a farmer had 50 cows, that was considered to be a big herd. Now the county average for herd size is 58.7 cows. The average 25 years ago was about 30."

What also has changed, said Houser, is the method of testing milk. He recalled

that when he first became a tester he ran the Babcock test, using a centrifuge and sulfuric acid. Now, the testing is done electronically by Penn State.

"I was glad to get away from that," Houser smiled, "because keeping that acid in the home was dangerous."

The age of computers has made the job of a DHIA supervisor easier, too. Houser said he used to have to do all the bookwork on individual lactations and production records by hand.

"The computers that are available today give you more information that's more uniform. And it's done in a much faster time," he conceded.

When Houser gave up his dairy farming profession to become a milk tester in 1955, there were more mixed herds on his circuit, he said. But today there are few mixed herds on his 30 herd circuit.

"I sample one Brown Swiss herd and several Guernsey herds — but the predominant breed of dairy cattle is Holstein, and mostly all registered cattle, too."

The reason why there are fewer grade cows in his circuit Houser attributes to culling.

"I think it can be said that the grade cows you still find are some of the best cows in the herd. But farmers cull their grades a lot harder than their registered cattle. I believe they're hoping those poorer producing cows that have papers will come around someday," he chuckled.

Houser, along with his wife, Elsie (who came from a Guernsey farm — but Houser said he didn't hold that against her) milked Holsteins for 11 years until

he was forced to give it up for health reasons. Now, as a DHIA supervisor, Houser said he appreciates the opportunity of working with good livestock even though he doesn't have any cows himself.

What about the high production records on some cows milking close to 30,000 pounds? Houser remarked, "These heavy milkers obviously are under more stress, but some cows can handle it better than others."

And you'll find some cows do better one lactation and taper off the next.

"A general rule of thumb I learned from an old dairy farmer when I was milking I think still holds true in most cases. If a heifer does extra

well on her first lactation, she won't match her production later. Maybe she overdoes herself — I don't know."

In 1955-56, the Lancaster County herd average for (Turn to Page A33)

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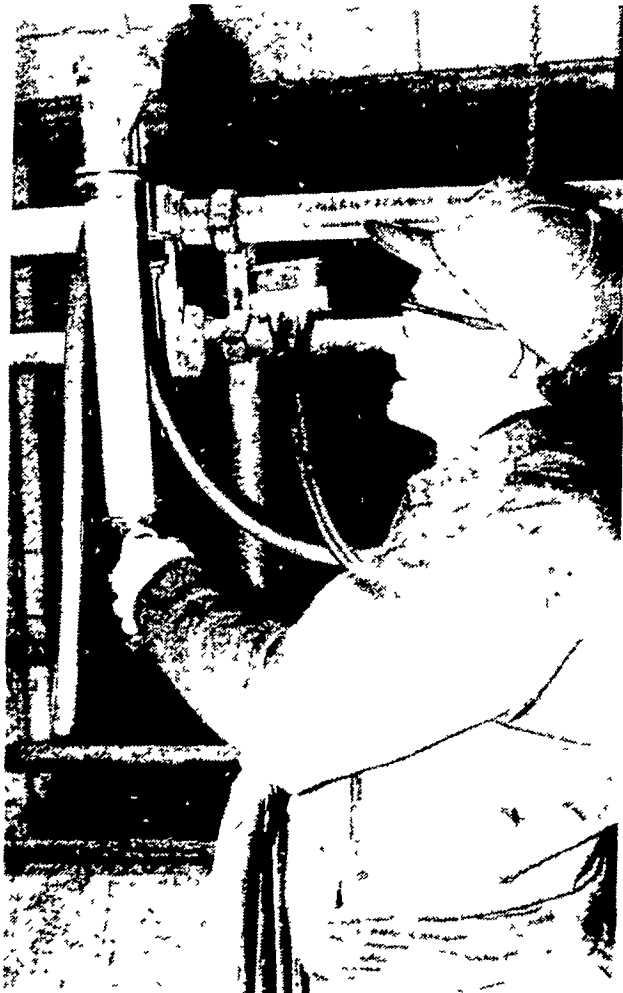
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Houser mixes Rhelda's milk in the milk meter before sampling it. He said, "The first milk always tests the least and the last tests the highest. This way the sample is accurate. Last month, Rhelda's milk production record was 101 pounds, and it's going to be high again."