

Davis family strives for national dairy ranking

BY DONNA TOMMELLEO
EAST TROY — Guided by a dream for the past decade, Bill and Ginny Davis have toiled long hours to build their registered Red and White Holstein herd from scratch.

Reknown British philosopher Disraeli once said, "Life is too short to be little." And with that thought in mind, Bill and Ginny have their sites set on being the number one Red and White herd in the nation and they want to reach that honor with just 50 cows.

This year, they own the top spot in the state for the Red and Whites. Their 66 head finished out at 17,101 pounds of milk and 639 pounds of fat.

The couple left their New Jersey roots to begin farming on the 400-acre Bradford County dairy — Matt-Will, named after sons Matt, 10, and William, 14. In the beginning, the barn was nothing more than a few old tie stalls and horse stalls supported by a dirt floor. Their first dairy animal was a Jersey calf purchased for their son's 4-H project. Once the calf grew into production, the Davises added more calves on her. Eventually, after many transactions the herd grew from one Jersey to a Black and White herd. And then one day it happened. A Red and White calf was born in the Davis herd.

Bill and Ginny described the birth as an accident. They hadn't selected for the crimson-coated baby born to a black and white dam. But they opted to stay with the breed and began gearing their breeding program accordingly once they knew the red factor was in the herd.

"We went to red so we could go to a registered herd. And it's something different," Bill explained.

The original Davis Holstein herd was comprised of some grades, the offspring of which would be ineligible for registration. However, the Red and White Dairy Cattle Association renders the third generation of a registered sire eligible for registration. The Davises explained the grading up system is known as "intermediate registration." All the Davis Holsteins — the Red and Whites and the Black and Whites are now registered with both the RWDCA and the Holstein-Friesian Association of America. The Black

and Whites are registered with the RWDCA, explained Bill, because they all carry the red factor.

Although she may agree with her husband's reasons for breeding the Red and Whites, Ginny noted that life on the color conscious farm offers her a double delight.

Calving time is especially exciting. Not only do we look forward to the sex of the calf but we look for the color, too," she said.

You can imagine her delight three years ago when one of the top cows delivered a healthy set of Red and White heifer twins. Unlike many calves born Red and White, which later change to black in a few months, this pair, sired by Hanover-Hill Triple Threat, stayed red.

The Davises are expecting a promising future from the twins, "Gracie" and "Ginny." Their dam, "Joyce" passed away recently but not before she finished with 19,997 pounds of milk and a 4.3 butterfat test. Matt-Will T.T. Gracie-Red Twin is projected at 21,000 pounds of milk. "Gracie" was recently listed in the leading Cow Indexes for the Red and White breed from the July 1981 Cow Index Summary, which represented the top 8 percent of all indexes.

While the herd progressed in the early years, Ginny was the full-time farm employee. Bill worked full-time as a machinist until 1978 when he finally came home to stay.

Together the family watched as their herd began to take shape. The barn was modernized. The Davises added gutter cleaners and a concrete floor. The old horse stalls disappeared and in their place, rows of tie stalls — enough to house the potential nationally ranked Red and Whites.

In 1979, an around-the-barn pipeline was added. The Davises didn't know it then, but for the next 16 months they would fight to keep their heads above water and their herd alive.

Soon after the pipeline was installed Bill and Ginny experienced a dramatic increase in mastitis. Their somatic cell count soared to one million and production sharply fell.

"We knew we had a problem, but we didn't know what it was," Bill said.

Their early efforts to rectify the situation were trial and error.



Matt-Will T.T. Gracie-Red Twin, one of the top indexing cows in the Red and White breed, is surrounded by the William Davis family, who hopes to get "Gracie" and her herdmates to the number one spot in the country. From left the family includes, Bill, Billy, Matt and Ginny.

Enlisting the advice of veterinarians and extension specialists, the Davises checked the water supply.

"We even pulled the pump out of the well," explained Bill. The water wasn't the problem so it was back to the drawing board.

Next, they quarter cultured the herd to determine the level of subclinical mastitis. That wasn't the problem, either.

Filled with frustration and agony the Davises watched as their promising herd slowly slid downhill. Cows, which had been projected at 18,000 or better were now making only 10,000. Their haylage was testing at 22 percent protein and yet production continued to suffer.

Morning milking was a gloomy event because the Davises knew they had to face a host of lopsided udders, infected quarters and kicking, something which the normally quiet herd had never done before.

"There was no desire to go the barn in the morning," said Bill. Often times, he explained, he would walk down the rows of stalls, armed with a bottle of antibiotic in each pocket.

Ginny recalls one painful morning when she had to treat 24 quarters and was milking only 28 cows.

Finally in April 1980, the problem was isolated. The culprit turned out to be stray voltage — an ever-growing problem for the dairy industry as farms continue to grow and mechanize.

Once the problem was controlled, the Davises were left with picking up the pieces.

"We're now in the process of trying to figure out what our losses were. We're just getting to the point where we're breaking even," noted Bill. The family is still culling as a result of the catastrophe.

"The only thing that saved us was the heifers," explained Bill. The Davis 1981 herd consisted of 35 percent first-calf heifers.

During the stray voltage problem, Bill said, many cows would dry up at 5 months.

"The potential was there," he added. Once the problem was corrected, the cows responded with a herd increase of 3,000 pounds of milk.



In the Davises' quest for a number one national herd, this Red-and-White baby may very well be part of the high producing team.

One of the pieces left to pick up was the countless bills the Davises had incurred during the frustrating 16-month period.

"How can you pay your bills on 13,000 pounds of milk when you're feeding for 20,000," recalled Bill.

"We lived a nightmare," Ginny admitted. But the nightmare which threatened to destroy their herd, their dream and at times, their 15-year marriage, was finally over.

Today every sunrise brings promise to the Davis barn. The bulk tank level is gradually on the rise and morning milking is not the dreaded event it once was.

Before the sun peeks over the endless Bradford County mountains, Bill and Ginny are busy in the barn, running eight units on their herd. Their mastitis prevention program includes teat dipping and dry cow treatments.

Meanwhile, the feeding system (their son Bill) guides a automatic unloading silage cart down the alley.

The largest part of the herd's diet consists of alfalfa and timothy mixed haylage. The Davises keep abreast of their forage quality and

test the haylage everytime they change fields.

To determine this, Bill adds a small grain mixture to each layer of forage in the silo. When the Davises begin seeing corn in the haylage, they know it's time to forage test.

The herd receives the haylage morning and evening. At noon, corn silage becomes the main meal. Bill feeds for more than 60 pounds of milk daily and top dresses the rations with a high moisture shelled corn, soybean meal and mineral mixture.

While three Davises are busy in the barn, the youngest, Matt, fills pails with milk and water and tends calves in their new hutches, added in March. Eventually, Bill plans to add a tree-stall barn to house heifers and dry cows, which are now kept nearby in a leased barn.

A manure storage system to replace daily hauling is also a future consideration at Matt-Will.

One item Ginny would like to see changed in the future won't occur



Bill, 14, left and Matt, 10, flank a set of twins recently born on the Davis farm. Calvings at Matt-Will are always a double treat as the family waits first to see the color and next to see the sex of the calf. However, in this case, the calf on the left is a red and White bull, the calf on the right, unfortunately, is a black and white heifer.