

Boarding dairy animals gives added value

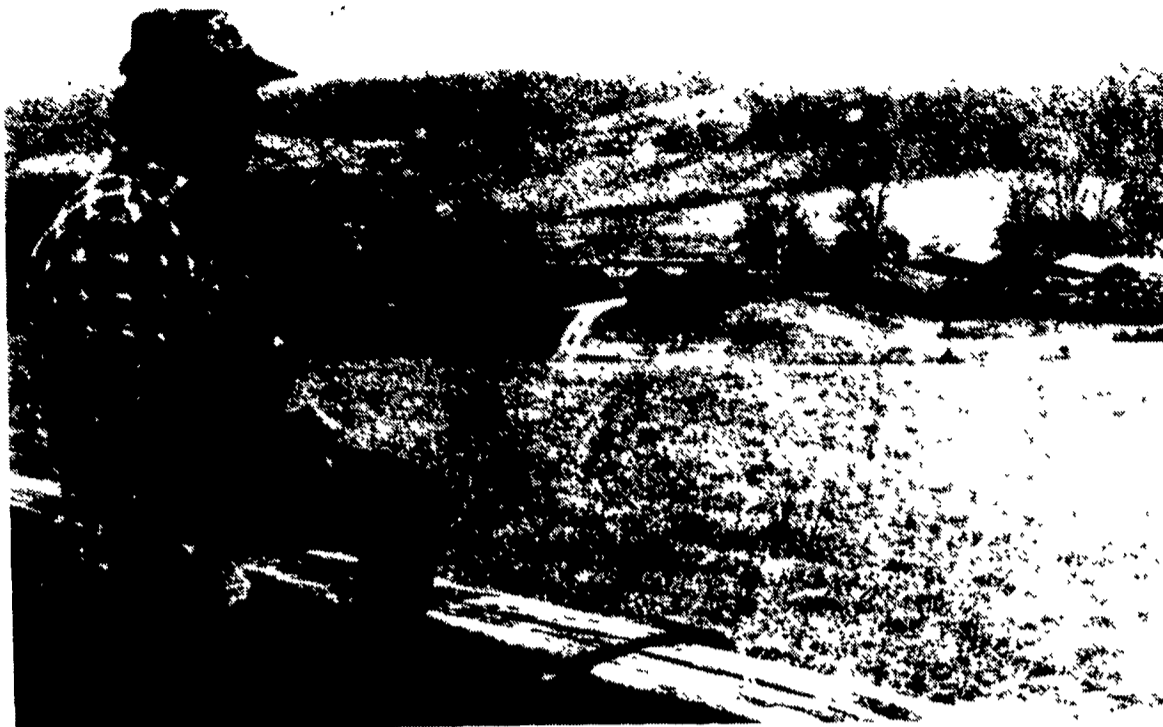
BY TRISH WILLIAMS

LANDENBERG — Wilkinson Farms is situated in southern Chester County amid a country patch work of fields and woodlots, cut naturally by streams into small farm parcels and stitched together by a network of winding roads. Unlike the small farms that typify the area, Wilkinson Farms is a large and diverse agricultural enterprise.

Putting modern day mechanization and communications to work, this family farm has branched out from dairy production into a multifaceted agribusiness. Aggressive and flexible farm management has been a key factor enabling the scope and scale of operations to expand despite a local trend away from agricultural production.

Wilkinson Farms is locally known for everything from custom harvesting to cattle hauling, but is probably best known for its famed visit by President Reagan in spring of 1982. Hundreds of politically conscious farmers gathered at Wilkinson Farms. In a barn amphitheater, sitting on straw bales, Reagan and the farmers discussed agricultural policy.

Hosts, Leon and Edna Wilkinson will always remember the day that the president visited as exciting by contrast. But there is hardly a dull moment on the home farm. The 200 acre home farm is headquarters and communications base for over 4400 acres of rented farmland. The



From this vantage point Charles Wilkinson likes to take a little time each day from his hectic schedule to sort things out.

Wilkinsons developed this expansive farming network with the help of their four sons, Larry, Charles, Tom and Lew. Charles, who has been a driving force in the operation, now has assumed most of the responsibility for managing the operation. Larry has his own dairy farm in Gettysburg, Lew does custom farming, and Tom

recently left the farm to become a realtor.

One of the new business ventures that provides versatility and stability is boarding dairy animals. A monthly boarding fee will provide care, food and shelter for an absentee owner's cattle. It also provides Wilkinson Farms another option for marketing its crops and improving cash flow.

The boarding operation is the brain child of brothers, Tom and Charles Wilkinson, who were tired of being price takers for their crops. Their rented acreage yielded far more feed than required to feed their 350 head of dairy cattle. Now they feed and care for about 500 head of board animals, including over 100 dairy bulls waiting to be proven.

They began to sell corn silage, high moisture corn and hay to feedlot operations on limited acreage. This allowed them to make fuller use of their existing equipment, which included custom harvesting equipment and a fleet of trucks. It also provided more work for the crew of full-time workers while giving their crops a value added bonus.

Wilkinson fills some silos with his crops directly from the field. Others are refilled during winter or spring months from six trench silos located on the home farm.

The innovative idea to board animals optimized the utilization of many of the farm's resources by providing a service. This service allows them to make use of animal housing facilities that were formerly under utilized. It also provides work for the full time labor force, particularly during the winter months when field work is minimal. With a small construction crew in his service, renovation of barns to accommodate boarded animals was made easily.

Wilkinson started boarding recipient heifers for EmTran Embryo Transfer three years ago. He had been filling silo for EmTran at their limited acreage facility at Elizabethtown. On a leased farm near Chatham, Wilkinson boards 300 recipient heifers. The feedlot facilities were formerly used by King Ranch for beef cattle. Wilkinson has a full-time man at the facility to feed and care for the heifers.

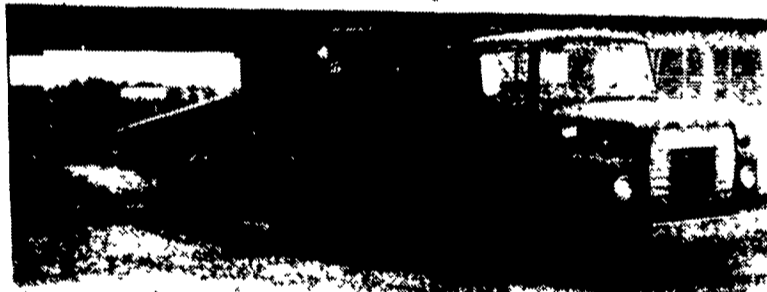
Heifers are acquired for the transfer program by Wilkinson



Charles Wilkinson at work in his farm office. Linked by a network of CB radios, Wilkinson can effectively communicate with his employees from miles away.



Trench silos are used to store almost all the silage fed at Wilkinson Farms. Corn fodder is used for bedding.



This truck is used to feed animals housed a number of farms operated by Wilkinson. All the animal housing facilities have been remodeled to allow quick feeding with the minimal amount of labor.



Open heifers coming into the recipient program are housed on the left side of the feeding aisle. When they reaching breeding size they are taken to EmTran's Elizabethtown facility where they are implanted. After the transfer they are brought back and house on the right side of the feeding aisle until they are proven safe with calf.



Boarding heifers and bulls provides Wilkinson with another way to market his crops. By feeding silage he can use the whole corn plant and add a valuable service.