

Mehring milker: Alive and well at 66 years

BY LAURA ENGLAND

LEBANON — Imagine for a moment that you're a dairy farmer in the early 1900's. You've got a herd of 20 cows - a large herd in those days - and must milk them by hand every day, twice a day. It takes about two hours to finish the sometimes tedious chore.

Now imagine that the year is 1918. Technology is on the upswing and more and more equipment is being developed to ease the back-breaking labor. One of those developments is a foot-powered milking machine equipped with two milking units. Imagine, milking two cows at once and in half the time!

For 79-year-old Verna Deck of Lebanon, all this "imagining" became reality when she convinced her father, Aaron Bicksler, to buy one of those new milking machines. That was in 1918 when she was 13 years old and the milking chore was done by her and her sister, Amy.

As Verna explained, the two-hour milking chore was handed down to her and Amy while the men of the family, her father and two brothers, tended to field work.

"The men didn't like to do the milking," Verna laughed, "so we did it."

That was OK with Verna, as she attested to the fact that women are known to be better cow milkers. At the same time, however, she felt a need for up-dated equipment to make the job easier and more efficient. That is when she saw an advertisement in a magazine for a Mehring Milking Machine.

"I saw the ad in a magazine," Verna recalled, "and I asked my father if we could buy one. He said yes but 'only if you can take care of it.'"

That would be no problem Verna convinced her father, so the Bickslers got their first milking machine in 1918. It was the Mehring model, introduced during the early 1890's, that Verna saw in the magazine, and that was the one she wanted.

The Mehring milker, which was placed in the stall between two cows, cut the milking chore in half. It was powered by foot which created a vacuum, drawing the milk from the cow's udder, through the machine and into a bucket.

Verna said she was more than pleased with the milker. And taking care of it? "During the winter I brought it into the kitchen so it wouldn't freeze," she admitted lightheartedly.

Verna and Amy used the Mehring milker for the next five

years, at which time the farm was sold and the family moved to Harrisburg. She attended Central Pa. Business College and became a secretary. With the farming bug still in her, Verna became a farmer's wife when she married Emanuel Deck in 1926.

With her marriage 58 years ago, Verna started a new chapter in her life. She and her husband lived in Churchtown for six years and bought their farm in 1931. They farmed until 1955 when they sold the dairy operation to their son, Clyde.

As a farmer's wife, Verna explained, she was no longer responsible for milking but took care of the farm records. "When we were married," she said with a chuckle, "my husband said 'you'll be my secretary now.'"

From that point on and the time the Bicksler family sold their 113-acre farm near Fredericksburg, Verna had a new role and was no longer a "milkmaid." But she carried fond memories of her days milking with the Mehring machine and had a delightful surprise last fall when she was reunited with the same milker she used 66 years ago.

The story of how Verna was reunited with her Mehring milker reads almost like a fairy tale, explained Harry Ressor, Lebanon, who was one of the men responsible for the reunion. The milker had been donated to the Alexander Schaeffer Farm Museum in Schaefferstown by George Crall, and it was there that Ressor realized he had seen a similar milker before.

"I used to play with one when I was a kid," Ressor recalled, "and I

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With the help of Harry Ressor, left, and Peter Horst, Verna Deck, center, shows off her Mehring milking machine, complete with two milking units and its own dumping station — the bucket held by Horst.



Verna (Bicksler) Deck, pictured at 18 years, convinced her father to buy a Mehring milking unit in 1918.



Reunited with her Mehring milking machine, Verna Deck demonstrates how she once milked cows.



Harry Ressor, Lebanon, and his dog, Heidi, get ready to "churn butter" in this old-fashioned, dog-powered butter churner.



A close up of the milker shows the individual teat cups, each equipped with a vacuum shut-off valve.