

Seven named 1984 Master Farmers

Seven Pennsylvania farmers have been named Master Farmers for 1984 for their business expertise and management efficiency.

The Master Farmer program now in its 51st year, is sponsored by the Pennsylvania Farmer magazine and Cooperative Extension Services of Pennsylvania, New Jersey,

Delaware, Maryland and West Virginia.

Formal award ceremonies will be held Jan. 15 at a special luncheon in Harrisburg. The seven winners will be inducted into the Pennsylvania Master Farmers' Association, whose membership consists of all former award winners.

The new Master Farmers

named for 1984 are Walter Wurster of Ottsville R1 in Bucks County; Mark and Paul Kiefer, a father and son team from Dornsife R1 in Northumberland County; Herbert Schick of Kutztown R2 in Berks County; Lewis Berkley of Berlin R3 in Somerset County; Boyd Mertz of Northumberland R2 in Northumberland County; and

Kenneth Benner of Millerstown R2, whose farm straddles the Perry-Juniata counties line.

Judges for the 1984 contest were Robert Reich of Northeastern Farm Credit, Lewisburg; Dr. Samuel Smith, dean of the Penn State College of Agriculture; and Wayne Cawley, Maryland Secretary of Agriculture.

Kieffer father-son team excel in grain farming enterprise

DORNSIFE — Hard work, efficient management techniques and the ability to adjust to varying farm conditions are some of the ideals that have spelled success for Mark and Paul Kieffer, a father and son team from Dornsife, R.I.

Partners in a cash grain farming enterprise, they annually grow and market 1,600 acres of crops, including corn, soybeans and small grains on their Northumberland County farm and 24 other farms leased by the family-owned corporation.

The Kieffers grow 1,200 acres of corn, more than 370 acres of wheat and oats, and 70 acres of soybeans. Yields are constantly well above the statewide average. Although changes are continuously being made to improve crop production, they never leave the operation's need for profits overshadow the land's need for good soil stewardship.

"It all started in 1951 when I bought my first 46 acres," the 54-year-old Mark Kieffer pointed out. "Two years later my wife Velma and I rented my father's farm. We raised hogs, beef cattle and poultry."

When margins in the poultry and beef feeding enterprises did not meet expectations, they were scaled down or completely eliminated. Grain production was

expanded and buildings used for laying hens were converted into a grain drying and storage center. All changes were geared toward a growing and thriving cash grain operation, being put together by buying and leasing farmland.

In 1980, after 27-year-old Paul decided he wanted to farm, the Kieffers formed a corporation. "We thought that incorporating would be a good way to get the next generation involved in farming and help with management decisions," Mark Kieffer said.

Mark and Velma own most of the land and lease it to the corporation. Some of the land, however, is being transferred to Paul and his wife Gail. Any further land purchases will be owned by the corporation.

"We try to give crop production the 'golden glove treatment' on our farms," Paul Kieffer emphasized. "All land is soil tested, then limed and fertilized according to test."

In the mid-1970s, the Master Farmers adopted a newer farming practice, minimum tillage. The chisel plow replaced the moldboard plow to help control erosion and increase output by eliminating conventional plowing and harrowing.

"By using the chisel plow, you can double acreage in a day's work, especially when you use the larger tractors," Paul Kieffer

said.

Seed varieties also get special attention. First of all, they look for a variety that yields consistently in both good and poor areas. They test new hybrids under average conditions and pay particular attention to those varieties that pay the highest returns on all types of soils.

Paul Kieffer performs the secondary tillage at corn planting time and harvests the crops. While he operates the machinery, usually in a seven-week period, Mark hauls the corn to drying facilities. Velma continuously monitors drying procedures, making moisture tests, and weight calculations as grain leaves the dryer.

The Master Farmers do some hedging and forward contracting on their grain based on weather conditions and market forecasts. Most is sold on a cash basis, however, and the Kieffers haul the grain to local mills.

"We may be expanding our soybean acreage next year because this will give us additional income and improve the soil. Soybeans loosen soil particles, add nitrogen, and eliminate microbe buildup. The two crops, corn and soybeans, compliment each other," Paul Kieffer pointed out.

"The new Master Farmers are



Father and son team Paul (left) and Mark Kieffer of Dornsife R1 are partners in a successful cash grain farming enterprise in Northumberland County.

involved in improving agricultural programs," said Vernon Brose, Northumberland County Extension agent. Mark serves on the Cooperative Extension Service executive committee and has promoted Farm-City Week activities. Both are members of the Pennsylvania and National Corn Growers' Association.

Mark has been president of the joint council of the Himmel's Lutheran Church for 32 years. Paul is a trustee.

They also are members of the Pennsylvania Farmers' Association, Pennsylvania Farmers' Union and National Federation of Independent Business.

Kenneth Benner made his 'dream farm' come true

MILLERSTOWN — In 1969, Kenneth and Jane Benner, of Millerstown R2, managed to scrape together \$5,000 for a down payment on a rundown farm straddling the Perry-Juniata County line. Although the odds of their ever becoming free of debt and successfully operating a dairy enterprise were slim, they had a dream and a plan.

During the next 15 years, they sold 100 acres of woodland and acquired an adjacent 20-acre parcel of cropland. They also sold an extra set of buildings and additional acreage. The money from these sales went for equipment, a new barn, and to reduce the mortgage on the 386-acre farm.

Benner terraced the hilly land and put in sod waterways. He also brought the soil back to its fertility potential to the point where only the fertilizer that is used by a crop needs to be replaced.

Today, the couple milks 60 red Holsteins that produce more than a half-million quarts of milk annually. Corn yields average more than 100 bushels per acre, corn silage production exceeds 16 tons per acre and alfalfa tonnage averages 7.5 tons per acre.

"Last March we made out last payment on the farm. I guess you

might say our dream and plan worked out the way we wanted it to," he said.

"I cried the first night here," Jane Benner recalled. "It was cold and the furnace didn't work. But I told my family in Virginia that everything was just fine."

Kenneth and Jane Benner met at Virginia Polytechnical Institute in 1966. He was manager of the research herds and she was graduating with a degree in dairy science. A year later they moved to Princeton, N.J., where he was employed as a herdsman at a large Guernsey operation. It was then that they started saving for the day they could buy a farm in Perry County, Kenneth's home area.

"The farm we bought is next to my father's property so he and I farmed in partnership until 1973 when I financed his share of the operation," the Master Farmer said. "In June 1983, my dad was paid in full."

Benner produces all food for his 60 milk cows and herd replacements. By doing this, coupled with high milk production, he is able to produce milk for \$9.61 per hundredweight, which includes the family's living expenses.

"We grind our own feed. That

way we know what each cow is getting. All forages are tested as well as the home mix. The testing is done by Penn State through the mill that supplies the minerals," Benner emphasized.

The cows get free choice alfalfa and some grass hay. Fed three times a day, each Holstein cow receives haylage and ground ear corn at noon. In the morning and evening, corn silage and grain mix are fed in the stanchion milking barn. During the summer, green chop is put in the pasture bunk each late afternoon.

Sound breeding principles play a vital role in the high milk production levels. "We try to mate each cow to a bull that will strengthen her genetic weaknesses," he said.

During the last 15 years, the Benners survived a flood, tornado, hail storm, and marketing problems. They currently market all milk through the Maryland-Virginia Milk Producers' Association.

The 40-year-old Penn State agriculture graduate's new goal is to raise the kind of cattle that will interest artificial breeding enterprises. He feels that unless you

add depth of pedigree the studs won't look at your bull calves.

The Benner's daughter Irene, 16, also is involved in the farming operation. They have written wills to allow her the option of keeping the farm.

"Ken's a real asset to our agricultural and youth programs," said John Harris, Perry County Extension director. "He's a 4-H dairy club leader, dairy cattle judging coach, and junior Holstein chairman, and dairy bowl coach."

In 1980, the Benners received the Young Cooperator Couple Award

from the Maryland-Virginia Milk Producers' Association. They also have won numerous milk production awards through the Dairy Herd Improvement Association.

The Master Farmer is a member of the Pennsylvania Farmers' Association, Pennsylvania and National Holstein Associations and National Milk Producers' Federation.

He also serves as a director for the Perry County Conservation District and Perry County dairy princess committee.



Kenneth and Jane Benner of Millerstown R2 stand on hilltop overlooking their dairy farm, which straddles the Perry and Juniata counties line.