

*Farming on Michigan's Upper Peninsula*

# Kronmeyers turn obstacles into opportunities

BY WENDY WEHR

PICKFORD, Mich. — Where the earth is a flat, heavy clay, where winters are long and snowy, and where the nearest cattle auction or feed mill is many miles distant. Is this any place to operate a full-scale dairy farm?

By all means, say John and Julie Kronmeyer, owners of Taylor Creek Farms, on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. While soil, climate, and economic conditions are regarded as obstacles by some, the Kronmeyers regard Michigan's U.P. as a land of opportunity.

"To me there are all kinds of opportunities here," says John, with a modest confidence. Now the owner of one of the largest dairy operations on the Upper Peninsula, he knows first-hand that from practically nothing you can take what the abundant acreage gives and create a profitable enterprise.

The Kronmeyer's are "migrants" from the state's Lower Peninsula — the better known land mass of Michigan that's as famous for American automobiles as it is for dairy production. But it's the sometimes forgotten Upper Peninsula, which is surrounded by Lakes Superior, Huron, and Michigan, which offers farmers some unique challenges, and concurrently, some unique opportunities.

**Land aplenty**

Taylor Creek Farms is a 750-acre, 180-cow operation south of Pickford, on the eastern end of the peninsula. With an additional 400 acres rented, each year the Kronmeyers harvest about 800 acres of hay, 175 acres of corn, 100 acres of wheat, and some other

small grains.

Haying is obviously the primary activity every summer, but on the U.P., where the growing season is short, one or at most two cuttings are the maximum yield from the flat hay fields.

Not much alfalfa is grown either. The Upper Peninsula hay crops consist mainly of clover, timothy, and bird's-foot trefoil.

"We have nine months of winter and three months of poor sledding," laughs John about the weather on Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Once it begins snowing in the fall, the ground stays covered with a blanket of white until April.

In northern Michigan, a winter's total snowfall reaches 160 inches. By comparison, southeastern Pennsylvania receives roughly 20 inches of snow each winter.

Temperatures, too, are a bit nippier than most Pennsylvania farmers experience. Average January temperatures on the Upper Peninsula hover at 15°F. In July the average reaches 65°F.

For the Kronmeyers to grow wheat, for instance, in these northern reaches, next year's crop is planted around the third week in August — just one week after this year's harvest.

"We turn around and take that seed and put it right back into the ground," says John about the wheat harvest. And the corn crop, he says, is barely ripe enough for silage at the season's end.

And while the flat terrain in upper Michigan may seem appealing to farmers from the rolling hills of Pennsylvania, the soils there cannot compare with the fertile land here. Surface drainage is needed to get the water off the

top of the heavy, poorly drained, clay soils of the Upper Peninsula.

The Kronmeyers have dedicated a lot of resources to creating grass waterways on their land, as well as putting in erosion control structures and adopting other conservation measures.

But their care for the land and for producing bountiful harvests contrasts sharply with the condition of the lands around them. For someone driving along the roads of Upper Michigan, a common sight is abandoned, decaying barns, and grown-up fields being overtaken by bushes and small trees.

John Kronmeyer says that land goes for \$150 an acre now, and one of these "abandoned" farms without much brush in the fields sells for only \$100. Three years ago the farmland was worth \$250 per acre.

Of the 45,000 acres of farmland in the eastern part of the Upper Peninsula, only about half is being farmed, estimates Kronmeyer.

"Traditionally, when horses were the means of transportation, this area was known as the 'cloverland,'" he explains. In those days, car load after car load of hay was shipped to Chicago.

And, at one time, high quality timothy and red clover from the Upper Peninsula made its way to the racetracks of Florida and New Orleans. But transportation costs are up and hay prices are depressed.

What we need, says Kronmeyer about the future of farming in the Upper Peninsula, is livestock, "but we're not geared up for it."

With a lack of nearby agribusinesses, farmers must often cover many miles on farm errands. For Kronmeyers, it's 20 miles to the nearest feed mill. The nearest cattle auction is on the Lower Peninsula, some 200 miles distant.

**Prosperous commercial dairy**

The Taylor Creek operation is, of course, the exception to the trend on the U.P. John and Julie Kronmeyer — and their children, Joanne, age 20, Jack, 17, Jim, 14, and Jason, 11 — operate a profitable 180-cow commercial dairy.

Most of the crops grown on the farm are fed to the dairy animals, with wheat a main ingredient in the total mixed ration. The high group, which includes cows producing 75 pounds and up, receives 25 pounds of wheat, 5 pounds of 38-percent protein, and silage, which is mostly grass silage with some corn as well.

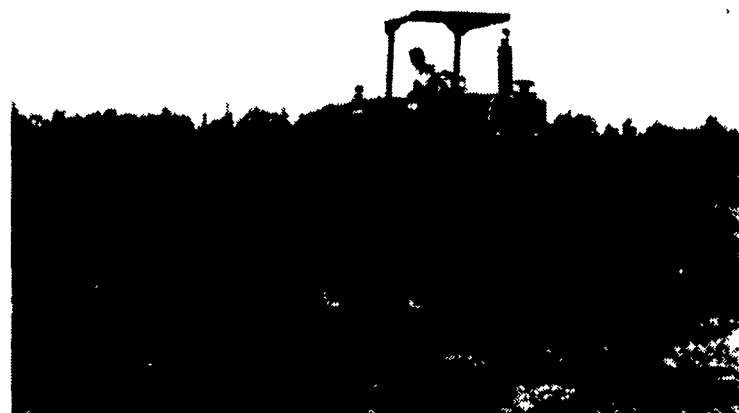
Participants in the dairy diversion program, the



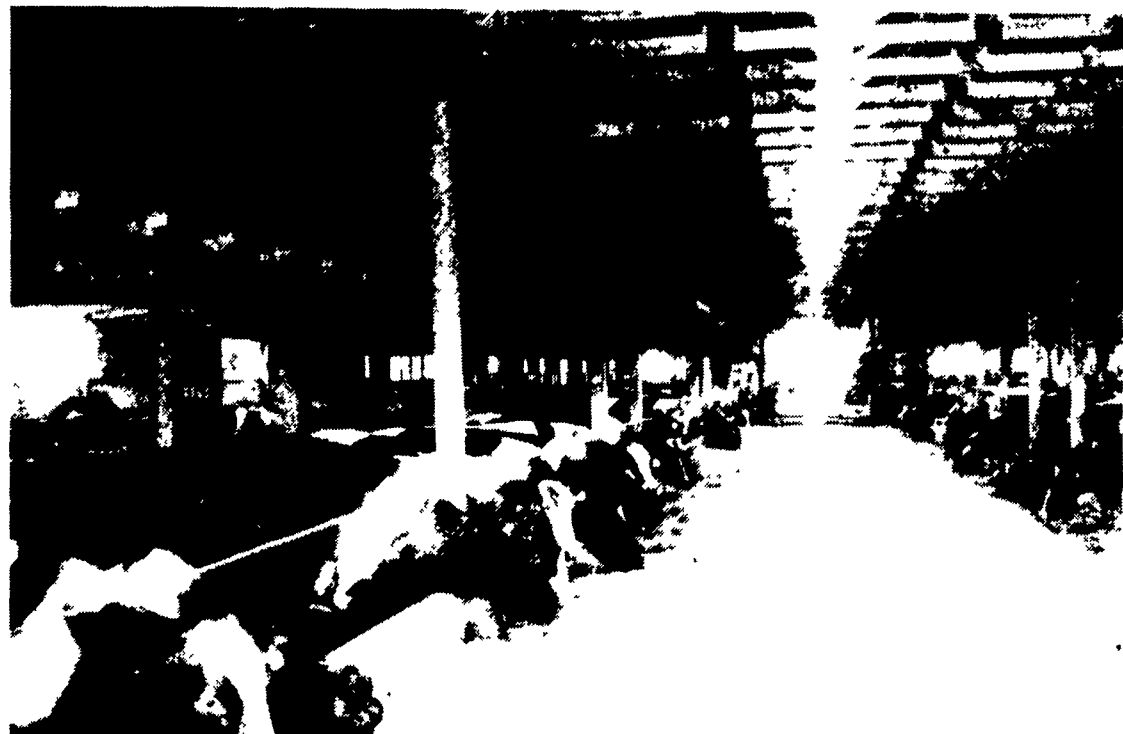
John Kronmeyer takes a break from an equipment repair job, but he never takes a break from promoting the farming opportunities on the Upper Peninsula.



This abundant stand of wheat was harvested around the second week of August, and was replanted the following week. Julie Kronmeyer indicates the height of the stand.



Jim Kronmeyer works a field for his FFA project. Higher horsepower tractors are needed to till the heavy, clay soil on the Upper Peninsula.



The Taylor Creek operation consists of a 274x80 free-stall barn housing a 180-cow herd.

Kronmeyers are now building the herd average back up to their earlier 17,000-pound production level. To meet their 25 percent diversion reduction, they sold their older cows and let production slip to 13,000 pounds.

The young dairy herd — almost half are two-year-olds — is housed in a 274 x 80 free-stall barn, and milked in a double-six herringbone parlor. Rounding out the modern dairy set-up is an earthen manure storage and series of lagoons that store manure for one year and gather milkhous waste water and run-off from around the farm buildings.

But this dairy operation was not built in a day, and the Kronmeyers don't go one day without remembering what they started out with 20 years ago on the Upper Peninsula.

With a 40-acre farm near Grand Rapids, Mich., they began dairying "the hard way," says Julie, without inheriting land from either of their parents. But a series of events soon dampened their spirits.

The squeeze of high land prices and high taxes, coupled with a devastating barn fire and John's bout with a serious illness, took its toll. Julie remembers thinking at the time, "You're not supposed to be here, you're heading up the wrong road."

But rather than leave dairy farming completely, they dared to leave the Lower Peninsula. With a bulk tank, 7 cows, and a car — which amounted to a whopping \$2,000 in assets — in 1963 they packed up and headed north.

Having vacationed a few times on the U.P., John Kronmeyer had had a chance to survey the acres of farmland in the eastern part of the peninsula. They found a farm outside of Pickford, in Chippewa and Mackinac counties. The owners, a couple who had reached retirement age, generously allowed the Kronmeyers to move in and create a successful dairy operation.

Progressive leadership  
Now, 20 years later, the  
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