

Wilkinson Family Plans To Stay With Farming

BY MIRIAM GREENFIELD

Lebanon Co. Correspondent

LANDENBERG — "I'm the guy that wants to remind them about the farmer; I will be the farmer's advocate," were the only comments Leon Wilkinson had on his new role on the Milk Marketing Board. This Chester County farmer preferred instead to discuss his concern for family farms and factors influencing today's farmer. "I'm looking out for the interests of young farmers," Wilkinson said, "to keep those 35-year-olds in business."

Wilkinson's father-in-law, Howard Wickersham, who is 86 years old, was a Guernsey breeder who started the Golden Guernsey market for milk back in 1946. Wickersham helped to set up regulations for milk marketing. Following in his father-in-law's milk marketing footsteps, Wilkinson says he is looking forward to the challenges offered by serving on the Milk Marketing Board.

Family Farms

Since his retirement, he serves as advisor for the next generation of family farmers.

"What's been so terrible in our lives that we don't want our children to follow voluntarily?" Wilkinson asks. His four sons are each involved in different aspects of farming. "It's tough now," says Wilkinson, "but those that were progressive are still in business."

Larry Wilkinson, the oldest son, moved to Gettysburg where he purchased a farm, Getty Acres. He is establishing a homestead like his father established in Chester County. He and his wife, Doris, have three sons and a daughter and they are expecting a fifth generation grandchild, which will make Leon and his wife great-grandparents.

Larry has 200 milk cows that are milked in a 17-cow turnstile parlor.

Wilkinson agrees with his son Larry's attitude when he says, "If every farmer goes out of business,

we want to be the last ones to go."

Charles, the second oldest was handy with equipment and handled the farming operation. He now owns Wilkinson Farms. He planted over 1,600 acres of corn; 600 acres of soybeans; and harvested 400 acres of alfalfa.

Tom Wilkinson, the third son, is a dairy farmer in Harrisonburg, Va., and is milking 100 cows.

Lewis, the youngest son, has a custom farming operation. He provides no-till planting and does harvesting for farmers in a 15-mile radius. Lewis also leases ground from owners to work his own crops. He gives close attention to his machinery, the lifeblood of his operation, which is highly technical and costly to purchase and maintain.

Lewis keeps his farm machinery in top shape on his 24-acre farm that is used as a base for his operation and a home for his wife Mary and their young daughters, Pam and Julianne. Their farm is small, but it's neat and well-managed.

"A family farm all starts with the grass roots, husband and wife," says Leon Wilkinson. The parents instill a sense of identity and pride. He says that children's hard work has to be compensated some way. Maybe the child has to give up athletics because of the demands of farm work, but that child might get a tractor of his own. There are many forms of compensation, Wilkinson says.

Wilkinson advises parents to give their children "that opportunity to choose" their own specialty. He says, "If one of them likes mechanics, combines and tractors, then he can go into cropping and mechanization." His youngest son, Lewis, has done that.

Helping the next generation into farming continues with Wilkinson's grandchildren. His 11-year-old grandson Scott purchased a used tractor from a widow who was selling an estate. Scott's father, Charles, paid for the

tractor and Scott paid his father out of earnings from working at the farm. Scott noted he got the tractor in good working order and will be fixing up two more tractors soon.

Scott's money for the tractor came from long hours of hard work. Some of the duties he performs on his father's farm are packing damp hay into trench silos and baling hay that is too dry for the trench silos.

When the decision to bale was made, Scott was right there, learning how to make decisions by using all the factors available.

Elisa, Scott's sister, also works on the farm. She is a senior at Kennett High School and was recently named Chester County's Alternate Dairy Princess. Her responsibilities on the farm include raking hay and feeding calves. Another sister, Crissy, is in high school and tends to the calves and young stock.

Diversity

"Diversity" is the key word for Wilkinson. He advises farmers to produce crops for different outlets. Farmers have to diversify to stay in business today, he explains.

Finding different outlets for crops is one way to diversify. The good quality hay can be sold to horse people or to feed the cattle while old hay goes to the mushroom farmers. That's one reason everybody has to be concerned about the mushroom farmers. They provide a good outlet for poorer quality hay and corn cobs.

"Diversified crops help you to plan and space out your planting and harvest schedule," says Wilkinson. Wilkinson Farms owns or leases about 5,000 acres. It takes about half of the production to feed the animals and the remainder is sold to the outside market.

Diversity in industry is important too, says Wilkinson. He has been a member of the Chester County Office of Economic Development for the past five years, chairman of the Board of Assessment Appeals, and adviser for the Pennsylvania and Delaware River Basin Commission — preserving water for agriculture. "It's all related," he says.

"You have to be able to pull things together to stay in operation," Wilkinson says. One of Wilkinson's enterprises, the Broad Run Valley, Inc. landholding corporation, houses bulls on a piece of ground that doesn't produce well to keep that land profitable. "The farmer has to learn to act, not react," he advises.

He says you have to be able to recognize that not everything works. They do a lot of experimenting with new methods.

Wilkinson points to a piece of machinery that was adapted to load and unload corn cobs for the mushroom farms. It cost a lot of money to adapt it and it was a good idea, but then it turned out that the mushroom farmers stopped using corn cobs on the compost. So now he has an expensive machine sitting in a shed, but he says, "we'll make the needed changes," and it'll will be useful someplace else.

In addition to boarding bulls, Wilkinson farms is also boarding surrogate cows. The surrogate cows are part of a new operation where Wilkinsons lease an operating room to Genetics Unlimited. In the operating room, Dr. Jim Evans works with fertilized eggs of prize cows and bulls and transfers the embryos into the surrogate cows.

The mother cows then receive the best of feed and the best of conditions from the Wilkinsons for the remaining portion of her gestation period. They charge a set fee for the whole package, the



Leon Wilkinson (right) and Bob Yeatman discuss the plight of the mushroom farmer in Chester County at the family-run mushroom farm of C. P. Yeatman and Sons, in Avondale.

transplanting and the boarding.

That's diversity — the key term.

Governmental Influences

"Now we have to make decisions that are heavily influenced by government decisions," Wilkinson says. He adds that the farmer has problems when the government changes its programs in the middle of a growing season, for example.

The government farm policy, says Wilkinson, is a "cheap food policy." He says government programs are there to guarantee consumers cheap food, but we have to show them that we have to stay in business for this program to continue.

The history of the land Wilkinson's family farms is a case in point. As social and economic conditions and government programs change, so does the farm operation change to adapt to new conditions, to new programs.

King Ranch, or Buck and Doe Farms, in Chester County was put together in the 1930's by one of the DuPonts. It was purchased in the 1950's by the Klieberg Family, one of the largest landholders in the U.S.

The Klieberg Family owned land in Kingsville, Texas, where they developed a breed of Santa Gertrudis herds, which were a cross between a shorthorn beef female and a Brahman bull. In the 1950's the Kliebergs sent steers up to the King Ranch where there was rich grassland to fatten them and then convenient accessibility to Philadelphia and New York markets.

When environmental regulations affected that operation, the slaughterhouses in New York and Philadelphia closed down. Beef is now slaughtered and then shipped in boxes in refrigerator trucks to the east coast markets.

Just as technological and political factors influenced government regulations and policies back in the 1930's, so are government regulations and policies being influenced by technological and political factors today.

The mushroom growers in Chester County are presently one of Wilkinson's primary concerns. Mushroom growers, threatened by price-lowering imported mushrooms from Red China and Taiwan, are having a hard

struggle to stay in business. Abandoned mushroom farms dot the Avondale landscape.

A mushroom farmer still in business, but affected by the government is Bob Yeatman. He runs a family mushroom farm, C.P. Yeatman and Sons, Avondale, that hires 35 employees.

Yeatman has managed to stay in business by watching his production closely. He says he can't afford to have a bad crop. It costs 54 cents to produce a pound of mushrooms, so he can only make a small profit on the fresh market at 75 cents a pound. But the market price for canned mushrooms is lower than the cost of production. So mushroom growers are in a tight squeeze and many have already been squeezed out.

When the mushroom growers in Avondale go under, everybody else is affected too. Dealers can't sell cars and trucks. "Other merchants are also affected," Wilkinson says, "the hurt goes right down the line."

"So much of our lives are subsidized by the U.S. government — schools, aging, highways, airlines, railroads — and you don't hear that played up all the time," Wilkinson says. A farmer has to forward contract or hedge or store his corn in order to cover the price of production and make any profit.

Wilkinson has a strong sense of need for cooperative efforts, he uses the term "two-way street" to describe the farmer's relation with landowners, with homeowners in developments, and with employees.

He was concerned with traffic problems that might arise when farmers take their large machines on the road to do work among distant fields or to haul their large loads. He was concerned with employees, and said it was essential that they think in terms of "my truck," or "my machine." Wilkinson stressed how important it is for employees to take pride in their work if they are going to do a good job.

"If a farmer must leave the farm," said Wilkinson, "he will make it some way. I never heard of a farmer being a poor worker," he said. "Whether they are driving a truck or working in industry, farmers get the job done."

N.J. FFA Dairy Judging Contest

NEW BRUNSWICK, N.J. — The N.J. FFA Dairy Judging contest will be July 8 at Delaware Valley College, Doylestown, Pa. Mr. John Dumschat, Sussex County Extension agent, will organize this contest.

Held in conjunction with the State 4-H judging contest, high

school students will be testing their abilities of judging different breeds of animals. This contest is a true example of practical experience for FFA members, students of high school vocational agriculture. A main goal of the contest is practical training to encourage students to seek the latest advances in these industries.



"I'm the guy that wants to remind them (the Milk Marketing Board) about the farmer; I will be the farmer's advocate," Wilkinson stated in describing his role on the Board.



Wilkinson Farms contracts to provide surrogate mothers with the best of care during the period of gestation. Here the surrogate cows are housed in loose housing with locking head gates.