

The Kellers Believe

Nothing Brings Togetherness Like The Family Farm

BY LOU ANN GOOD

LITITZ — While many farmers lament that their sons don't want to continue farming, Lloyd and Eunice Keller have a different story. Their three sons possess the same love for the soil as their father and are continuing the farming tradition.

Their oldest son Bob took over the family farm and Lloyd and Eunice help out. Bob and Lois with their children Karen, 11; Cynthia, 9; Sheri, 6; and Stephania 22 months, farm 235 acres; raise 400 steers and 68,000 layer hens.

Probably nobody believes in the advantages of the family farm more than the Kellers do. Bob says, "All I ever wanted to do was farm." He believes his parents made farming enticing by encouraging him and his siblings to have agricultural projects. Then, too, he recalls that chores like picking peas were fun when interspersed with playing family pranks and singing ditties like "I've been working in the pea patch all the live long day."

As the family expanded through marriage and grandchildren, Eunice faithfully planted ten pounds of peas each year. Then their children returned with their spouses and offspring to harvest the peas. "I'm sure passerbys thought we had a bunch of migrant workers picking our peas," Eunice says of the pea patch pandemonium.

Occasions like these bring laughter and happy memories to the Kellers who stress that family farming encourages better communication and togetherness. Small farmers, they believe, have a quality of independence that other businesses lack.

Yet, Bob sees that independence which farmers cherished for decades fast eroding. "Many farmers are dependent on working for feedmills or businesses that hold their contracts." Of greater concern to Bob is the government subsidies and policies that he feels are making the farmer dependent on the government. Pressures of finance and the pursuit of affluence he believes has caused many farmers to take advantage of government funded programs. He said, "Independent farmers today must be committed to principals and take another look at borrowing practices."

Lloyd would like to see more young fellows tackle farming. At the same time he realizes the debt load required is overwhelming. "Our sons don't want to carry the debt load that we did only a generation ago," he said. Then the economy was on the upswing for the farmer. Banks encouraged lending. But this decade with its fluctuating interest rates have taken their toll on the industrious farmer. The risk of borrowing blankets the idealistic dreams of being close to the land and tending livestock. So potential farmers turn away, not willing to take the risk.

Lloyd wishes things were different—that today's youth could look forward to taking over the family farm. He questions, "Are we improving our farms so much by increasing their values that they can't afford to buy them?"

He sees another detriment to the small independent farmer. He said, "Big operations hurt the family farm. We can't compete with the price breaks that egg and feed companies give big operations."

At one time, Lloyd considered expanding his farm so that it could employ his three sons and their families. He took the first step and built a second chicken house. He planned to diversify by adding a pig operation. "But I didn't feel comfortable continuing the expansion," he said. "By becoming big we lose too much of what we wanted in the first place. We lose that quality of independence of having more time and less pressure, because the bigger you get,



Lloyd Keller



Twenty-two month-old Stephania is the Kellers' miracle baby. Lois who was diagnosed with having Hodgkin's Disease needed to undergo extensive chemotherapy. Consequently, doctors did not think it possible for Lois to have a healthy baby. The Kellers expect another baby in July.



The Keller clan values the family togetherness that farming allows them. What other occupation would allow them to take an afternoon break when the children return home from school? From left, Lois, Karen, Sheri, Bob, Cynthia, and grandparents Eunice and Lloyd.

the more pressure and that reflects upon family life. Then too, the more heads there are in a corporation, the more opinions there are to cause dissention."

Lloyd didn't want that. Yet, he felt responsible to help his sons realize their dream to continue farming. The Kellers discovered that buying separate operations and helping each other with machinery and chores works best.

Despite the high value of his land, Lloyd said, "I've never been tempted to sell building lots to maintain the family farm. The blessings, benefits and advantages of the small family farm outweigh the dollars of selling."

Both father and son reiterate, "We'd rather not get bigger; instead, we want to do better with what we have and spend more time together as a family."

Lloyd reflects on his chosen vocation with pleasure. "Farmers have more sensitivity to creation and more opportunity to thank God and worship. Sometimes when we pay service people to repair machinery, we're tempted to think we have the wrong job. The inequality of the middleman gets higher and higher margins than production."

The most frustrating conflict is the debt load, climbing interests rates and trying to make ends meet. Dealing with those issues are more stress provoking than unpredictable weather. Lloyd said, "If we have a dry year, we turn around, plant again and anticipate a better year because God promises that seedtime and harvest will continue until the end of the world."

Bob agreed and added, "We question how much longer the market will remain depressed." But Bob, who the family labels as an optimist, believes that farmers eventually will see rising prices. He said, "It's always been that way before."

The Kellers also believe speculation has caused greater swings in market commodities. "Supply and demands are not always ruling markets, but demands that merely appear on paper," Bob said.

Both Eunice and Lois find machine breakage frustrating. Eunice believes that automation causes more stress for farming than the years when chores were manually completed.



"The farm is a good place for children to learn to accept responsibility," Bob Keller said. His wife Lois and daughters (left) Karen, and Cynthia take care of egg packing each afternoon.

Lois inserted, "If you want to go away, you can't leave because something is broken."

Farming isn't the only demanding occupation the Kellers have. Lloyd is a deacon in the Mennonite Church and Bob is a minister. "Schedules are pressing and it is a luxury to stay home," Eunice admitted. "We hate to say no to requests."

Because schedules are more pressing today than earlier decades, Bob feels that it is more important to take vacations than

years ago. They are grateful that they have the opportunity since his father and mother can run the farm smoothly.

Things aren't perfect on the farming scene, but Bob said, "Although things are less than ideal, we live in the perspective of the next life. We know not all injustices will be taken care of in this life."

In the meantime, the Kellers plan to continue working on the family farm where nothing brings togetherness like the family farm.



Lois Keller



Bob Keller