

Spinning Wheel Farm

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consumers is better taste and a longer shelf life.

"We (dairy farmers) send out of our farms a good, quality product and it's up to restaurants and handlers to make sure they keep it that way," says Ralph.

Each year the Robertsons host hundreds of school children to show them life on a farm and how milk is produced.

"It's up to us, (dairy farmers) to spread the word. We've got to tell kids we've got a quality product. I tell them when they go into a restaurant and they order milk and the milk comes out and it's not cold, to send it back and demand a good, cold glass of milk," said Ralph.

Quality is number here. The Robertsons do not have a dazzling new milking parlor. Nor do they have the latest in pipeline and milking equipment. And the barn is far from ideal for dairy cows.

A creek lies a few hundred feet from the barn and the low ground collects water making the path to the pasture sometimes sloppy and muddy. An excellent environment for breeding mastitis. The free stall barn built in 1977 is designed for 60 cows, but is constantly filled to over capacity with 75 to 80 cows at one time. And Ralph, Debbie, Melvin Arrington, the fulltime person, or Judy Owings the morning and weekend milker, may do the milking.

Production is near 18,000 pounds of milk and 627 pounds of butterfat. Quality is first here. Income over costs is first, too. A healthy herd is a low-cost herd. Time is also a consideration.

"We want the most amount of milk for the least amount of money and that may not be at 21,000 pounds. 21,000 pounds may take heavy duty management and that would take time away from my family. I like our outside activities with farm bureau, church, ag preservation. And we have a nine-year-old daughter, Katie. We want to spend time with her, too," said Ralph.

"The cows work for us. We don't work for them, but we've got to take good care of them so they continue to work for us," said Debbie.

Atlantic Dairy Cooperative pays 20 cents per hundredweight for the top quality premium. That's a

bonus. The real pay-off is increased production and lower health related costs. But putting quality number one means they do things a little differently at Spinning Wheel Farm.

Although any one of the Spinning Wheel Farm crew may greet cows in the parlor for milking, milking procedures do not change.

"We don't take shortcuts. We don't push the cows here. That's very important. If it takes an extra 20 minutes to milk, that's okay," said Debbie. Everything has to flow smoothly."

Be it Ralph, Debbie, Melvin, or Judy milking, there are no surprises in the parlor with for the cows or the person doing the milking. Robertsons' cows must walk up 19 narrow steps from the holding area to the parlor twice a day. Only a secure relationship with the

milking crew can entice a dairy cow to make that trek.

Although the capacity of the free stall barn is 60 and it is usually houses 80, feeding six times a day keeps the cows up and moving so cows can share the stalls.

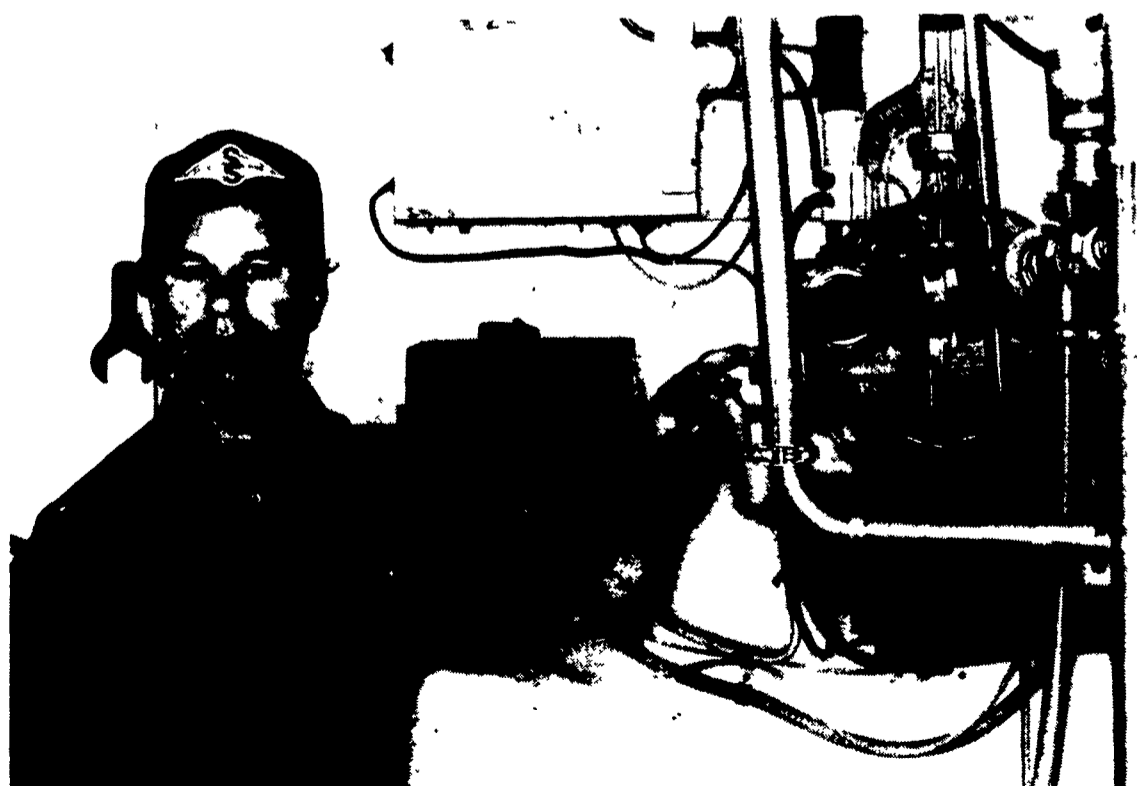
The Robertsons bed with straw and Ralph says they have not had a case of coli mastitis since they changed from sawdust seven years ago. Alleys are scraped twice a day, and freshens beds as needed.

"When its muddy we don't allow our cows to go out unless its good and solid. I'm convinced cows get mastitis from slopping through the mud," said Ralph. "The cleaner we keep them the better off they are."

In Ralph's barn, as well as some of the other dairy barns in the Wakefield Valley, there's some-



Anyone of the Spinning Wheel Farm milking crew can milk alone. Cows being treated and needing treatment get both red leg bands and red chalk markings — double insurance that the next person milking will know which cows to watch. A bulletin board in the parlor holds notes for next milking. Pictured are: Judy Owings, Ralph Robertson and Melvin Arrington, and Debbie Robertson (not pictured) earned their quality premium for 12 consecutive months in 1988.



It may be a mix-and-match milking system, but one thing Ralph Robertson is firm on is "shine". He buys the lowest-priced soaps and detergents, but adheres to dealer's recommendations. If the product falls, Ralph demands immediate response from his supplier or the product goes. However, price is no object when he buys a sanitizer.



In field work, Melvin Arrington, is hard to keep up with, according to Ralph, but Melvin is invaluable in the parlor, too. Melvin keeps a close watch on equipment, cows and on the mailbox for their quality 'report card' every month.

thing unusual under neath the straw bedding.

Asphalt.

No it's not the kind used on roads and highways. It is a special blend. This unordinary material provides a soft base which Ralph prefers to increase cow comfort.

"It seems to be something that people in this area do. We have an asphalt plant nearby so it makes it easier, but it's more economical, too. It's a special mix, very pourous. You can pour a bucket of water on there and in a few minutes its gone. So it keeps the cow dry," explained Ralph.

A monthly visit from the foot trimmer assures Ralph that all the cows' feet are in good shape. This is essential to cow comfort and health all year around.

"We do as much or more maintenance and preventative work here as anything else. We trim the feet when the cows go dry or are ready to go dry. We don't want to create any additional stress when they are milking than what they have to," said Ralph. "And we don't want any damage to the udder either."

The Robertsons milk a mix of registered and grade cows. The average age in the herd is just a little over four years. Ralph likes to keep young herd because his cows spend a lot of time standing on concrete and an older cow may not

have the ability to negotiate the 19-step trip to the parlor. A younger herd, he feels, is a bit more aggressive.

"Also, if a cow gets a high mastitis count, it is just not economically feasible to keep her," says Ralph. "I've got to turn her over quickly."

Ralph hasn't used mastitis tube treatment in years except for dry treatment of cows. He relies totally on I.V. treatment which he administers.

"We don't have a lot of help here, but the help we have here is good. Melvin or Judy can do the milking by themselves. I have no worries about them. They are very good. If we are out baling straw or hay, Judy just comes in and takes right over. Debbie also milks when the need arises," said Ralph.

Anyone of them can do the milking because red and yellow leg bands, chalk markings on the cows and notes on the bulletin board in the parlor, tells the next milker what to do and which cow to watch, treat or to cut back on feed.

"I know you're not supposed to, but we use a lot of water here to wash dirt off the cows. We use a hose with a solution of iodine water. But we use one to ten towels to dry those teats and udder off completely," said Ralph. "It must

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The Spinning Wheel Farm has been in the Robertsons' family for three generations. Ralph Robertson currently chairs the Carroll County Ag Land Preservation Committee to assure that not only his farm, but others like his will remain in agricultural use for years to come.