

Weaver Homestead Offers A Great Way To Live

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NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — The Weaver Homestead, a familiar name among progressive farmers, is often cited for excellence in farming practices.

But Nelson and Don Weaver, who operate the century farm in New Holland, appear nonchalant about the media recognition they receive for their example of leadership and inspiration to others.

"We are trying to do a good job and we're thankful for what we have accomplished, but what we really are trying to do is to live in a way that our families enjoy," Don said.

He explained, "We consider ourselves progressive in management, but we don't live or die by our cows production. We get the most satisfaction out of doing something with our families and with our church because God is important to us."

Begin farming

Nelson, 38, the oldest son, began farming in partnership with his dad, John M. Weaver, in 1976.

While Nelson has always maintained a love for the farm, his brother Don, who is 32, recalls that, as a teenager, he couldn't wait to leave the farm.

"Back then, it seemed like everything I touched broke," he recalled. "It was so frustrating."

After high school graduation, Don left the farm and for three years was employed by a company in a supervisory position.

No regrets

"During that time, I felt no regrets for leaving the farm and I was content in my job," Don said. But in 1980, when his brother bought out his dad's share, Don decided to join his brother in partnership.

"I had matured a lot in those three years," Don said, "and we



The Nelson Weaver family includes (from left) Joyce, Nelson, Jennifer, Justin, and Janina.



Don and Linda Weaver with their children, from left, D. John, 20 months; Gina, 6; Heidi, 8; and Rita, 3.



D. John, 20 months, shares his mother's delight with the chickens, rabbits, and guinea pigs that are housed in a shed on the homestead.

decided I would be in charge of the cows and Nelson in charge of the crops."

Working in partnership allows the team to be flexible and Nelson said, "I feel we make better decisions because we can weigh each other's perspective and come up with the right decision."

The brothers believe they balance each other. Nelson enjoys the crop and mechanical end of farming while Don prefers overseeing the breeding and feeding program for the cows.

Recognizing strengths

Both recognize that Don is more open in expressing his opinions and Nelson more reserved. Recognizing

each other's strengths and weaknesses has allowed them to work well together.

"Sure we have differences of opinions sometimes — that's to be expected — but the important thing is that we respect each other," Don said.

One of the first decisions the brothers, who have both earned the Keystone Farmer Award in the FFA program, made was to cut back on diversification.

"We wouldn't have this farm if our dad hadn't kept on top of things. He wasn't afraid to expand. Over the years, in addition to dairy, he farmed tobacco, tomatoes, pigs, chickens, and steers.

"But we decided to stick to dairy because that makes the most money to support two families," Nelson said.

They have 90 Holsteins and 90 replacements on their 106-acre farm. Nelson owns the farm with the two houses.

Conservation practices

In March, the Weaver Homestead received the annual Outstanding Cooperative Award from the Lancaster County Conservation District.

The Homestead had been signed up with the conservation district in 1970. At that point, they began contour farming and soon installed a waterway to prevent ditch erosion.

Don Robinson, who heads the Young Farmers Program in the Eastern Lancaster County School District, worked with them to switch fields from square blocks to strips.

In 1974, the Weavers added to the barn and installed a 90,000 gallon liquid manure system. "It held a two-month supply and was surely better than spreading manure every day," Don said, "but it had its disadvantages too."

In 1982, they installed a slurry

hold that stores a nine-month supply. "It's ideal because we haul in in the spring and the fall — whenever it's convenient for us.

"In the beginning we viewed the system as an advantage for the mere fact that we didn't need to haul it everyday. Later we saw the advantages that we needed no fertilizer at all for the last three years.

Soil tested

After the soil tested in excess for nitrogen, potash and phosphorous, the Weavers became more particular about adding additional nutrients to the soil.

"The soil is alive; it breaks down organic matter and we must treat it as something special. If we put on chemicals that are so toxic that it

hurts our skin, I have to ask what else is it killing," Don said.

The reality of this possibility was magnified when Don and his wife Linda's first child was diagnosed severely mentally handicapped.

"The doctor attributes her handicap to high nitrates in our water," Don said. "Since that time, we've eliminated the water contamination but we prefer to not place blame but to accept that God gave Heidi to us for a special purpose. She is very happy and fits in well with our family."

When the Weavers observed that the soil was getting solid, they saw the importance of crop rotation and low input farming. Today they rotate from corn to alfalfa to kill off the weeds. A severe problem with shatter cane was eradicated with mowing and crop rotation. Instead of baling corn fodder this year they plowed and disced it to build up the soil.

To be successful in low input farming, the brothers contend, you must stick out your neck and do what you think is the right thing to do.

Experimentation for them did not result in crop losses, but "our corn fields didn't look perfect," Nelson admitted. But the Weavers have been pleased with crops and yields.

"It has been three years since we put on fertilizer and we're really impressed with the look of the soil," Don said. "It's healthy, loose and full of earthworms."

Milk production

For two families to survive on one farm, the Weavers wanted to push for optimum milk production. "We didn't want to expand our herd because we didn't have any place to go with the excess fertilizer," Don said. "At the same time we needed more money to survive financially."

In February 1989, the Weavers began milking three times daily, at 6 a.m., 2 p.m., and 10 p.m. "It's one of the best decisions we ever made," Don said. Their milking totals have been up 10 percent during the first year.

Presently the herd is averaging 23,000 pounds with 880 of butterfat.

"Milking three times daily really helps udder health because it relieves pressure," Don said. "We have no mastitis or damage to the teats because they don't lay in a wet bed."

"It has a lot more pluses than minuses," Nelson said. "It's important to have automatic stop milkers if you milk three times daily."

Despite their success, Don said, "We don't recommend milking three times daily unless you have enough help. We don't recommend having your wife help on a regular basis or you'll suffer burnout."

Both wives can handle the milking alone, but do so only during

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