

Despite Ups And Downs In Milk Price, Farming Offers Joy

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LITITZ (Lancaster Co.) — The harsh realities: Milk tumbling by \$4-\$5 a hundredweight. Land prices soaring to \$10,000 an acre. The cost of pesticides, herbicides, and equipment fuel rising by as much as 20 to 25 percent. The cost of living increasing 5 percent and more.

The joys: Being your own boss. Raising a family in the wholesome environment of the farm. Keeping the tradition of the family farm alive.

Edward and Shenda Sensenich prefer to think of the joys of farming. As a young couple, with only a year of farming behind them, they've encountered plenty of the challenges involved in dairy farming — along with raising their 15-month-old daughter, Ashley.

The Sensenichs, like many dairy farmers, have had to weather everything from watching the milk price rise and fall dramatically to mastitis problems to raising their own family on the farm.

But improvements in feed, and culling cows that were old and not producing much anymore, gained them number one status as the most improved herd in the mixed breed category in milk production and protein totals, according to Pennsylvania DHIA records.

The increases were the result of overall management decisions, such as "getting better cows, getting rid of some that weren't paying the way, and better feed quality," said Ed.

The Sensenichs rise at 4:45 every morning to milk the cows at 5 a.m. Ed and Shenda both work in the dairy barn most of the morning. While Ed milks, Shenda feeds hay and grain to the milking cows and tends to the heifers.

A great deal of time in between

milking, and up to the final milking at 4:30 p.m., is spent working with each cow, until the day ends sometimes at 7 p.m.

"On this farm, things aren't awfully modern," said Ed. "When we started, we didn't have a dumping station. We carried all the milk over to the tank, and we were trying to improve one thing at a time."

Ed said that "you have to spend time with the cows. I think that being around the cows a lot helps to identify cows that have foot problems and that kind of thing." Working with the cows twice a day seven times a week allows a farmer to get to know what each cow is really like — and this contributes greatly to managing them better.

The Sensenichs farm about 69 tillable acres and rent an additional seven-acre field. Their herd, consisting of Guernseys and Holsteins, includes about 30 milking cows and six dry cows, in addition to about 10 heifers and calves. The Sensenichs milk their cows out of a tie stall using the old-fashioned dumping station and buckets. (Moving to a milking pipeline is something they're considering for the future.)

The Sensenichs regularly have their forages checked for protein and other nutritional factors. They work with Rick Hartman, a dairy consultant from Leola, who also helps them with overall herd management.

Last summer, Ed used a hand-mixed total mixed rations (TMR) program. The program included a soy distiller (50 percent soy meal and 50 percent corn distiller). In addition, Ed is feeding the cows more, "about as much as they can eat," he said. Keeping the dry matter intake up "helped about as much as anything," he said.

During the summer, Ed keeps



The Sensenich's herd of Guernseys and Holsteins increased milk production by 4,624 pounds, making it the number one highest increase for mixed breed, according to Pennsylvania DHIA records. Shown here are, left to right, Shenda with 16-month-old daughter Ashley and husband Edward. Photo by Andy Andrews

the cows in the barnyard, and puts them in the pasture to get their feed and some exercise. But the better feeding program, in addition to keeping track of the protein and other nutrition in the forages, helped get improved DHIA records this year.

"It's a lot in the feeding," he said, "because we jumped in percent protein within the first couple of months, and nonfat solids."

Ed said that genetics also played a big part. Nearly 100 percent of his herd is sired by Atlantic Breeders Cooperative.

But the drop in milk prices in recent months has cast some gloom on prospects of increasing the herd and updating the farm equipment.

"Production is not overly great even now," he said. "We were making progress, and hopefully we can keep doing that. When milk prices were good, we were buying cows and doing everything to try and improve the herd."

But now, the Sensenichs hope that through improved management, they can continue to enhance their farm profitability.



Edward S. Sensenich feeds rations to the dairy herd. A combination of management and feed improvements boosted protein averages 158 pounds, making his herd number one in the state for protein increase in the mixed breed category.

Lately, the Sensenichs have encountered a mastitis problem and once faced a somatic cell count (SCC) of about 400,000. But post-dip and pre-dip procedures, and culling the cows, brought the SCC down to about 150,000 — results they attribute greatly to help from the DHIA.

"I think that's another (area) where DHIA records helped," said Ed. "The records show you the cows that are making a profit. Because one cow can be milking 50 pounds and have a 3.5 percent test and the next cow can be milking 50 pounds with a 4 percent test, and the profits can change from one to the other."

The Sensenich family has been with the DHIA since 1963. But since January of this year, DHIA has helped to control the mastitis problem. A combination of culling older cows (many in the 7-8 year range) is helping Ed reach his goal of milking 40-50 cows.

And given a better price for milk, Ed would like to expand the

herd and update the technology in the barn.

Ed and Shenda met at Manheim Central High School. Before and after their marriage, Ed worked four years as a tractor mechanic. In 1989, he purchased his father's (Robert Sensenich) herd, and began renting the farm (a farm, said Ed, that has been in the family back to the years of his grandfather).

Shenda was raised on a "farmette," she said — a 4-acre steer farm managed by her father.

"It's a nice place to raise a family," said Ed. "And I like being my own boss."

Ed said his father and mother do the milking on the farm when Ed and his wife need some time away from the farm. The freedom from a rigid 9-5 schedule and raising a family appealed to both of them, and so far, living on the farm has been beneficial.

"And I love animals, so I took to farming right away," said Shenda.



Shenda takes time out from farm chores to show daughter Ashley what it's like to help feed the cows.



Shenda Sensenich feeds Elle, a two-month-old Holstein heifer, as part of the morning chores.