

## Smith's Guernseys: Breed Of Choice Or Heritage?

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It's an important fact, because real estate speculation has been a major reason for dairymen to make changes in operations — the higher land prices necessitate extreme farm operation thriftiness in order to pay off the high loans often required to buy a farm from another farmer.

Even from one generation to the next.

And many times, using the land for agriculture isn't profitable enough to pay for the land.

So it gets lost to agriculture.

Sitting on some of Lebanon County's richest soil, surrounded by menacing housing developments and strip malls, is the Smith farm, located just north of Route 422 in Palmyra.

On the turn-of-the-century farm is an all-registered Guernsey herd that traces its roots back with the farm family who nurtured it.

There is no dispute that the gentle, red and white cattle with the pink snouts are not the best breed for producing pounds of milk per animal.

But for the amount of feed they require, the size of the buildings needed to house the animals, and the other overhead costs involved, Guernseys can compete in the ever-tightening battle to be profitable, according to the Smiths.

David Smith, and the rest of his family, is content with the 65-head milking herd. Altogether, with replacements and dry cows, they have about 160 head.

A third generation Guernsey breeder, David, 34, said he is not prejudiced against other breeds, however.

One of the strongest reasons for the Smiths having Guernseys dates back to a decision made early in the century, when the family herd was started by David's grand-



David Smith (right) and Kenneth Winebark, county extension agent, discuss the results of the Lebanon County Dairy Judging teams at last Saturday's contests at the Penn State Dairy Expo in State College. Smith is one of the team's coaches and a former participant. The junior team was high team in their competition, while the senior team came in seventh.

father, Jacob Smith.

Jacob had been a milk tester in Lebanon County during the 1920s and 30s. In the 1930s he bought his father's farm and some Guernsey cattle to start his own dairy farm.

David's father Robert (the eldest son of Jacob) said his father started the herd during the brief age of "Golden Guernsey" milk. Guernsey milk is high in butterfat, at a breed average 4 percent, and also high in protein. It has a golden tint to it, as compared to some of the very white milk of Holsteins.

The Golden Guernsey era was so named because of selling promotions about the richness of the Guernsey's milk.

Although that era has disappeared for a variety of reasons, the Guernsey breed continues to produce rich milk and production per cow has been increasing.

However, many of the dairy farms which keep Guernseys are located near cheese plants or other industries which rely on milk with high component percentages. And cheese manufacturers pay premiums on protein.

The Smiths don't have such a plant nearby. They don't get any extra money for having cattle produce high amounts of butterfat and protein per volume of milk.

However, the Smiths continue to keep Guernsey cattle by choice and because of heritage, and because its practical.

Robert worked for his father for years before taking it over in 1978. In fact, Robert said he had never been employed anywhere else.

"I made the decision early," he said. "I was home ever since I was in high school."

After working for so long with the herd, he continued working with it. There was no reason to change things, he said.

The stanchion barn on the home farm is built to accommodate Guernseys. It would have to be changed to hold fewer and larger Holsteins.

That would not make sense.

David echoed the same sentiment. He said he likes Guernseys, but he likes other breeds of cattle as well.

A member of the state Guernsey Association (recently reading pedigrees for their Blue Halter spring sale in Chambersburg), and enjoys the Guernsey breed, he said would never put down any dairy breed in comparison to another.

"They all have their advantages," he said.

However, he said he knows of numerous times when a Holstein has kicked, deliberately stepped on a foot or squeezed against a man who was trying to attach a milker.

He said he cannot report the same type of behavior from his Guernseys.

His father agreed.

"They have a nice temperament. They're nice to work with. But I guess the biggest thing is, I was around them," Robert said. "Somewhere along the line (as a milk tester) he (Jacob) must have taken a liking to them."

And Robert did too, as David does also.

In fact, Robert was on the state Guernsey Association's board of directors for six years, from 1980

to 1986, representing his region.

David went to college, to Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University for their dairy program. Though his own 4-H project animals were Guernseys, he got a lot of exposure to other breeds through county 4-H, and cattle judging. Also, the college has both a strong Holstein and a Jersey herd.

But that didn't sway his mind about Guernseys.

After school, about 10 years ago, he came back to work the farm. He got the family involved in showing the animals. About the same time, they closed the herd and have been breeding their own replacement stock.

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This cow and the next one down the line have been producing 90 pounds of milk a day for the Smiths. That's good for any breed.



Dave Smith scoops out helpings of grain mix for the helpers kept at the old limestone barn on the property. The one at the far end pokes her head around in anticipation.



David Smith stands gets lots of attention from these young Guernsey gals. Dave farms with his father Robert on the family farm in Palmyra. Part of their all-registered Guernsey herd traces back to Jacob Smith, his grandfather.