

Togetherness Marks Family

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child is 20, he or she should have a small herd or at least enough animals to get them started in farming. Or, if they prefer, they can sell the animals to pay for college education or do whatever business endeavor they want.

"The savings keep multiplying," he said.

Unfortunately, Sandra, who is the oldest, said that she has had a lot of bad luck with her animals. Although she does own 13 cows, she said that she really should have more, but one calf fell down the hay mow and others suffered similar misfortunes.

Gross said, "I don't push the kids into going into farming. I want them to decide what they want to do. Then my wife and I support their decision and do everything we can to help them reach that goal."

But he and his wife, Marilyn, are extremely proud that four high school students from non-farm backgrounds whom they hired part time liked farming so much that they are now in full-time farming.

Despite the high cost of farms, kids are able to start up in farming today, David maintains because "someone in their 20s can do almost anything he or she wants if they are willing to put in lots of hours and effort. And if they don't start up with new equipment and farm in counties with high-priced

land such as Berks."

The children and the teen-agers who work on the Gross farm, are required to take a farm safety course.

"You can never be too safe," he said.

Operating equipment safely also has its recreational advantages. The bookshelves in the family's home are filled with more than 50 trophies for tractor pulls won by Gross and his son Michael.

"While most babies take teddy bears to bed, Michael took a tractor," Gross said.

Gross said that his philosophy for a happy family is dependent upon priorities.

"I don't put myself too near the top. I try to put God first, others second, and me third. That makes it easier for others to live with me," he said.

David and his wife, Marilyn, own 120 acres and farm 320 acres. In addition to 55 Holsteins and 60 heifers, they have 11 pigs, 3 horses, 1 pony, 70 ducks, 2 dogs, and 20 cats.

As much as Gross loves farming, he almost quit in 1980. That was the year, his herd got infected with bovine lacosis virus. He lost 12 cows in one year.

"It's like cancer — there's nothing to do to stop it," Gross said.

When he first contacted the Department of Agriculture, he said that they thought he was silly for

being worried about the virus. They did not consider it to be a serious contagious disease.

According to David, it is estimated that 25 to 30 percent of cows have the virus but only 5 percent show clinical signs.

With those statistics, the Gross family does not understand why the virus was so insidious to their herd.

David said, "Back then, I said if I end up with less than 15 cows, I'm going to quit farming."

The herd dwindled to exactly 15. David did not quit.

"I started selling a lot of hay from the 500 acres I rented."

But David liked cows better than field work. From the hay profits, he began slowly to rebuild the herd to 60 head.

The memory of that loss brought some changes in the way Gross buys cows. He insists that every cow he purchases be tested for the virus. It costs \$7 a head, but Gross is convinced it's worth it to have a certified-free herd. He believes testing should be a requirement for all cattle sold, and that people should be willing to pay more for a certified-free cow and for embryo transplant work.

The Gross herd went on test in 1984. They went from 14,000 pounds to 19,000.

Gross credits the increase to better feeding and management. Instead of selling his best hay, as he had been doing, he feeds it to his

cows.

"It seems to work a lot better that way than trying to make up the lack with feeding supplements," he said.

Progressive changes have been made since Gross took over the family farm in 1963. He put in a pipeline and put up silos. He feeds a total mixed ration and is making a switch to a registered herd.

"Housing is coming from every direction," Dave said about the encroachment on their farmland. "I'm not sure that I want to be the last farm in the neighborhood."

They strive to maintain friendly neighborhood contacts by warning neighbors that they will be spreading manure so the neighbors do not hang out their wash or plan outdoor cooking.

Duck manure is spread on the fields.

"It really makes crops grow and it's a lot cheaper," Gross said. "It also smells like the pits."

Some of the neighbors told him, "We will pay for your fertilizer if you promise not to spread manure."

Dave said. "I told them it will cost \$40 to \$50 an acre for fertilizer."

Needless to say the neighbors withdrew their offer and vowed to put up with the smell.

"If my children want to farm, there isn't room to expand here," Gross said. "I may need to sell to help them buy farms in a more reasonably priced county."

Whatever the future holds, Gross said, "The farm belongs to the kids."

Marilyn said the farm's name, SMAK-B, is derived from the first initial of each child's name. For many years, it was called SMAK Farm. "Then Brian came as a surprise," she said.

Marilyn said that as a former city girl, she found it easy to adapt to working with the animals, but she has never been able to adjust to early rising. Although David goes to the barn at 5 a.m., Marilyn waits until after the children are at school before she feeds the heifers and helps in the barn.

Her enthusiasm for farm life spread to her parents who moved from New Jersey to live within a

mile of the Gross's farm.

Marilyn said. "My dad helps out by fixing things — he is the mechanic."

David's parents live in half of the farm house during the summer months when his father works as a hired hand. In the winter, his parents vacation in Florida.

Sandra said, "If I didn't live on a farm, I would be lost. Everything I do — FFA, dairy princess responsibilities, 4-H — it is all centered around farming. It makes me feel good to know that I am filling my time with something worthwhile that will help me in the future."

Sandra received the FFA Keystone and Star Chapter Farmers Degree.

She is secretary of the Tulpehocken FFA. At school, Sandra is a member of the National Honor Society and the Prom Promise committee.

Sandra was one of 10 members of the Pennsylvania Council of Cooperatives who was sent to compete nationally at Colorado where she was chosen to be in the top five who will return as a leader next year.

She is active in the Mohrsville Church of the Brethren choir and youth group.

Fulfilling both Berks County and Pennsylvania alternate dairy princess duties takes precedent over everything else for Sandra.

She said, "I have other years to do other things, but this year I want to keep as busy as possible doing promotions. The worse thing for me is to sit at home without a promotion."

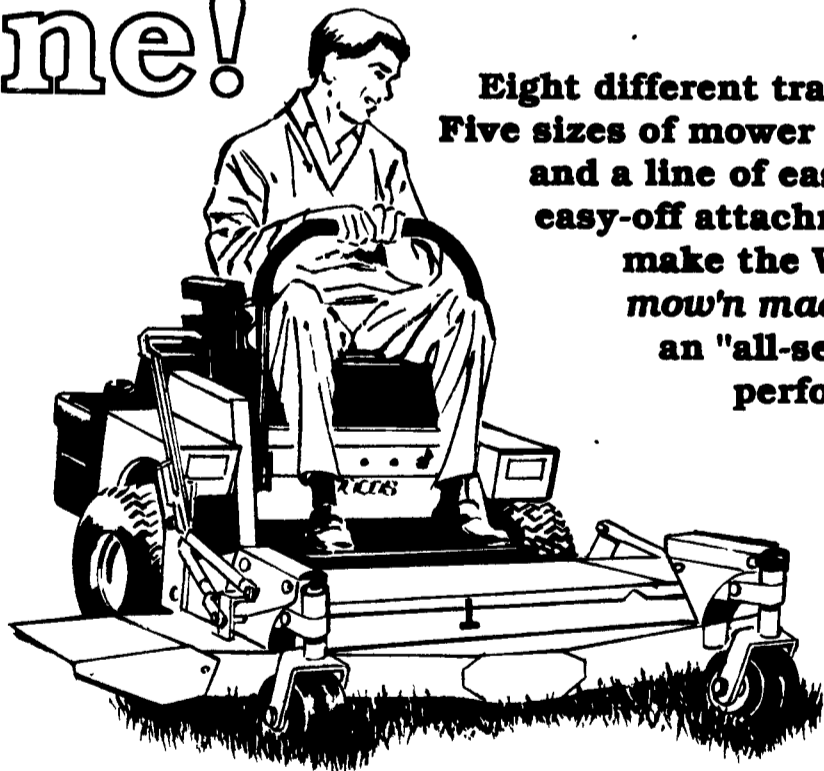
Sandra said, "Dreams take work. My goal as a dairy princess is to educate people, especially kids, about milk. Many children believe that milk comes from the supermarket."

She tells the children that the cow is responsible to keep the milk fresh, but once it is in the carton, it is our responsibility to put it in the refrigerator to insure its great taste and freshness.

She takes a bag of things used around the farm such as strip cup, balling gun, pill, syringe and tells

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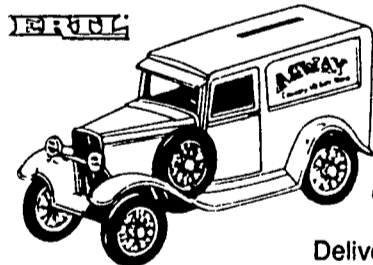
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