

Milk Drinkers Come To The Cow In Westmoreland County

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KECKSBURG (Westmoreland County)—A family dairy here has milk drinkers coming to them.

Gilbert and Jane Hutter, with their sons' (Dale and Blaine) families run a dairy production and distribution operation that has grown in the last 40 years from a one family farm to a three family business.

The dairy and farm, located between the villages of Norvelt and Kecksburg in rural Westmoreland County, seems to have developed a producers dream situation. Almost everything they produce is either consumed by their herd, or sold to consumers.

In the process of growing food and family, all the children helped milk cows before breakfast. There has been growth, including purchase of land (125 acres in 1973 and 92 acres in 1983).

A major step in the business development, according to Gilbert, came in 1969 when they decided to increase income by adding retailing to their dairy production. Their retail milk store opened in 1969.

Beginning the farm

The farm began in 1950 when Gilbert moved from his parents home in near-by Weltytown. The original farm consisted of a house, barn, 203 acres, and milk shipment of 5 gallons a day.

Gilbert recalls those days before

any soil conservation measures had been implemented on the land. After a rain "I don't know why I went back over the hill. Between each of the rows of grain the soil had washed down and started covering the plants below." Seeing that damage to his land motivated Hutter to begin extensive conservation steps.

First came contour farming in 1953. Then three diversion terraces, including grassed waterways to allow runoff without erosion in the middle '60s. Minimum till cultivation began in 1974.

In analyzing the benefits of minimum till, the Hutters point to a variety of advantages in addition to saving the soil. The advantages they see are: reduced labor, better nutrient management, ground water preservation, reduced fuel use and lower equipment investment. Hutters current minimum till cycle includes planting, herbicide application, harvest, disking (sometimes) and manure injection.

With the retailing operation taking time, the reduced labor is significant for the Hutters. "We have kept labor in the family," said Gilbert.

Minimum till fits their nutrient management needs, which became a high priority in 1979.

"We inject the manure," said Blaine. Injection confines the nutrients to the ground, which "cut fertilizer use about half. When you

can smell it, all the good stuff is getting away," he said.

The key to planting in the minimum till approach, according to Gilbert, is watching the seed depth. He feels some have planted too deep and then are disappointed in the stand. "You have to keep checking the seed," he said. Different soils and conditions require different planter settings to get the seed covered but not too deep.

Packaging their own milk

In 1969 when they decided to start the retail business, the Hutters built across the road from the house and barn to give physical separation between the herd and the processing and selling operation. Now milk amounts to two-thirds of the store's sales. Between the store and a wholesale route developed by Dale, all the milk from the 140 head (85 milking) herd is sold.

But matching consumer need with production has required a close eye on the freshening cycle of the cows. "If we see a time coming up when a lot will be dry, we try to hurry some heifers into production," said herdsman Blaine. And there has been an arrangement made to buy or sell with other sources, but that has to be minimized because "we have to buy at premium prices and sell at surplus."

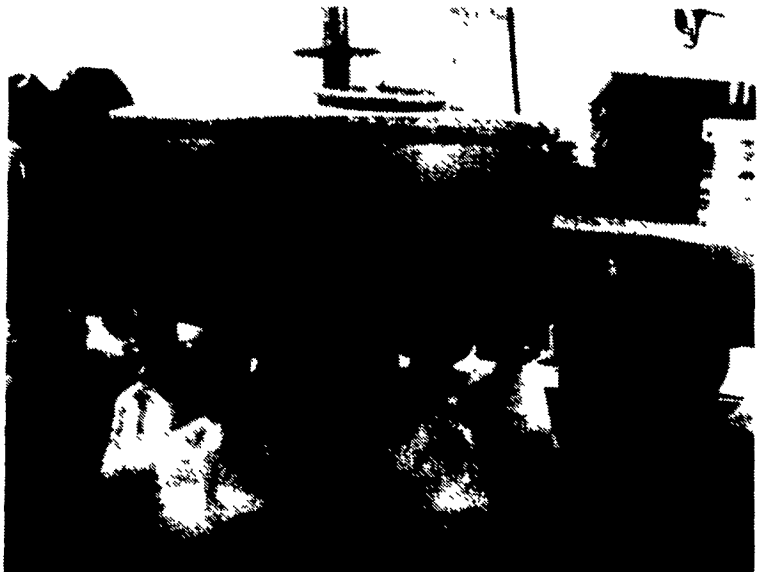
In setting up the first processing system, the family worked with dairy supplier Oaks and Burger, Cleveland, Ohio. The connection has been maintained to this day. In addition, the family credits Sid Bernard, an Ag-extension worker from Penn State, with helping them set up their processing system in the beginning. And with maintaining quality. One time, the dairy had trouble with high bacteria, and Sid helped solve the problem by reviewing their whole process. His simple solution: hotter cleaning water.

Developing the wholesale part of the milk business has been up to Dale. Current customers include gas stations, dairy queens, and restaurants. But, he said, time for expanding that customer list has been limited. Processing is done three times a week, and then the milk has to be delivered.

The processing begins when the milk is hauled from the barn to be cooled and stored. On processing days, the milk is run from storage through a tri-processor. The skim, 2%, 4%, or chocolate milk is then



Gilbert Hutter can sometimes be found at the cash register of the retail portion of Hutter Dairy in Westmoreland County.



Carol Gary, a daughter, loads the plastic milk jugs into the bottling machine at Hutter Dairy. This Westmoreland County dairy combines retail and wholesale distribution with production to provide income for three family households. The dairy processes 3-4,000 gallons of milk each week.

pasteurized at 140 degrees for 30 minutes in a 200 gallon vat. In a continuous stream, the milk is homogenized under 2,000 pounds per square inch pressure, then cooled to 40 degrees with well water, before bottling.

hours before milking should be restricted. And they emphasize that no feed should be given the hour and half before milking.

In conclusion, the sales side of the dairy seems to have had a positive impact on the production side. And to produce a similar income without the retail outlet, the Hutters would have to double the herd size. In good conservation practices and responding to the times, the family has found a key to survival.

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