

Rohrer Family Dairy Farm Continues To Modernize, Expand

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WASHINGTON BORO (Lancaster Co.) — When Robert Rohrer began farming in western

Lancaster County on his father's farm, he had 10 cows, one bucket milker, and 15 steers. That was 1953. Today, Rohrer and his four sons

and a few hired men run the largest dairy operation on test in Lancaster County. And on June 24, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., the facility is to be open to the public.



Bill Rohrer, one of Robert's four sons, sprays an iodine solution on the teats of this cow in the double-20 herringbone, computerized parlor. The Rohrers went to herringbone design with a double-10 parlor that's still in good condition, but not big enough to handle 650 cows three times per day. The family said they prefer the side-approach to the udder for milk prep and milking.



With the rapid exit reel locked into place, the next line of cows to be milked quickly gets into position and the teats can be accessed easily from the side in the herringbone design. In the middle of the ceiling are vents to allow heat to escape. They can be closed during bad weather.



The rapid exit reel allows all 20 cattle to leave the milking area within seconds — the time it takes for one to move, is the time it takes for all to move, increasing turnover and worker efficiency.

The Rohrer farm showcases some of the latest state-of-the-art designs and equipment. Some other aspects of the design are preferences, which make the whole operation unique and customized, even though much of the new 569-stall free-stall building was pre-cast and hauled in.

The Robert Rohrer & Sons partnership operation is nearing capacity on milking about 650 Holsteins three times per day in a double-20 herringbone, computerized parlor.

While the area immediately surrounding the Rohrer farm appears much as it did when Robert's father bought it in 1956, the current Rohrer dairy operation represents a huge change.

Perhaps more so, the current facility represents a series of smaller changes.

Over the years, Robert Rohrer Sr. has continued to take advantage of new technology, as he was able to see it clear, and make it work for himself.

The latest change has the Rohrers almost doubling their milking herd, and only add one more man to the operation.

The expansion is different, however, than other changes done over the years. In effect, the expansion represents the creation of a heritage for the Rohrer family — Robert Rohrer said that if considered only his lifetime needs, an expansion after 40 years of work would not make sense.

Robert said that during his career, he has designed the farm expansions and modernizations at first because he wanted to stay in business and provide for his family. More recently the efforts and assumed risks were undertaken because he said he felt it was his duty to be able to offer his sons a place on the farm.

Robert Sr. and his wife Lorraine have four sons; all involved to varying degrees in the farm operation.

Two sons are partners, Mike and Robert Jr.; the other two, Bill and Tony, are still too young to make that commitment.

He said he didn't want to push his sons to go into partnership with him, or even get into dairying, but he wanted them to have the home farm as an option.

"If it didn't work out, well, then, at least I did my part," he said. "But, you know, today they are all still with me," he said.

As it is, of the fully fledged partners, Bob Sr. is responsible for the feeding and nutrition work; Bob Jr. does the breeding and herd health; and Mike is responsible for raising replacements.

Bill Rohrer spends a lot of his time milking and doing maintenance in the parlor. The youngest, Tony, is still in high school, but is coming on into the operation with more responsibilities.

They all live close together, yet retain their independence as adults.

Tony and Bill live with Bob and Lorraine in a ranch-style house across Charlestown Road from the farm.

Mike and his family live at the farmhouse. Bob Jr. and his family live on another farmhouse on the operation, where they keep heifers and a 130 sow farrow-to-finish operation.

They all pitch in with field work and manure hauling and whatever other work needs to be done outside of the specific responsibilities.

According to the Pennsylvania Dairymen's Association 1993 Yearbook, last year the Robert Rohrer & Sons farm had been the second largest single milking herd operation in Lancaster County at 381 head.

With an average of 22,341 pounds of milk per cow, per year, they ranked 40th, on a protein production per cow basis, in a county with several hundred dairy farms.

That ranking isn't expected to last long — the Rohrers have bought quite a few springing heifers to bring on line, and expect the herd average to drop temporarily.

The business strategy of the

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These cows return from the milking parlor through an archway-like computer screening device that reads identification tags on the cows' collars. The identification number of those cows that need to be separated for reproductive or health reasons are entered onto the computer. When the cow returns from milking, and passes through the computerized archway, gates are automatically opened to direct the cow into a separate holding area.