

At-Home Schooling Helps Chester Dairy Farmers Thrive

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— Nearly a half century ago, Sam Fullerton, a Soil Conservation Service (SCS) representative, laid out contour strips, and a diversion about 800-feet long, on the boyhood farm of dairyman Jesse Lair.

Proving that hands-on experience is nearly always the best teacher, some 40 years passed in which Jesse's family moved to another farm, he married, reared his own family, and watched his dairy business grow.

Watching Fullerton proved educational for the young Jesse. Almost like riding a bicycle, in 1989, Jesse constructed diversions as he had learned many years before.

For these and other efforts on his farm, Lair was recently honored as Chester County Conservation Farmer of the Year, presented to his family at the 1994 Chester County Crops Day.

Lair Farm

Hands-on experience and knowing the intricacies of conservation farming are part of the lessons learned at the Lair Farm near Russellville. And while many dairy farmers are leaving their home in the rich farmland of Chester County and calling it quits to dairying, the Lairs employ a "stay-at-home" attitude about life on the farm.

With help from his son David and their full-time herdsman Sam Patterson, Jesse manages the 170-acre farm. About 135 acres are cropped: 80 acres of corn, 45 acres of alfalfa, and 15 acres of barley.

The Lair's stay-at-home attitude includes education of their children. Martha supervises the home schooling. Kathryn, 16, studies math and science through the ABEKA Home Video Program. Her Latin and English come from other sources. David, 15, and Hannah, 11, use ABEKA home school material but are not in the video program. (ABEKA is produced by Pensacola Christian College of Pensacola, Fla., according to Martha.)

"I've been farming all my life," said Jesse, who helped on the farm owned by father William in Landenberg. William Lair and his father were members of Interstate Dairy Cooperative from 1930 until their deaths. Jesse continued with Interstate (now Atlantic Dairy Cooperative).

Most of the present farm was laid out in strips when Jesse and his father purchased it in 1961. During the 1960s, several wide fence rows were bulldozed, and additional strips were laid out.

In 1988, thinking that something more than strips was needed, Jesse asked the SCS, with Jim Cain, to lay out some storage terraces with an underground discharge pipe. This pipe ran several hundred feet through pastureland belonging to neighbor Harold Bryson, who was very helpful in giving permission to use the pasture. The terraces were constructed by Clair Burkhart's bulldozer operated by Eddie Hoover, according to Jesse.

In 1989, on another part of the farm, Tim Smail of SCS laid out four diversions which emptied into a grassed waterway which had been constructed the year before.

Jesse constructed these diversions with his own tractor and plow, in the same way the one had been done some 40 years earlier on

that boyhood farm. The terraces and diversions cut across some of the previous strips; therefore, new strips were laid out in 1990-1991, according to Jesse.

Jesse received a bachelor's degree in animal husbandry from the University of Delaware in 1950.

Farm technology

While keeping with some of the traditions of dairying since a youth, Jesse has learned to stay up-to-date in farm management and technology.

For example, Jesse has installed a computer feeder system on the farm, with part of the grain being mixed with corn silage and haylage fed in the bunk feeder. The dairy itself has 95 cows, of which 84 are milking, with 50 replacement head of all-grade Holsteins. They use Atlantic Breeders Cooperative AI.

The Lairs use a double-4 herringbone parlor and milk twice a day. DHIA averages are 19,750 pounds of milk, 712 pounds of fat, and 615 pounds of protein, which Jesse said they are "trying to get higher" with the help of their feed representative.

Some traditions are hard to change, however. Jesse uses all on-farm stock for replacement heifers — at least for the past 25 years, he said.

With the help of Jesse (doing the bidding), son David purchased five registered Holstein heifers at the recent Chester County 4-H Center Dairy Sale. Those purchased were donated by Breck-A-De Farm of Oxford, Hoopes Yarnall of Oxford, Harold and Glen Ranck of Cochranville, David and Becky Troop of Cochranville, and Art and Duane Hershey of Cochranville.

The Lairs donated a grade calf of their own, a 9-3-92 heifer, Addy, which was purchased by Robert Peifer, Cochranville, for \$1,050 — the third highest-selling calf at the auction. The benefit auction raised about \$29,000 for the new center.

Jesse said, "We didn't really do anything" for the sale, other than make the contribution of a heifer.

"David was interested in getting a registered Holstein calf," said Martha. "He ended up with five."

The Lairs indicated that David wants to work on improving the herd genetics through use of registered animals.



Jesse Lair, with the help of son David and herdsman Sam Patterson, manages about 170 acres on the dairy, including about 135 in crops (80 acres of corn, 45 acres of alfalfa, and 15 acres of barley). The Lairs also take time to ensure that their children, front from left, Kathryn, 16; Hannah, 11; and David, 15 — make good use of the ABEKA Home School material and also help with farm chores. (The ABEKA program was produced by the Pensacola Christian College, according to Martha.) Photo by Andy Andrews

Tornado

Some improvements are necessary, since the Lairs had to deal, as many farmers did, with the spate of extreme winter weather and the severe storms that rolled through the area in the spring. One day, thunderstorms generated a tornado which careened through the farmland.

"It was raining so hard, we never heard any noise," (referring to the shed's destruction), said Jesse.

Martha said, "Our herdsman's wife was telling me that she heard the noise, and saw the twister coming. She said (the sky) got so black . . . she heard a rumbling, but she didn't know what it was. After she heard the noise . . . she saw a calf come running up over the hill."

That calf was AR-JOY ROYAL, the youngest (about a month old), of the five purchased at the 4-H sale. She was temporarily housed in the machine shed. Thankfully, the calf escaped harm.

But the machine shed didn't. It was destroyed by the twister, and it may cost upward of \$10,000 or

(Turn to Page A27)



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The Lairs see a recent change in the community that may hold some hope for farming. More and more Amish farmers are starting to farm the Chester County acreage. According

to Martha Lair, younger, plain farmers are beginning to see the possibilities of caring for the good agriculture land in the county.