

Providence Acres Provides New Home For Abma Family

(Continued from Page A1)

First the Abmas looked in Tioga County, near Lawrenceville. When that deal fell through, a realtor called to say that the farm they are now on was available.

"We prayed about coming here," said Dorothy. "This farm was supposed to have been sold, but it wasn't. When we came here, it just fell into line that we could get this farm, so that's why it's called Providence Acres."

The Abmas first got their taste of the Endless Mountains when they visited friends in the area.

"We love the Endless Mountains area and the people are so friendly here," said Henry.

Dorothy said, "And not only that, the farms are here."

"We're right in the middle of the dairy belt. When we first came here, I wanted to raise beef. I never liked dairy when I was a kid, I hated it. We used to hand milk everything. Of course today, everything is modern. That changed my attitude quite a bit. But we knew we would have to make a living here. We have a son who is coming up the ranks and we'd like to leave the farm to him if he wants it," said Henry.

After securing the farm, the family needed to find cattle, so, Dorothy said, Duane Mattocks put them in touch with two area dealers.

"It was really comical. There were two cattle dealers we had to work with. It was Glen Shores and Howard Visscher. Well, Howard Visscher took one look at my husband and he said, 'Henry Abma!' They used to ride the school bus together when they were kids to Christian school. They knew each other from then."

The Abmas decided to take the herd of cows that Visscher was able to put together. All their cows came from one herd in New York state.

"The man had a herd of about 100 animals, and he was selling 50 of them. We took 45. They did come out of a stall barn and we had a stall barn that they would go into," said Dorothy.

Soon the herd of grade Holsteins was at their new home in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. For Dorothy, who had never milked a cow before, and for Henry, who had only milked by hand when he was a boy, many challenges were ahead.

"When (Visscher) came, he came with 45 cows and four bucket milkers. And Duane was there and we started milking, and you learn real fast twice a day. I think what helped us at first was we didn't have any young stock, we just had the herd and then we built up from that," Dorothy said.

The Abmas stress that they couldn't have made the move without the help of neighbors and friends. One neighbor did all the spring plowing so the Abmas could plant the corn the first year. Even the former farm owner helped the family get their second start.

"It's no wonder we feel so good here," said Henry. "The people are just so good here. When we first started, we had trouble calving, Milford Kinsman, even with his good clothes on would roll up his sleeves and come and get that calf out. I knew nothing about it. In fact it was the night of a PFA meeting we were going to. He went home for his coveralls slid them over his clothes and we got that calf out.



Some of the Abma family's cows graze near the farm pond on their Dairy of Distinction.

And we were half an hour late for that meeting."

"You can have a lot of problems in dairy and be the best dairyman in the world. You can have sickness or other things, but I think even our veterinarian, Dean Elliott, has been a big help. We have herd day every month and he has spent a lot of his time with us over the years and given us such good ideas and good advice. Even now we still have him as our vet and he's a real good friend, too," Dorothy said.

Today the Abmas milk 45 cows in a tiestall barn. Their DHIA herd average rolls at 22,000 pounds of milk, with a 3.6 percent fat test and a 3.2 percent protein test.

"The years just progressed, and the farm got bigger. We didn't really buy too many animals. We raise all our young stock," said Dorothy.

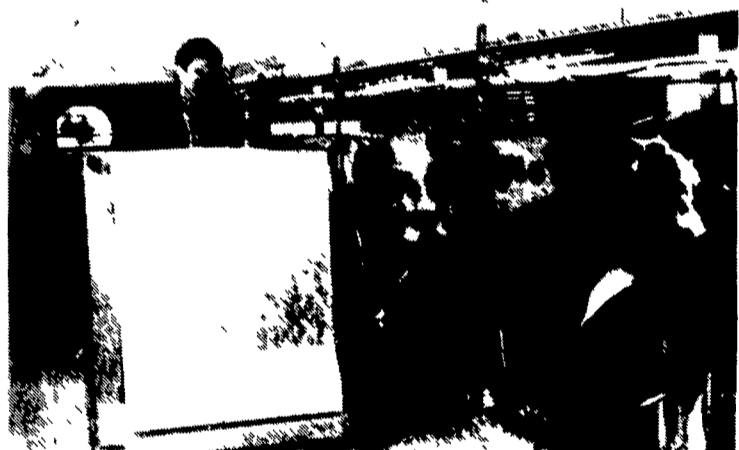
Currently the herd is about one half registered and one half grade.

Their first registered animal belonged to Shawn.

"The first year we were here, that August, they had the Blueberry Festival and it was at Wayne LaMont's farm and Shawn won the registered calf. That was the start of the registered herd," said Dorothy.

They also bought a registered cow from their neighbors, Milford and Shirley Kinsman and four head from Orton Mattocks.

After farming for six months, the Abmas put slate in the mangers to make clean-up easier. Seven years later, they put in a pipeline.



Henry Abma prepares to use his automated feed cart, one of the family's latest investments.



The heifer barn is designed to accommodate round bales. Here, Shawn Abma forks the hay in closer to the animals, while the family's Boarder Collier, Shelly, waits anxiously for her master's command.



Dorothy and Henry Abma look over their herd health cards in their milking barn. Each time something happens to the animals, whether it is a flare up of mastitis, or the birth of a calf, Dorothy is careful to record the information on the index card. That way, she explained, all the information is right at their fingertips if it is needed.

In recent years, they put up another silo and last year they put up a small storage and equipment shed. This year they purchased an electric feed cart to help feed the silage.

One early improvement the Abmas made to the farm was the erection of a heifer barn.

"We raise the calves all the calves till three months old in hutches. My husband built all those (hutches). And after three months they go up in the heifer barn," said Dorothy.

The heifer barn is divided into sections so the calves can be grouped by age. There's a bedded pack in the back, a scrape alley in the middle and locking headgates at the front. The feed alley is wide enough to unroll round bales of hay.

"The heifer barn was designed for round bales. We just roll one up and roll it back at night, and it's gone," said Henry.

"About two to three weeks before (the heifers) freshen we bring them into the main barn to get them used to the routine," said Dorothy.

The cows are fed a homegrown diet of corn silage and mixed hay that are grown on the family's 260 acres. An additional 25 acres of ground is rented. In total, about 50 acres are planted in corn and the hay ground is seeded in a timothy, alfalfa, and trefoil mix.

The Abmas are strong believers in the use of tedders for their hay.

"It brings the hay in one day sooner," said Henry. "Usually we

use the tedder 12-24 hours after it's cut and, boy, does that work.

"We usually get two cuttings of hay a year. It's very rare that we get three. There's third cutting out there right now, but you can't get in the field to get it. So it will be there until next spring and, Lord willing, we'll have a good spring. But our barn is full. I said to Shawn, why wreck the field? It's so hard to get a good seeding there and here we go out there trying to get it in. The rains have been too much."

They also feed a grain mix from Judson's Agway and top dress with Megalac and sodium.

"We don't have any TMR and we don't feed any haylage," said Dorothy.

The cows are on pasture at night from May to October. The pastures are divided into about five paddocks.

Although the Abmas are not afraid to try new ideas, they are somewhat cautious about some.

"When we have a good herd average, like we do, I don't like to try something that's too different," said Henry.

"I still think," said Dorothy, "That if you want to stay in any business and in dairy, you have to be open for the new way. We don't use BST because I just feel you really have to be on top of your cows and you really have to know your animals and it can't be given to all of them. It's something that we're not ready for. If our son ever

(Turn to Page A25)