

Kids Korner

Half Pints Invade Dairy Farm

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MIDDLETOWN, Md. — Farm tours, hayrides, ice cream making, and a picnic made a day of fun for a group of 60 kindergartners from Spring Ridge Elementary recently. The group visited the Middletown farm of Randy and Karen Sowers and family at the culmination of a school unit on farming and farm animals.

Randy and Karen Sowers have two children, Abigail, 18, and Ben, 13. Abby is the Frederick County Dairy Princess. The Sowers farm approximately 900 acres in total. The original farm is in Ag land preservation, and the additional acreage they own, which runs up the side of South Mountain, is under a conservation easement for Battlefield conservation, for the Battle of South Mountain. They plant 350 acres of corn, 150 of beans, 100 of a small grain, and about 150 of alfalfa and grass hay. Two hundred ten acres are devoted to pasture. They milk 160-170 head, raise 200 heifers and about 50 Holstein bull calves, and have a 70 head Hereford cross beef herd. In addition, 109,000 layers are part of the operation, and a few pigs.

The diversity of the farming

operation offered a good representation of Maryland agriculture to the children, whether they realized it or not! As far as they were concerned, it just made for a whole lot of fun. Accompanying the children around the farm and livening things up in general was Heidi, a mischievous goat belonging to Ben Sowers.

Daughter Abby, the county Dairy Princess, graduates this week, and plans on attending Frederick Community College as a business major. She has been active in 4-H up until her senior year, and is also involved with the Big Brother/Big Sister program, is a volunteer at the Cancer Society, a member of a vocal ensemble at school, a third grade Sunday School teacher at United Church of Christ, Middletown, and likes to line dance once a week. Her chores on the farm include milking at 1 in the morning on weekends, and on weekdays helping with the 5 a.m. milking, and feeding calves.

In addition to opening their farm to the school children of Frederick County in an effort to promote a better understanding of agriculture, the Sowers were honored with the Master Farmer award, given by Pennsylvania

Farmer magazine in January 1995. Farmers from New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, and Virginia were eligible for the prestigious award. They were also voted Outstanding Young Farmers in 1987 in a statewide honor given by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

"I'd like the opportunity to say how fantastic, thoroughly fantastic, the Sowers have been. They have just been great. I can't say enough about how wonderful this has been for the children," raved Ann Miller, Team Leader at the school.

She said, "This has reaffirmed that farming people are a part of the county. I have children living in 1/4 million dollar homes and children from housing projects in the inner city. This has been a wonderful experience for them." Miller said that she explains to the children that everyone who lives on the farm is a farmer, that the whole family is involved.

Head after tiny head peeking out of a neat row of calf hutches brought shrieks of delight from the children. Bottle feeding the babies at "calf kindergarten" was a thrill for some of the more adventurous youngsters. A Brown Swiss had just had twins the day before



"Calf Kindergarten" was something the children could relate to. The sight of head after tiny head peeking out from the neat row of hutches delighted the group.



His first hayride. When asked what he thought of the wagon ride, this youngster exclaimed, "Fun!"

ated group. The tour, and one of the calves was available to pet.

The group was led through the holding area into the double six parlor, where, later in the day they would return to see the herd being milked. They learned that no matter how tempting it may be to try to climb a shiny bulk tank, it's almost impossible to scale the slippery sides.

Everyone, chaperons included, stood in awe of the big equipment when they came to it. But as soon as Randy Sowers made the suggestion, there was a mad scramble to "drive" the haybine, the combine, and the forage harvester.

Washing with hot water keeps the Sowers' equipment sparkling clean. The forage harvester, one year old, cut 900 loads last year, yet it shone like brand new. Supervised climbing on the equipment provided an exciting opportunity for hands-on learning about where food comes from.

"Is this what you make ice cream with?" asked an innocent voice, the child scooping up a handful of corn. "Well, in a way it is," chuckled Mr. Sowers. "The cow eats that, and gives the milk, and we use that milk to make ice cream," he explained to the fascin-

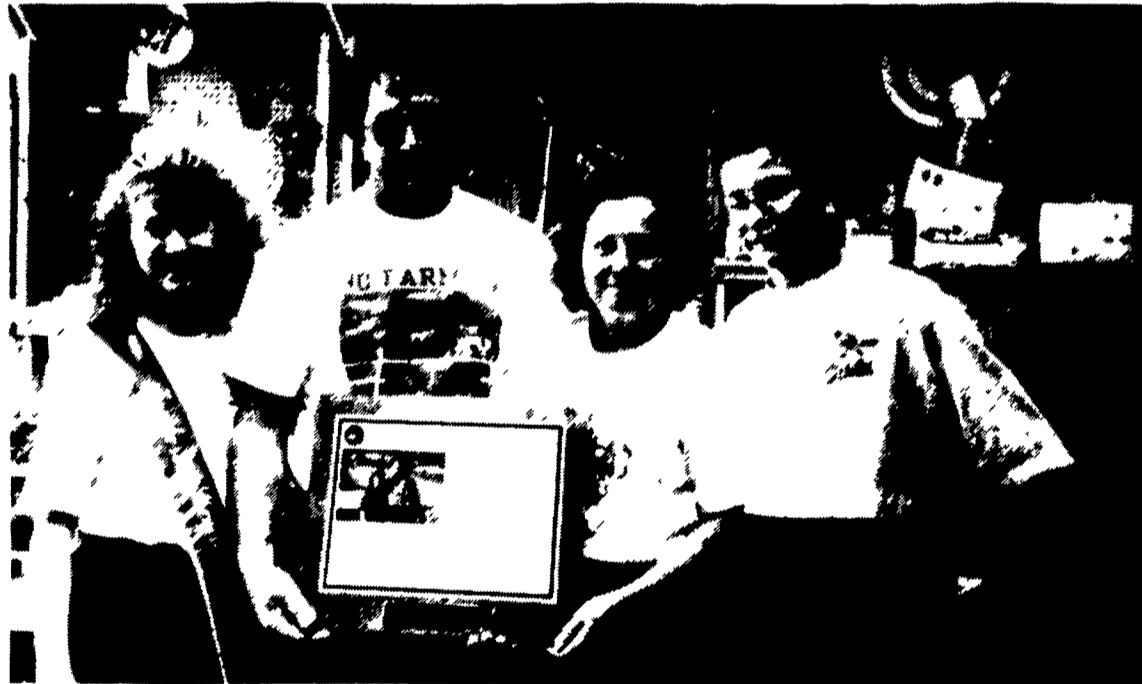
"Do cows really sleep lying down?" The questions continued as the tour passed the freestall barn. "What happens if Heidi jumps in (the manure pit)?" "How many chickens lay all those eggs?" "Can I take this home and plant it? Will it grow?"

And, finally, the question everyone had been waiting for... "Have you kids ever been on a hayride?" The excitement of the hayride was compounded by the fact that by this time, Frederick County Dairy Princess Abby Sowers had come home from graduation rehearsal, and joined the children. Abby joined one of the wagons as they paraded through the farm fields, leading the children in a chorus of every farm song they could think of.

As the wagons slowed to a halt at the crest of a sun-drenched hill, with the Sowers' farm nestled far below, and a "real Princess" in their midst perched on a bale of bright straw, the children could hardly have wished for any better field trip. Then the wagons once more rocked into motion, carrying their precious load down for the promise of a picnic and some home-frozen ice cream.



Learning how the eggs are packed fascinates the children.



The Sowers family, Abby, Karen, Randy, and Ben, were honored in January 1995, as Master Farmers by Pennsylvania Farmer magazine.



A shady spot for lunch. The front lawn of the farmhouse was turned into a picnic grounds for the hungry youngsters.