

Dairy Knowledge, Eye For Cattle Marketing At Cornerstone Of Farm's Success

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expected, the quiet farmer's daughter took a big gamble. She left her parents, Alfred and Mary Sparling, her siblings and the family farm, Maple Flat in Troy, and moved to be near Dale.

Before they began farming together, she and Dale tried traveling the show circuit. But the perpetual road trips began to wear on Deanna. "We can go out here and work side by side, but five days in the truck and one of us would have to go stay somewhere else," Dale said with a smile.

The couple later worked together at a cattle flushing facility in nearby Frederick, Md. Before long, their thoughts turned to "the M word" and that's how Deanna ended up in a Roy Rogers restaurant one May morning, eating breakfast with the man she'd pledged her love — and the rest of her life to — just minutes before.

The celebration was short-lived — "we came home and filled silo," Dale said with a chuckle — but a weekend honeymoon trip to Atlantic City was worth the wait.

Now a 26-year-old married lady, Deanna has committed herself to her husband and her cows. She and Dale milk 62 registered and grade cows at Spungold Holsteins outside Gettysburg. They have a 21,385 rolling herd average with 740 fat, 687 protein, and 195,000 somatic cell. The herd includes one renegade Jersey who refused to adjust to the tiestalls at her owner's farm.

The couple rents their facilities from his parents, Herman and Barbara. Herman Bendig — formerly a partner with Bill Powel in Unicorn Associates of Taneytown, Md. — moved his family to the 86-acre farm next to Route 15 when his partnership with Powel was amicably dissolved.

Herman Bendig will breed cows, fix equipment, and do other jobs necessary to keep things going, but all the decisions regarding the herd are left to Dale and Deanna. "If we're going to make a mistake, we may as well do it on our own," Dale said.

They rent another 60 acres and make their own hay. Their neighbors at Getty Acres handle the corn planting and harvesting. "I couldn't afford to invest in the equipment, not for what they charge me," Dale said.

"They're great. They've helped us from day one," Deanna agreed.

The couple has made most of the dairy-related improvements on the property. Obtaining financing wasn't easy. "Both of us grew up with cows all our lives, but we didn't have a track record," Dale said. Typical agricultural lenders were less than accommodating, he said. A local bank guaranteed their loan without question, however.

Their first step was the flat parlor and 56 freestalls with mattresses for the milking string. Last fall, a trench — 18 feet by 120 feet with an 8-foot pit — was added for silage. An additional pit — 12 feet by 20 feet and four feet deep — was added to hold the brewer's grain that is a key ingredient in their total mixed ration. The Bendigs hope to add a manure pit this fall — a cost-share project with the local Farm Service Agency office.

They pay just as much attention to how they milk their cows. The Bendigs adhere as closely as possible to their 5:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. milking schedule.

On a recent evening, a cool breeze blew through the parlor and country music played in the background as the cows eased calmly in and out of the headlocks. All of the cows at Spungold are named because "that way I can remember

them," Dale said.

Milkers are dipped into a bucket of bleach water as they come off one cow before they're put on the next one. The extra care is an effort to keep bacteria counts low. Somatic cell reached an all-time low of 95,000 in April, Dale said.

Deanna and a friend started their regular summer clipping of the milking string in early May. "Some people think that's foolish, but for us it makes more milk," she explained.

She's usually found in the barn for both daily shifts. Dimpled with a gentle manner and disarming smile, it's easy to see why the cows move so quietly when Deanna's in the parlor. She is ably assisted by part-time farmhand and neighbor John Eyler, who stops in after school. Her father-in-law also helps in the barn.

Dale milks too, but continues to hire out as a herdsman for other people's show strings. He attended some spring shows this year and expects to work some sales this summer, helping Norman Hill of NH Cattle Co., among others. "What would be most people's spare time is when I work on a show or a sale," Dale said.

The schedule has some benefit for Deanna, because "if I have to milk too often, I dry off cows," he said.

The milk cows are fed a round bale of hay every day, along with free choice timothy. The TMR fed before and after milking is an

eight-pound ration mix of alfalfa haylage, corn silage, chopped alfalfa, cottonseed, and brewer's grain. Dale is a big proponent of the brewer's grain, which is brought to the farm from Baltimore, Md. It takes the cows a short time to adjust to the taste, he said. "But once a cow's used to it, if you run out and don't have it to put in the mix, they want to know where it's at," he said.

In addition to their milk herd, the Bendigs average about 10 dry cows, 13 bred heifers, 20 or so heifers between six months and a year, and five or six heifer calves. They have five bulls of varying ages.

Expanding their herd is not in their plans. "We don't want to milk any more cows. I don't want to be a mass producer of milk," Dale said.

That's where the marketing comes in. "I like to sell," Dale admitted. "And I sell 'em quicker than Deanna would." The Bendigs have a number of award winning cows in their string. They've exhibited cattle at the World Dairy Expo in Madison, Wis. In fact, they don't breed cows to calve during that time just so they can make the annual trip and make the work at home easier on whoever fills in.

Each has shown cattle in a number of states. Last year, they had the reserve grand champion and reserve junior champion at the South Mountain Fair. Their All-Pennsylvania junior yearling, Laverne, was first in her class this

year at the state Spring Show.

The Bendigs have sold their genetically-correct offspring to farms around the country through contacts Dale made when he was fitting and trucking cattle. "We have show cows and index cows and they're bred to stay in those categories," Dale explained.

Their prized cow at the moment, Woodside Manor SW Kathy-ET, spends her nights in a box stall because that's what she seems to prefer. With two records over 30,000 pounds and a projection of 34,000 pounds this year, Kathy certainly has the production to warrant special treatment.

But she's also sired three bull calves that the Bendigs have sold to breeding cooperatives for quite a nice price. In addition, Kathy has four daughters who've all proven themselves worthy of their great genes. After she makes her record this fall, Kathy will be flushed in hopes of more lucrative offspring.

Flushing and the resulting embryo transplant are key in order for the Bendigs to increase their income, Dale said. Improving upon the quality of stock they sell is as important as boosting the quantity of heifers that leave Spungold, he said.

"It's tough out there and you've got to be a manager," he said. He also worries a lot about the demise of the small farm "because as everyone gets larger, it will make it harder for our herd to compete."



Deanna Bendig washes up after the evening milking at Spungold Holsteins in Gettysburg. She is the third generation of farm wives in her family. Deanna and her husband, Dale, met while showing cows when she was just a teenager.



Sheba is flanked by her owners, Deanna and Dale Bendig of Spungold Holsteins outside Gettysburg. The young couple rent the property from his parents.



Deanna Bendig takes a moment to check the heifers at Spungold Holsteins outside Gettysburg. She and her husband, Dale, usually have about 15 bred-heifers on hand. The registered cows are used for breeding and the grade cows to carry the embryo transfers.