

Hillegass Family Commits To Preserving Farm

GAY BROWNLEE

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BERLIN (Somerset Co.) — "I'm changing to make it better for them," said Doug Hillegass, alluding to his and wife, Debra's children — Desirae, a Pennsylvania State University student, and Justin and Jared, who attend the Berlin High School.

"The kids have a choice about whether to be involved," said Doug.

"If our kids leave the farm," Debra continues, "that's all right, but at least they will know how to work."

The young individuals all say they want very much to be involved — even Desi, a 1997 FFA Keystone Degree recipient whose major, for a teaching vocation, is ag education and minor is dairy animal science.

The siblings compose the fourth generation of Hillegass progeny.

Sixty years of growth began with Doug's grandfather, Daniel Hillegass, and continued with his late father, Glenden and Mother, Geraldine, 79. Their modern house is near the larger farmhouse

that Doug's family inhabits.

Although Glenden hauled coal on his truck and shoveled it off himself, in the mid-1940s he and his wife would hand-milk seven cows and do chores prior to his leaving each day.

Gradually, the herd was increased to 21 dairy animals and Geraldine's milking assistant was a lady who they also boarded. The system they used was to begin at opposite ends of the barn and work toward the middle.

Until the Eisenhower era of the 1950s when Glenden finally bought a John Deere tractor, horses were used for fieldwork and to gather sugar water in maple season. They later supplemented their annual income because they could produce about 500 gallons of maple syrup to sell.

A second farm that Glenden used for a potato operation was purchased in 1969. Twelve acres of spuds that Snyders of Berlin bought for making potato chips were harvested by hand, using burlap bags.

A pipeline system and 30 milk cows governed the 1960s.



Backdropped by a network of Mountain View Farms' buildings is the Hillegass family. Desirae, Debra, and Jared are in front and Doug and Justin, in back, on a damp and rainy day near Berlin, Somerset County.

More herd growth continued through the 1980s. Doug came aboard full time in 1977 and a third farm was added in 1992.

Mountain View Farms, located near the Routes 31 and 60 intersection at Roxbury (following a recent, major expansion) comfortably accommodates about 350 milking Holsteins.

Ensuring the goals they had set for the Dairy of Distinction were attainable allowed the couple to take the plunge.

"It was the future of our farm, as a farm, to survive," Doug said.

Visiting some of the most futuristic dairy operations in the East, primarily those found in Pennsylvania and New York state, gave Doug and Debra information to ponder and evaluate. Voices of experience advised them about what worked and didn't work in other setups.

Then, too, the family had to consider the natural climactic conditions found in Somerset County's high elevation — which usually mean a shorter growing season for crops.

Doug said more acreage is required because the yield typically will be less than in other areas.

Still, they try to grow the necessary feed themselves.



Doug Hillegass manages crops and feeds the 250 head Holstein dairy herd. He is pictured on the John Deere 4440 tractor.

Primarily, Doug's role is managing the crops and feeding the herd.

To predict futures and to secure contracts for feed and commodities, he relies on a communications system — DTN — and the Internet.

In 1994, plans fell into place for a spacious facility fit to house the entire herd. Finally, the inconvenience of milking 70 cows at home and a newly purchased 36-cow herd, three miles distant at a rented farm, was ended.

By the fall of 1995 the four-row, 220-stall, glu-lam (laminated) barn was completed. It was open in the center for added ventilation and additional cow comfort came from curtains controlled by automatic thermostats kept at 40 degrees.

Designed for cow friendliness, the stalls are good for the most awkward adult bovine, which can easily get up from mattresses filled with shredded rubber.

Mineral boxes are located near all the waterers for free-choice products.

For a year, some 200-plus cows were milked in the old barn, with four switches being made. They had walked about 300 feet and remained outside in holding lots.

Debra, who in 1981 gave up her job as a registered nurse to work full time at the farm, recalled that production was at a standstill. One milking required four men and seven hours of time.

By February 1996, a parlor was under construction. The new

double-six Surge Auto-flow was completed that June.

During the three-times-a-day milking, in four and a half hours one man getting his own cows can process some 300 head.

The April 1998 DHIA report for the Hillegass herd at 329 cows is 27,131 pounds of milk, 877 pounds of fat, and 849 pounds of protein.

Milk is sold to Galliker's Dairy in Johnstown.

"Milking three times a day has really helped," Doug reported.

Now the herd manager, Debra said the operation employs five full-time workers and one part-time. They are David Keefer, George Kovacs, Charles Ulery, Mike Weimer, Carl Benning, and Morgan Dickey.

"The hired people do milking and you keep them in that position only," she said.

"When our applicants started getting an hourly wage and a time card, that was the key to getting good help," she reported of their success with the hired staff.

"Never turn a good employee away if they want work," is a philosophy the Hillegasses endorse.

"We are totally committed," Debra said. "If I have dinner planned with Doug and a heifer is going to freshen, she comes first."

She oversees the dry cows, springers, and calves, and keeps vaccinations current.

A Somerset County DHIA director, Debra is the breeder of Hill-

(Turn to Page E7)



Debra Hillegass, herd manager, is discussing cow matters with AI technician Robert Fritz.



Hard work in the expanded dairy operation owned by she and her husband, Doug Hillegass, doesn't stop Debra from planting flowers to dress up their Dairy of Distinction premises at Roxbury.