

Wester Jersey Farm: The Art Of Becoming Farmers

MARSHA ANN CHESS

Mercer Co. Correspondent

JAMESTOWN (Mercer Co.) — Albin and Betty Wester, Jamestown, Mercer County, started dairy farming a little differently than many other farmers.

It all started when they brought a family Jersey cow to their eight-acre home 22 years ago. It grew into a Jersey farm in the early 1980s. Today they milk 57 head and have an expansion in progress.

Westers still own only the original eight acres, but they rent approximately 200 acres on which they grow corn silage and hay. They buy all of their grain and some hay. In the past they bought nearly all of their feed.

Despite their small acreage, manure has never really been a problem.

"We're out of the way up here, so it's not a real problem," said Albin, adding, "We take great pains to keep it off the road and make sure the wind is not blowing toward the neighbors' houses when we spread."

They started farming because it was something Albin had always wanted to do.

"I'm a farm boy," Albin said, "the farm kinda grew on the rest of the family."

Growing up, Wester had worked on Holstein farms, but he really likes his Jerseys. "We think they're the cow of the future," he said.

In addition to being a dairyman, Albin is a retired teacher, an artist, and a builder.

"It's interesting," he said. "I've been all these things and I have a daughter who is an artist, one who is a teacher, a son who is a carpenter, and another daughter who is a farmer (currently a dairy science

and pre-veterinary student at Delaware Valley College)."

At present they are in the process of building a parlor and adding onto the free stall barn with plans to milk 100-150 cows in the future.

"We're growing slowly, doing 90 percent of the work ourselves with help from our son. It's enabling us to avoid taking on a lot of debt."

In addition to building the new parlor and expanding the free stall barn, Wester is working on an art studio in which to paint portraits. He hopes to have time to spend painting after they get the parlor up and running.

Westers run the farm themselves with the help of a girl hired part time, and Albin's right hand "girl," a border collie named Esther.

As they look to the future, they hope to get into merchandising and have that as part of their income. To reach that goal they've been working to improve the genetics of their herd.

"We started with some not very good cows," Betty said. "They were all grades, but we put them in genetic recovery and really focused on our breeding program."

It has worked. Their herd averaged 51 pounds per cow on their most recent test day.

Both Albin and Betty feel they appreciate good cows more now than they would have if they had them when they started.

Westers are not the only ones who have noticed their success. They received the Pennsylvania Jersey Management Award in 1994.

It hasn't always been easy, getting up at 4 am.. and learning as they go, but they have survived. Albin laughed and said the biggest



Albin and Betty Wester and their grandson Gus show off their future parlor.



Albin and Betty Wester along with grandson Gus, and Al's right hand dog Esther take pride in their Mercer County Jersey Farm.

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Marsha Ann Chess is a December 1997 graduate of Penn State University with a degree in dairy and animal science.

A Mercer County correspondent for *Lancaster Farming*, she is employed on her family's Pleasant View Farm, in Fredonia, Mercer County, where her duties include milking, and calf and heifer care and management.

When she is not working on the farm, she enjoys horseback riding, reading, exercising her Shetland sheepdog, writing, sewing, and swimming.

While in college, she was active in the Penn State Dairy Science Club, Delta Theta Sigma, the College of Agricultural Sciences Student Council, and was a member of collegiate 4-H.

She competed in public speaking/presentation contests and was on the 1995 Penn State dairy judging team.

She served internships with the Jersey Journal and Pennsylvania Farmer magazines in 1996 and 1997.

Chess was active in 4-H for 11 years, with projects in dairy, dairy goat, horses, dog care and training, and veterinary science.

She was a member of her county 4-H council, and also served as a member of the Penn State 4-H Ambassador state team, as well as a junior advisor.

In addition, Chess was Pennsylvania Jersey queen from 1992-1993, and the Mercer County dairy princess from 1993-1994.



In other pursuits, she won the senior division of the All-American Jersey Youth showmanship contest and placed seventh in the Jersey youth achievement contest.

In 1991, she was the state 4-H award winner and delegate to the National 4-H Club Congress.

Chess said she takes some pride in the fact that she has worked with all six breeds of dairy cattle, and said it gives her a chance to assess the comparative strengths and weaknesses of each breed in order to evaluate merits fairly, although, she said she considers her Jerseys and Brown Swiss to be personal favorites.

challenge sometimes has been not running away.

"I didn't know anything about farming when we first got married," Betty said, "I was afraid of anything larger than a terrier."

"One thing that really helped us learn was 4-H. Our youngest daughter, Leanna, got involved in 4-H and I had to take her. 4-H helped build our interest and taught us about animal care."

Now, Betty said she has complete confidence in her ability to work with the cows, although she feels there is always more to be learned.

"In some ways building from scratch has been good," Albin said, "but it would have been nice to start with one big barn instead of having to keep building on."

One advantage they feel they had was not having any bad habits or being set in their ways.

Albin said his advice to others wanting to get into the dairy business is to hang around good farmers and learn from them.



Albin and his right hand girl, Esther, take a break as the Jerseys look on.

"Keep your ears open and listen," Betty said. "Think positive," Albin added, "We're very positive."

Make it Milk