

# Walnut Run Is Farming At Its Best

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cows, 300 laying hens, and 10 acres tobacco.

"Mother was involved in all the work. With the help of friends, uncles, aunts, and a hired man, we kept farming," Myer said of those early years after his father's death.

He continued, "I wasn't interested in schooling. Back then, that was fine because hard work fit the bill when it came to farming."

Hard work is something Myer relishes. After high school, Myer and his mother formed a partnership. Five years later, which was in 1968, Myer and his younger brother John formed a partnership, and their mother was able to devote time to other interests.

In the meantime, Myer married Dot, his high school sweetheart, and his brother married Judy. Together the two families form a great working partnership. Myer is considered the general manager who pays the bills and oversees the cropping and does the nighttime milking. His brother oversees the dairying.

"It works, I guess, because I'm the aggressor and my brother is the follower. It's been that way since we were growing up, but we try to be sensitive to one another," the older brother said of their relationship.

Under both brothers' oversight, the dairy herd was expanded to 40 cows, then to 50 cows, to 120, then to 275. Three adjoining farms were purchased. In 1965, Myer started farming potatoes, and today raises 100 acres for potato chips. Harvesting starts Aug. 15 and continues sometimes as late as Dec. 15.

In addition to potatoes, they farm 500 acres of corn. In the past they sold the excess, but in recent years they need it to feed their own herd. They stopped raising chickens and tobacco.

New technology means making some changes. In recent years, the farm is leaning away from registered Holsteins to concentrating on raising a top-producing commercial breed.

"About half the herd is registered, but we are into raising a commercial milk producing herd and not into selling cows," Myer said. "It saves us extra paperwork and time."

Myer said that they use every available technology to increase herd averages, which is 25,200 pounds and rising.

Dot is in charge of the calves from births to two months of age. The heifers are integrated into the herd and the bull calves are raised to about 800 pounds and then sold.

Calf numbers vary from 40 to 90

head to feed twice daily.

"Dot does a great job. She hardly loses any," Myer said.

"It's just like taking care of a baby. I like the challenge and seeing each develop its own personality," Dot said.

She's a stickler for cleanliness. "You can't be too particular," she said.

In 1995, the Myers had an outbreak of salmonella and lost several calves. Despite extensive testing, they could not determine what was contaminating the herd, so now they vaccinate to keep cows in top condition.

Calves are taken from their mothers immediately but housed close enough to be licked by the mothers. The calves are fed one gallon of colostrum for the first two feedings and mother's milk for the remainder of the first week. The calves are bottle-fed for three and four days and then introduced to the bucket.

Grain is introduced when the calves are three days old. Milk replacement is used for the first eight weeks. Weaning begins at seven weeks and is completed when the calf eats three pounds of grain.

Plans are to increase the herd to 400 head within the next few months and then to 500 next year.

Myer is the first to say that his decision wasn't based only on his love for work or to make the operation more profitable.

Again and again, he says, "I pray for wisdom daily. We are stewards of what God has given us. We want to be productive, useable vessels."

He's quick to credit God with the success of their operation. He said, "The Bible says, you have not because you ask not. I guess I ask for a lot."

Despite their prayers, life hasn't been trouble-free. The most devastating event was losing their only son who died when he was 13 years old from a motorcycle accident on the farm.

"You never forget it," Myer said of the void his son's death has left on their lives. At the same time, the couple believe it was God's will.

"We committed our children to him and that means for whatever reason, God wanted to use him in that way," Dot said.

That assurance has enabled them to continue life, enjoying the good things that come their way.

The couple has a married daughter and a grandchild. Their daughter and her husband are not interested in farming and neither are the two children of partners John and Judy.

"Some people say why are you building up the farm if you don't



In partnership with his brother and wife, Carl and Dot Myer farm 700 acres, milk 280 cows, and are expanding the operation.

have a son or daughter to pass it on to?" Myer said.

He shrugs and then adds, "Who knows? Maybe one of our grandchildren will want to farm when we're ready to retire. Or, maybe it will be an opportunity for someone else."

Although the family doesn't have children working on the farm, they do have six full-time and a few part-time employees. This summer, for the first time, the family has an employee living with them. They are thrilled that things are working out well with a live-in employee.

Sara Holmes, a college ag business student, is from a smaller New York family farm. She wants to experience a lot of different farm jobs before making a decision as to where she fits in the larger scheme of the ag community.

"She jumps out of bed and wants to work," Myer said of Sara's putting in 15-18 hours daily. "She's bright and can talk shop. She knows a lot."

Maintaining a good working relationship with employees is important to Myer. He said, "Most farmers haven't grown up with that orientation. We need to learn to delegate, compliment, and think of ways to let them excel."

He's had a few long-time employees who eventually left to start farming on their own.

Myer derives a lot of satisfaction from this. "I'd like to keep them, but it's important to train and let go," he said of employees.

As a good steward of the earth, Myer is conservation-minded and uses conservation tillage to conserve the soil. He is an advocate of no-till, but said, "It doesn't work here because of the amount of manure we have to get rid of."

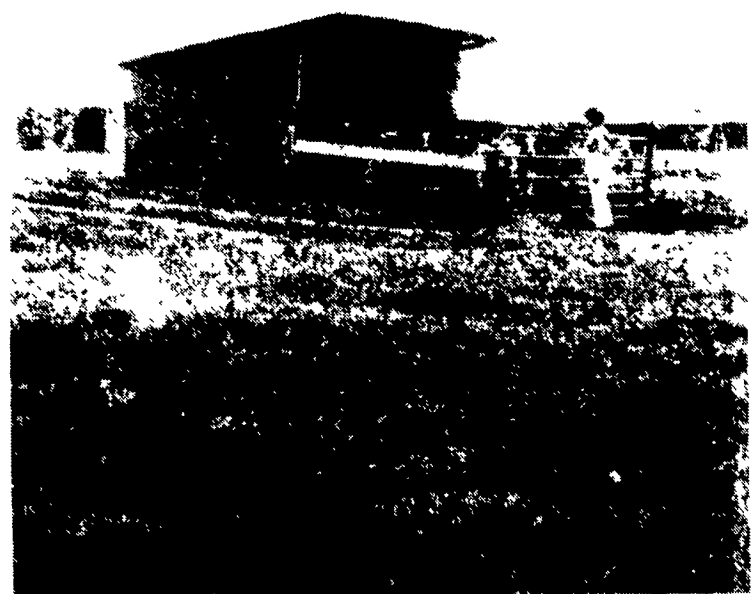
He uses soil tests, fertilizing consulting services, and field scouts to determine how to manage the soil.

"My wife is a real support. She is more detailed than I am, more to keep things clean. I am more volume oriented and want to get things done quick."

Dot's passion for farming extends far beyond the acreage of their own farm. She is Lancaster County coordinator for Ag in the Classroom. She began helping in the Manheim Central district in 1985.

"I like to educate people about agriculture and how important it is and how much it plays a part in everyone's life," she said.

"My goal is to get in touch with all the schools and put together a



"You can't be too particular," Dot said of caring for the calves, which range between 40 and 90 head. Dot has a reputation as a stickler for cleanliness and detail.

top-notch quality Ag-in-the-Classroom program," she said.

While classroom teaching sessions and farm videos can be shown, Dot believes there is nothing as educational as walking through a working farm.

In a way the Myer farm is everyone's farm. It's the place where a five day camp has been held for the past 15 years. School students and 4-H'ers tour the dairy facilities and hold picnics on the expansive lawn.

"I consider it a real privilege to live here, and we want to share it with others," Dot said.

In fact, the new facilities are being designed to enable visitors to watch the milking process.

The Myers will be building a new free stall barn and a milking center.

"It will probably be a double 12 but not decided if it will be a her-ringbone or parallel," Myer said.

To make the expansion, the Myer family will need to buy additional cows. They are wary of the risks of introducing a new herd.

"We are particular in how heifers are raised. It goes a long way in production and herd health," Myer said.

"Genetics are important. In recent years, genetics came a long way. Genetics overall has improved so much that almost every stud has the potential to produce if combined with other successful management practices," Myer said.



While Carl works on the farm bookkeeping, Dot, who is coordinator for the county program of Ag in the Classroom, reviews the paper work.

Although the family takes some vacations, they'd rather work on the farm than spend time at commercial vacation spots. They've taken a week to help with a mission project in Kentucky and they've gone snowmobiling at Yellowstone.

Their idea of the perfect farm vacation is touring other farms. Recently they took several day trips, mostly to the New York area to tour farms in order to get ideas for expansion.

"Every farm does the same thing a little bit differently. It's a great way to come away with some fresh, creative ideas," Myer said.

Although Myer said that he wasn't much of a student in school because he wanted to be a farmer, he now adamantly supports higher education as a tremendous boost to successful farming.

"I read everything I can get my hands on about college research and the latest technology. I talk to nutritionists, vets, farmers, contractors. . . I'd probably go for an ag business degree if I were a young person starting out," he said.

He believes that farming is on the verge of making tremendous changes in operations. He foresees buying feed packages for individual cows and changes in the way manure is handled.

"Already we see ag companies merging to pool resources," he said.

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