

Dairy Farming Can Be Busy, Educational, And Simply Fun

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff
LANSDALE (Montgomery Co.) — On a dairy in this north-west Philadelphia suburb, some days can be literally — well, *swarming*.

Merrymeade Farm is filled with visitors on a daily basis — busloads of children from schools in center city Philadelphia and surrounding areas; tourists from New Jersey, New York, Maryland, and other states; and neighbors who simply want to treat themselves to some homemade ice cream and see the farm's many pets, including the biggest hog in the world.

In the midst of this, Merrymeade still has to function as a dairy. Imagine hundreds of school kids walking from one of many education stations on the farm while milk trucks, tractors, delivery equipment, a street sweeper, and even golf-carts-turned-utility-vehicles try to mend their way through the farm.

Then it gets really hectic, in the fall season, when pick-your-own pumpkin visitors jump onto the hay wagon on a trip to the 40 acres devoted to ornamentals.

"We have to move equipment through here while there are strollers, grandparents with their kids, and to do it safely, that's a challenge," said Steve Quigley, Merrymeade Farm general manager.

He was pointing to a heavily traveled area which connects various "educational stations" that help school kids learn what a working dairy farm is all about to the milking parlor and cow barn.

But all 18 members of the Rothenberger extended family enjoy working with the public — it's what their farm is all about.

Merrymeade, which includes a farm market and a retail flower and vegetable business, is what some would call an "entertainment farm." But farm owner Maynard Rothenberger, who with his wife Betty Jean built the store in 1971, sees how essential "entertainment" farming can be.

Years ago, Maynard saw how important it was to justify the dairy in light of a changing community. Dairy farms were going out of business, replaced with development. Some of the most highly developed areas in Pennsylvania surround the 140-acre homestead near Lansdale.

Rothenberger knows this and tries to work it to the farm's — and the community's — advantage.

"We try to provide that balance," he said. "We want to be an asset to the community. The public will put up with the inconveniences this might cause if we remain in the community."

The Dairy of Distinction and Century Farm is where Rothenberger was raised. His parents, Oscar and Eva Rothenberger, sold the farm to Maynard and Betty Jean in 1965.

At the time, the Rothenbergers milked 35 cows. To be viable and profitable, Rothenbergers knew

expansion was key. In the years since, they built the herd size to approximately 100 cows.

A key to the farm's growth was constructing a store that could take the milk and ice cream products and sell them directly to the public.

"We saw the potential there," said Maynard. "We observed what others had done."

In 1971, when the store was constructed, Maynard had seen the "writing on the wall, as far as commercial agriculture in the area was concerned," he said.

He looked at other farm stores and realized, to operate a store successfully, he had to move it a fair distance from the milking barn. The general public was simply not used to the sights and scents of modern agriculture. So a 250-foot milk pipeline was constructed underground, running from the milkhouse to the processing center connected to the retail store.

Along with that, the farm store founders had other ideas.

They would watch as people who came in for a few dips of ice cream would walk out and tour the calf hutches. The store evolved from a place for people to buy ice cream and look at how the farm grew, with new housing and equipment, to a modern-day farm market. The idea of providing a little education and entertainment for visitors took hold.

The farm store was expanded to include a deli, bakery, and other items for sale. Not long after, a retail flower business opened. Vegetables from the farm and surrounding areas were for sale.

With the many visitors, and with the Rothenbergers' intent to keep the farm orderly, clean, and neat, they purchased a street sweeper. About five years ago a son, Scott, painted the sweeper the colors of Holstein.

Other attractions were added since the store opened. They include Wilber, a 7-year-old Hampshire barrow, now weighing 1,150 pounds and what the Rothenbergers dub the world's heaviest hog; a large cage with Clarence, a 4-year-old peacock; a sheep and goat pen containing Suffolks and pygmy goats; Scooter, the rooster; and lots of other educational exhibits about how a dairy farm operates and the importance of milk in a nutritional diet.

Steve Quigley, farm general manager, said that, in a year, "tens of thousands" of children tour the farm from hundreds of schools in and around Philadelphia. In a single day, many busloads will appear.

"We show kids what cows eat," he said. "We show them the basics of milking a cow. We allow children to put their fingers in the pulsators."

Recently some kindergartners from Stanton Elementary in south Philadelphia toured the milking parlor. At the same time, kinder-



Seth Epstein, a Spruance Elementary kindergartner, lifts the milk barbells. Kindergarten children from Spruance School in Oxford Circle, downtown Philadelphia, learned the benefits of milk products, from ice cream and cheese to whipping and sour cream.

garten children from Spruance School in Oxford Circle, downtown Philadelphia, learned the benefits of milk products, from ice cream and cheese to whipping and sour cream.

Also, at one end of the parlor, an observation area allows visitors to watch the milking, at 3:30 a.m. and 5 p.m. The parlor consists of a double-6 herringbone, which feeds a pipe to the store itself.

Most milk is processed at the store, according to Quigley. The remainder is sold to Land O'Lakes Cooperative.

There are 10 different educational stations. They include baby calf hutches; a chicken coop, which describes how many eggs a hen will lay; a peacock in a cage; sheep and goats, which children can pet; the world champion Wilber the pig, declared the biggest pig in the world by the Guinness Book of Records, according to Quigley; the cow maternity barn; a heifer barn; the feed station for cows, how different groups are fed; the milking parlor, and the silos, with the holding station and feed room.

After the tour, the children are treated to ice cream.

Scott Rothenberger, Merrymeade Farm manager, noted the dairy includes 100 milk cows with 80 replacements, all registered Holstein. The cows are housed them in freestalls. On DHIA, rolling herd average stood at 21,600 pounds with a low SCC — 96,000-98,000. The cows are fed a TMR.

In the freestall barn, the cows are on mattresses with sawdust.

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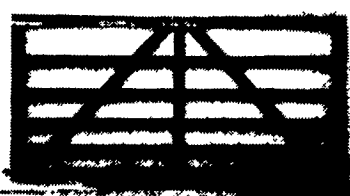
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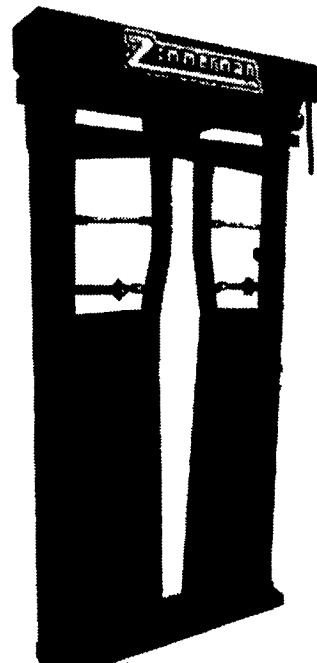
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