

DeLongs: From Sows To More Cows, Transition Proves Challenging

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QUARRYVILLE (Lancaster Co.) — A former swine producer, Jim DeLong remembers many a sleepless night in 1998.

DeLong sat up late into the night thinking of ways he, as a farmer, could survive.

"We had to try to figure out what we were going to do," DeLong said, when hog prices fell to their lowest in history.

The ideas the family eventually put in place — converting swine facilities into heifer houses and coming up with ways to milk a herd large enough to sustain three families — were "figured out," DeLong said.

With help from his brothers and their families, Jim came up with three major changes:

- Convert a 44-cow stall barn to a calf barn.
- Convert sow barns from 3-month-old to 5-month-old calf barns.
- Move bred heifers to old hog finishing barns.

In addition, the family built new feed troughs and hay racks. Other work was done to finally convert what was once a thriving

hog with some dairy farm into a profitable dairy.

A partnership that began in the early 1970s, Jim farms with brothers Ken and Gerald and families in Quarryville. Jim's family includes wife Martha and children Jen (married and off the farm); Jody, 16; Sam, 14; and Tom, 11. Ken's family includes wife Eleanor and children Jonathan, 19 and Jeremy, 12. Gerald's family includes wife Alma and children Jared, 9 and Kevin, 7.

The DeLongs rely on full-time help from Mike and Sue Appel and their children Matt, 17 and Angel, 13. In addition, part-time milking help is provided by Roxanne Sippel.

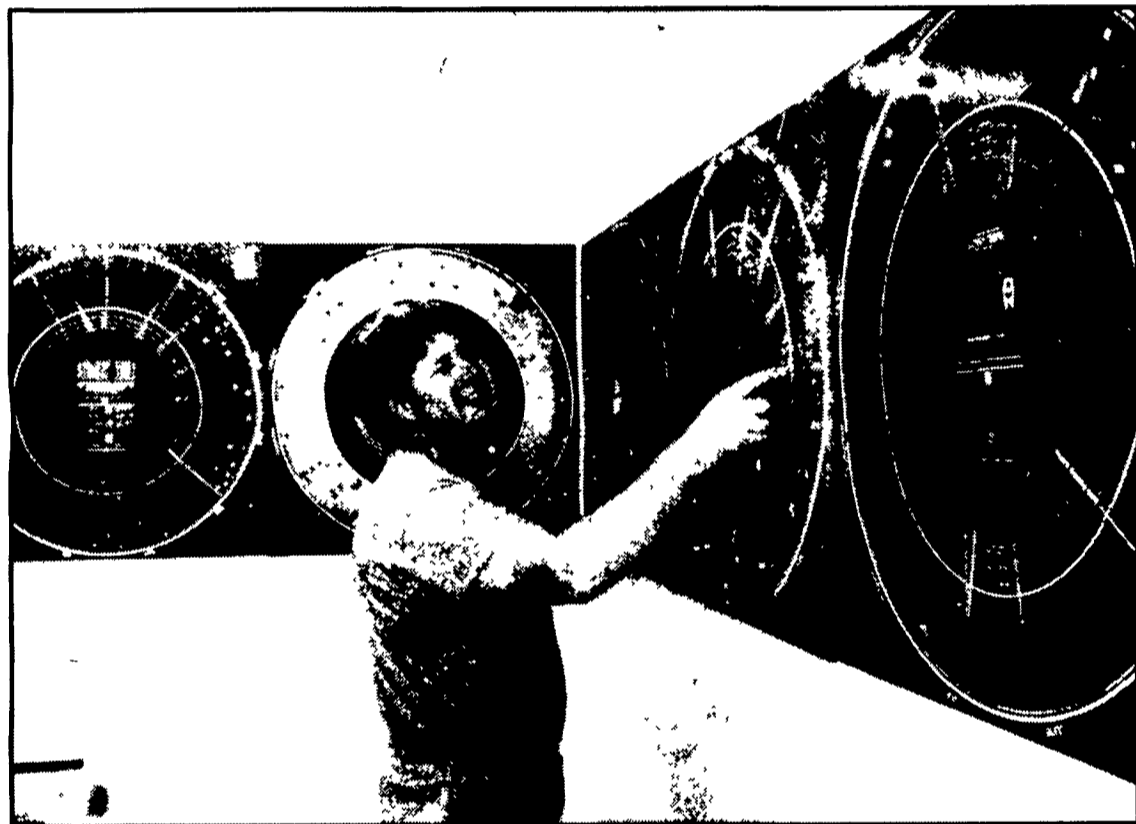
The DeLong's Hope Valley Farms herd includes 370 milking cows, grade Holsteins, with a rolling herd average of more than 18,000 pounds on Lancaster DHIA. Fat is 3.86 percent and protein, 3.12 percent.

Milk goes to Land O'Lakes Cooperative.

Responsibilities are split throughout the family, with Jim, the in-house "vet," who works closely with the cows and other



The DeLong family shares daily farm chores at Hope Valley Farms. From left, Jim, Sam, Martha, Tom, Jody, Jess Shenk, and Gerald DeLong; farm help, Mike, Sue, and Matt Appel; Roxanne Sippel; Angel Appel; and Ken and Jeremy DeLong. Photo by Andy Andrews



Breeding wheels are key to managing the large dairy, noted Jim DeLong.



Jody DeLong works with Jess to ensure the cows are milked in the afternoon on time.

barn work. Ken works with the calves. Jim cares for the fields, along with Ken, Gerald, and Mike.

Jim said the farm began in 1948 by his father, M. Clair DeLong. The farm expanded slowly, starting with 12 cows, all milked by hand.

Though M. Clair was deceased in 1993, their mother, Miriam, is still involved with the farm.

In the late 1950s, M. Clair DeLong expanded the herd to 36 cows. "That's three times as many, and so did we," said Jim. A renovation and expansion in 1964 brought the herd to 44 cows.

In 1970, a second barn was remodeled and the brothers began taking over aspects of the farm. The herd stood at 100 cows.

But in the 1960s, the farm was primarily finishing hogs, numbering about 200 head. They switched to a farrow-to-finish operation in the 1970s. In 1984, a barn was built to hold about 120 sows.

But in December 1997, things began to fall apart. Hog prices plummeted.

"We felt we had to move in a different direction," Jim said. "We had to go to a whole new operation."

Several problems surfaced with the old buildings. The stall

barns didn't look good and farm milking help was at a premium. The DeLong's biggest dilemma: how to milk enough cows while the labor continued to become scarce?

Milking out of a stall barn was "time consuming and labor intensive," said Jim. The hardest decision to make was to transition out of the hog business, he noted, with a maximum of 2,000 finishers per year, to a dairy.

In April 1998, the DeLongs got rid of the sows. In October the DeLongs broke ground on the double-12 dairy parlor. In November 1998, construction began. The double-12 parlor was finished in five months and 422 dairy stalls were constructed.

The Appels, working with the herd for 13 years, contributed greatly to the transition, Jim noted. All families work closely together to continue milking on schedule, twice a day at 3:30 in the morning and afternoon, to ensure the work would be finished on time.

Mike Appel feeds the large herd. Ken DeLong feeds the calves and heifers. Gerald maintains the equipment and does office work, along with his mother. Early milking is done by Roxanne Sippel and Sue Appel. The children work about three days out of the week, rotating their schedules to fit in school time, church, and other activities.

Jim noted that obtaining the

proper financing and business management assistance helped in the transition. When he sold his last shipment of hogs, he was getting 17 cents a pound — far under the break-even cost.

"We've been offered a good opportunity to farm," he said. With the children involved, crucial to the success of the farm, "if they don't like this, then they don't like to farm."

Though only a year on test, the full herd remains in the high 18,000 pounds at milking, with some individual cows at 110-120 pounds per day. Some high producers are in the 26,000-pound range now. Next year, the goal is to obtain averages beyond 20,000 pounds for the herd, "without a question," Jim said.

The large herd began milking April 1, 1999, "April Fool's Day," DeLong said, with a chuckle. Some of the herd was obtained from an existing dairy. Others were purchased and all needed to be trained. Others were built up gradually using the genetics at Hope Valley Farms.

"It was a lot of major adjustment," said Ken DeLong. The financial management and planning are getting easier, he noted.

The herd is fed a TMR consisting of haylage, corn silage, citrus pellets, cottonseed, (Turn to Page A35)



Jeremy DeLong also helps in the daily milking. The DeLong children schedule the milking around school and church activities.