

From 'A Pocketful Of Dreams' To Their Own Herd

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farm) until the time we moved in was about two months. It was the best move we ever made."

Paul and Brenda Zimmerman, who own the farm, plus their three children live on the other side of the farmhouse.

The Siplers expanded their dairy herd and moved from Berks to Lancaster County this summer. They are milking 100 head and have 112 heifers.

Nearly one-half of the dairy cows are Brown Swiss and the rest are Holsteins. Oscar intends to increase the number of Brown Swiss in the herd and also plans to market the animals which are registered.

Marie has had Brown Swiss cows since she was 10 years old.

"Close to half are Brown Swiss. With the milk market today going on components, we have much higher butterfat, protein, and solids with the Swiss," she said.

This year Holstein heifers will become recipients to Brown Swiss eggs to increase the Swiss percentage in the herd. The couple also plans to flush their own Brown Swiss heifers.

"In general, Swiss add quality to our herd," said Oscar, who believes in a "constant upgrade" of his herd.

Previously the couple housed their animals on several facilities, including Marie's parents' farm.

"When her parents sold out, we thought, 'we're either going to do it on our own or sell out,'" said Oscar.

The dream of a farm then became a reality as the couple began the own 50-animal dairy in Shoemakersville, Berks County.

When their loan officer suggested the couple look into renting from the Zimmermans, the Siplers jumped at the chance to expand.

The couple, who enjoys the Zimmerman family and the facility, will be at the farm for at least three years. The farm will hold approximately 140 head.

"The way I feel, people have to get bigger to be more efficient," he said. The couple is hoping to have a herd numbering 250-300 some day.

"Our next expansion will depend on efficiency and profitability," said Marie.

When they considered expansion, the Siplers factored lower milk prices into their figuring. "If we can figure on what the low might be, then it will definitely work at higher milk prices," he said.

Transition

The Siplers added Zimmerman's cows and heifers to their own, bringing their herd numbers from 50 to milking 100 head. While Zimmerman's cows adjusted to new management, the Sipler herd adjusted to the move from a tiestall to a freestall barn. Blending the two herds, each with their own dominant cows, has also been a challenge that time is slowly erasing.

The couple experienced a high cull rate the first six

months, a trend which Oscar believes is starting to reverse. "The cows couldn't adjust. We also had a few expenses we hadn't expected, like a new TMR mixer and feed bins to upgrade the facility."

"We've turned the corner now," said Oscar.

A recent feed room fire also delivered an unexpected twist to dairying for the Siplers. "We were unluckily lucky," said Oscar, who believes that although the fire was a stressful experience, the event forced them to replace equipment, so "things ought to be a little better," he said.

A friend told the couple "don't get too big too fast," advice the couple found to be true.

"Fighting the little fires can take away from fighting a bigger fire," said Oscar. "You might work with a cow that should just be culled and neglect the next one. Don't underestimate how much work you may need the first couple months."

Transition means being open to change and ready for risks. "I kind of like change," said Oscar. "When you start to get comfortable in a situation, it's time to change because you don't want to get in a rut. I'm always thinking about the next move to be prepared."

"I had it in my mind I wanted to get to a certain size, and I had it worked out on paper, so I was ready. You can't be scared to change or try new things, to take that next step. Otherwise we wouldn't be doing what we're doing. Young people have to take that risk."

A Growing Love Of Agriculture

Dairy farming is new to Oscar, who grew up on a large grain business.

A love of agriculture, however, was an inborn trait for him. "My dad always said you're born with it," he said. "I grew up on a farm where everyone worked a job and came home to farm. I always thought, 'wouldn't it be nice to be a full-time farmer?'"

Oscar decided he knew grain but not enough about animal agriculture.

"I figured to be in agriculture I had to know about livestock,"



The Sipler family includes daughter Josephine, 18 months. "It's always been our ambition to farm," said Marie.



Oscar enjoys a friendly working relationship with the family's cows.

said Oscar. His father, who had worked at dairy farms, piqued Oscar's interest in the business. Later his job for the Department of Agriculture at the dairy facility in Beltsville, Md., helped him learn firsthand about dairying. A year working for Pennfield Feeds gave Oscar a solid background in nutrition.

Oscar also does all his own artificial insemination work on the herd to reduce costs and improve efficiency.

Education, Backing Important

The couple, both originally from Maryland, met at the University of Maryland. Oscar graduated with a degree in animal science and Marie graduated with a degree in agriculture business.

Marie believes their education is key in gaining their chance at farming.

"Without our college degrees, we wouldn't have gotten our first loan," said Marie.

Her ag-related job is also a product of her college education. Although she works as an area sales manager for New Holland Credit, she also helps with the

milking in the evening and genetic selection on weekends for the breeding of the cows.

Consequently Oscar is responsible for taking care of their 18-month old daughter during weekdays.

"I used to pull her around in the wagon with blankets everywhere I went," said Oscar.

The Siplers' long-term goals include more herd expansion and ownership of their own farm. "I can't say we've made it. We're on a path. I always wanted to farm. I'm living my dream. Too many times people say 'I wish I'd have done it...' If I fail, at least I tried."

Not only education but also support from family, friends, and business partners has combined to give the Siplers their chance at farming. "We had people who believed in us," said Marie. For example, "The Zimmermans didn't know us, but they gave us a chance."

The couple doesn't mind building the herd "from scratch."

"You never know, we may be starting a legacy," said Marie.



The Sipler's herd consists of an almost half-and-half mix of Holsteins and Brown Swiss.



Correct feet and legs and longevity make the Brown Swiss a top choice for the Siplers, according to Oscar.

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