

Blessings From Ashes

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silos' concrete blocks had gotten so hot through the fire that they were extremely brittle and crumbly. For safety's sake, they made plans to pull the unstable silo down.

Saturday afternoon turned to night before equipment was in place to pull down the shaky tower. But rather than fall in the intended, safe spot away from the barn, the silo collapsed right into the smoldering remains. Blackened milk lines and cow stalls, including some which had initially escaped heat destruction, now lay mangled and bent under the tons of concrete block and heavy silage.

There was little sleep at the Keeney farm that night. By morning, faced with the pile of smoldering debris, cows dispersed through the neighborhood, Keeney was so disheartened he suggested they might just sell the herd and abandon dairying.

"The children were very supportive and encouraging. They all wanted to help," Darlene says of their close-knit family of eight children, all of whom had and continue to remain active with the family dairy and crops operations.

But support for the Keeney's dilemma reached far beyond the immediate family. Friends, church acquaintances, neighbors, people they barely knew began showing up to assist with the cleanup. Food arrived in an almost continuous procession. Envelopes with monetary contributions turned up in their van during church services, often bearing no signature to identify the giver.

"There was not a week that we didn't get a half-dozen calls, cards with encouragement, often with contributions, offers of time to help," Darlene says. "Churches did fund-raisers for us."

Those outpourings of support and encouragement, combined with some time to assess their situation turned the dilemma of

"do we start again?" to "how and where do we start?" Tons of smoldering feed had to first be hauled away, a monumental chore in itself tackled by getting the manure cleaners running and loading it out via that system. As the damaged feed was hauled out in some 100 manure-spreader loads, volunteers picked through it for broken blocks, twisted metal and similar debris. The Keeney children, even those married and with jobs off the farm, were an almost constant presence on the cleanup crew when they were not working elsewhere.

"Our blessings just kept flowing. Just having people care enough to ask how it was going was comforting," says Darlene.

It took nearly a month of debris removal before a thorough assessment of all the damages were made. In the meantime, the Keeneys had already begun to evaluate systems and consider options for new facilities.

"We had lots of ideas, and changed a lot of ideas as we went. We wanted it to be functional, but to be able to live with the financial cost without burdening the next generation," said Darlene.

After several weeks of evaluation, visits to other facilities and discussions with suppliers, excavation began in late May for a double-10 herringbone milking parlor, equipped with 20 Bou-Matic automatic take-off milking units. There was never any concern about a solid foundation for the parlor, since early in the ground-moving they ran into a mass of solid rock, causing some additional delay. Over a weekend in mid-August, with some final details still to be completed, the Keeney's cattle were hauled back home for their first milking in the new parlor.

"We wouldn't want to go back to the old system," says Darlene, adamantly. "And while we had heard lots of horror stories about how difficult it would be to get the cows to adjust, we really had very few problems, even with the



A small silage pile covered with smooth plastic makes a great impromptu sliding board for the Keeney family grandchildren. Thick grass at the bottom provides a soft landing.



Cousins Hannah Keeney and Justin Stuber find only empty nests when they search the henhouse for eggs.

heifers. The parlor doesn't look confining, so maybe they think it's a place for them to escape the first time they go through."

Even though no feed is given to the cows while in the parlor, they still enter with little reluctance and absent a crowd gate. While the Keeney grandchildren initially missed the old barn which was so familiar to them, they quickly learned how "all the buttons work" on the new system. In fact the older ones enjoy helping to get the milkers ready before chores.

Darlene and daughter, Amy, handle a good portion of the milking responsibilities. Randy

and son, John, are generally in the parlor to help with the morning shift, before heading out to feed and fieldwork. Sam, employed full-time at Godfrey Meats, arrives to help most evenings after his work hours. They find that a crew of three in the parlor helps to keep the cow flow steady and the milking pace moving along efficiently. Randy mixes feed and does the feeding for cows and heifers along with helping John with the crops of corn, hay, and grains.

Though housing for the herd was at a premium during the winter months, the mild weather proved to be yet another blessing.

By bedding the parlor holding area and maximizing the use of their 66-stall freestall area, their growing numbers in the herd made it through the winter with relatively few problems. Expanded housing area is one of the first projects on the Keeney's future-to-do list.

While Darlene, Amy and John make up the backbone of the daily milking crew, everyone in the family pitches in to help as needed. Jenny and Julie, also employed by Godfrey Meats, help with milking and feeding, and Julie's husband, Chad Sweitzer, helps regularly, too. Daughter Becky is married to Nathan Stuber, who is employed by a contractor they utilized to help build the barn. During the parlor construction, Nathan often stayed beyond his normal work hours to help complete whatever job was most pressing. Emily, 16, and Andy, 15, can be counted on when not in school to join the family in milking, feeding and whatever jobs need their assistance.

John and his wife, Bethany, have three children, Hannah, 5, Jonathan, 4, and Devon, 3, and live on an adjoining farm. Sam and Rachel are the parents of Austin, 4, and Brianna, 18 months. Becky and Nathan's three sons, Justin, 6, Bryan, 4, and Dylan, 2, spend most of their weekdays at the farm while their mother is at work. Like most youngsters, the grandchildren enjoy being in the midst of the farm activity and take special pride in the farm's affectionate spring crop of kittens. These lively youngsters are especially important among the many blessings the Keeney family rejoice in each day.

Despite the initial despair of the fire, the Keeneys repeatedly express gratitude for the multitude of blessings that rose from the ashes. Arising from the charred wood, shattered blocks and twisted metal is a new milking facility and a renewed appreciation for farm life's daily joys and a host of caring family and friends.

Jenny, most avid gardener of the family, persuaded the family to arrange some of the charred timbers salvaged from the barn fire around the outer edges of the milk house and parlor to form landscaping and flowering planting areas. Their presence, brightened by the colorful blooms of annuals and decorative touches, are a silent, visual reminder of their resurrected dairying operation.

"We have truly been blessed through all of this, from the beginning," Darlene said.



Austin Keeney joins his cousins in exuberantly sliding down the silage sloop.

Attention Grassland FFA Alumni

NEW HOLLAND (Lancaster Co.) — The Grassland FFA Chapter will be holding an Alumni Potluck Picnic, Sunday, June 30, at Brubaker Park, Fivepointville.

Starting time is 3 p.m. with various sports activities and chatting time. Supper will be

served at 5:15 p.m. Alumni should bring one warm or cold dish and a dessert. A pig roast and chicken will be provided. The FFA will supply plates, utensils and drinks.

Following supper, a park tour and an update of Grassland Chapter activities will be offered.

After 32 years of dedicated service as FFA adviser, Cliff Day is retiring. It would be great joy for him to see all his former students at the picnic.

Reply by June 10, by calling the ag department (717) 354-1577 or Darlene (Horning) McCosby at 484-1057.

Beginning Silk Ribbon Embroidery Workshop

LEESPORT (Berks Co.) — Silk ribbon embroidery is a beautiful and quick way to embellish garments, pillows and accessories, almost anything you can put your mind to.

Learn the basic stitches and how to handle the ribbon in this fun and informative three-hour class. No experience is necessary

although some knowledge of embroidery stitches is helpful. Equipment supply list will be sent.

The Beginning Silk Ribbon Embroidery workshop is Wednesday, July 17, 1:30-4:30 p.m. or 6-9 p.m. at the Berks County Ag Center, Leesport.

The instructor is Kristi Elkner, member of Smocking Arts Guild

of America (SAGA).

Registration deadline is July 9.

Mail registration including name, address, phone number, and check made payable to Berks County Cooperative Extension Special Account to Consumer Connection, Berks County Cooperative Extension, Berks County Ag Center, P.O. Box 520, Leesport, PA 19533.