

Kings Farm: Where The Blacktop Ends

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COCHRANVILLE (Chester Co.) — As summer wraps up, people are scrambling to escape for a final fling of vacation.

Not Neal and Mary Lou King. "We aren't big go-away vacation people," Mary Lou said. "We feel like our farm is a vacation spot, and we try to relax here."

Those words might give the wrong impression to people who don't know the Kings. They don't live on a nonworking farm, and they certainly aren't lazy.

Sure they live on picture-perfect farm in rural Cochrانville. So rural, in fact, that Mary Lou jokes they should name their place "Where The Blacktop Ends."

It's a full-fledged working farm with 145 milking cows plus replacements and 90 acres of crop farming — all done by the King family and one full-time hired man.

"It keeps us busy, but we find pleasure in our everyday work," Neal said.

The Kings have four children — Kelly, 12; Colton, 10; Kristy, 8; and Kandy, 5.

Kandy was born with severe birth defects that have not been medically diagnosed. After heart surgery (when her heart was only the size of a cherry tomato) and numerous life-and-death encounters, Kandy has stabilized, but the 5-year-old is developmentally between 3-6 months old. She requires constant care, and needs to be fed through a tube. Her gastro-intestinal system is seriously defective. Her parents need to get up several times during the night to change her position because she has difficulty breathing and swallowing, which could result in asphyxiation or choking.

While many people would be overwhelmed providing the care Kandy needs, the family radiates contentment and enthusiasm for



Neal and Mary Lou King and children, Kelly, 12; Colton, 10; Kristy, 8, often use this Gator to transport Kandy around the farm. The puppies — Sunny, Spot, and O.P. Junior — often go along for the ride.

life. Mary Lou said, "We love her. It's a joy taking care of her."

The Kings said that some people think Kandy's quality of life is so limited, and is of no value. But Mary Lou said, "Who are we to judge? We are all made in God's image, and we see her as no less valuable."

"She has taught us so much — to be thankful for little things, not to take our health for granted. I think the experience has made our older children more compassionate toward others with disabilities."

Mary Lou sees living on a farm as an advantage in caring for Kandy. Neal is nearby to care for Kandy whenever Mary Lou

needs to transport the older children to 4-H, church, and other community activities. A visiting nurse also helps with Kandy's therapy. And, to Kandy's delight, a four-wheeler is often used to transport her around the family farm.

The Kings look for ideas to improve the three-generation farm and make it more attractive. When they purchased the farm, they remodeled and added on to the house. They can sit at the kitchen table and look out the spacious windows and see miles of surrounding fields.

Everything new isn't necessarily better. For that reason, the Kings kept the cast iron radiators, which had been installed in the farmhouse during World War II. In addition to the radiators' instant warmth, they also have an accompanying story from that era.

Neal said several of his grandparent's children had pneumonia. The family thought it would be better to install a furnace for more uniform heat instead of using only a cookstove, but steel was rationed during the war. The family needed a doctor's written permission to put radiators in the house.

Transferring the family farm isn't always easy when numerous children want to farm. Neal's dad, Merle, was one of nine children. Merle's parents Valentine and Naomi helped the other sons acquire their own farms and were ready to retire when Merle was old enough to take over the family farm.

Neal has two sisters and one brother. His dad helped his younger brother purchase a neighboring farm. Each operates an inde-

pendent dairy but the brothers help each other with the crop work.

Neal said he and his dad believe that transferring the family farm from one generation to the next should be done about every 30 years.

"If you let it go longer, the person buying it doesn't have enough time to pay it off," Neal said.

In 1991, the Kings built on to the barn to increase to 111 stalls. Before that, they had only 39 stalls and needed to switch cows around three times to complete each milking. King allows the cows to go dry 10-12 weeks so that he doesn't need to switch them around.

Although they eventually hope to expand even more, they said, the Kings want their place to remain a family farm.

"We keep looking for ways to ease the labor so we can continue to enjoy it," Neal said. One of those ways was to build a bigger silo.

"I don't like trenches — too much spoilage," Neal said. "I guess I'm too picky, but you've got to be when you're a small farm. One bite of mold in one day can make a cow drop in production, but it takes two weeks to build her back up."

"To get good milk, you've got to get good feed into a cow."

The Kings raise their own feed, and are particular with harvesting it in its prime.

When it comes to adopting new farming practices, Neal said, "I'm not the kind to jump in. I want to see it proven. I'm interested in long-term results."

Rotational grazing isn't something he considers. "We don't have enough land for our cow herd size, plus my boy and I both like running equipment," he said.

The rainy spring season hurt their alfalfa fields, and they haven't been able to harvest any good baled hay. But the corn looks tremendous — with three ears of corn on some stalks. Neal said, "I expect 200 bushels of corn per acre in some of the fields this year."

The Kings say their full-time hired help, Shane Johnson, has been with them for seven years. Mary Lou helps with the milking on weekends and whenever Neal needs to do crop work or take off for other reasons.

"She is the big reason for success behind this farm," Neal said of his wife.

In addition to her enthusiasm for farming, her positive attitude, and encouragement to him, Neal said that Mary Lou lines up the breeding program.

Mary Lou said, "I like to see good cows, and prefer doing the pedigree work along with Select Sires' mating program. We breed for good feet and legs rather than milk. I get excited seeing a good heifer (resulting from her breeding choices)."

The Kings also raise a few good bulls, and what they don't raise themselves, they sell.

They believe a sturdy cow fed good feed will yield good milk, and that longevity is more valuable than pushing for production that shortens a cow's lifespan.

Mary Lou's interest in cows was revealed at an early age. She said, "My dad says that as a 3-year-old I could name all the cows on my parents' farm. I always knew I wanted to farm."

The older King children also help with the milking and barn cleaning.

Although they live in Chester County, the Kings are active in Lancaster County 4-H. Kelly is involved in many 4-H clubs such as sewing, crocheting, art, dairy beef, quilting, archery, and candle making. See page B10, for a story on Kelly's mishap with a 4-H animal.

Colton said, "I'm into farm working." He's also into country

(Turn to Page B12)



The Kings look for ideas to improve the three-generation farm and make it more attractive. When they purchased the farm, they remodeled, added on to the house, and landscaped the property. Neal and Mary Lou King with children, Kelly, Colton, Kristy, and Kandy.



It's IH Country on the King farm, where three generations of Kings love tractor work. From left are Merle, grandfather; Colton, grandson; and Neal, son.

OMESTEAD NOTES