

The Wisconsin Dairy Farm: A Working Tradition

Wisconsin boasts a population of 1 cow for every 3 people. We produce almost 15 percent of the nation's milk, 25 percent of its butter, and 30 percent of its cheese. With more than 27,000 dairy farms and 1.45 million dairy cows, the state clearly still deserves the title "America's Dairyland."

The honor of having the largest number of dairy cows in the state is shared by Marathon and Clark counties, neighbors near the center of the state. Each has 62,000 cows. Clark County is the picture of a healthy farming community, its landscape dotted with working farms and a plethora of agriculture-related businesses, from feed cooperatives and implement dealers to pole-barn construction companies and milk pickup stations. You're likely to meet a milk truck on any

of the county's small rural roads and just as likely to come across tractors pulling whatever piece of equipment is appropriate to the season.

The culture of dairy farming in the state is pervasive. Many residents either grew up on a farm or have spent time on their old "home farm" run by relatives. Many still value such connections and credit farm life with fostering strong family ties and a spirit of cooperation, moral instruction and a sense of stew-

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ardship for both land and animals. But most people rely on an image of farming rather than an actual knowledge of farming as it exists in the 1990s.

Contemporary dairy farming demonstrates a principle folklorists love to pronounce: culture, like the traditions that assist in its maintenance, is dynamic. It changes to suit the needs of the members of a particular community at the same time that it retains the core values of that community. While farms are becoming much larger and technologically more complex, they are still community based and resource conscious, and are usually family concerns.

Here's what more and more contemporary dairy farms look like. There's a "milking parlor," where the cows enter into stalls to be milked; then they are released into "return lanes" to head back into the adjacent barn. The milker stands in a "pit" about three feet lower than the milking stalls, where she can easily put the milking machine on the cow without having to bend over. Many farms have free-stall barns — long, open, one-story barns where the cows wander in large pens, entering stalls to eat or lie down. These barns often have curtained sides that can be raised in the summer to allow a breeze to pass through. Most farms still keep their old two-story barns but find new uses for them, frequently as treatment barns for sick cows or mothers ready to give birth.

Near the milking parlor or in the house you'll find the farmer's office, filled with certificates and awards, pictures of both cows and kids, an aerial view of the farm, and, of course, a computer. All the information on each indi-



Light spills through the curtain of the free-stall barn at the Boon Farm in Greenwood, Wisconsin. Photo by Andy Kraushaar

vidual cow — her breeding records, her health records, her milk production — is kept on the computer, and the computer may be hooked up to the Internet, to allow the farmer to communicate with any of a number of agriculture-based discussion groups, both nationally and within the state. On the bigger farms, you'll find a work force which divides up to perform specialized tasks but in which any individual can handle a number of tasks.

Where Dick and Peggy Rau run their 700-cow farm, near Dorchester in Clark County, there's a lot of community support for dairy farming. Peggy says:

We don't meet a lot of people who are against us. You'll meet a few people that say, "Oh, you're putting the little farmer out of business." Well, not really. What would the difference have been if we would have stayed at 72 cows? We'd just be struggling the same as the rest of them, and I'd probably have an off-farm job instead of staying here. I've been lucky enough to be here 18 years; I've never had to work off. And I've always been here when the kids get home, and when they leave, which I consider a big plus.

The heart of the family farm is its children. The hope is that the farm will be there for the children who want to continue the tradition. To assure this, the farm has to be more than just financially secure; farming has to be something that the children can imagine themselves doing. Peggy Rau says that expanding helped increase the kids' interest in farming. Their son Zack helps to maintain the cows' feeding schedule, getting up at four in the morning before school to help feed. A year ago their daughter Stephanie began working as a milker, and Peggy and Dick have been surprised by her enthusiasm. "Who would have



Head milker Carrie Dassow monitors the milking machines in the double-ten parallel milking parlor at the Rau Farm in Dorchester, Wisconsin. Photo by Andy Kraushaar

ever thought she'd be talking to her friends about cows?"

Part of what makes their current mode of farming attractive to Peggy and Dick's children is that, with an expanded work force, it's possible to leave the farm now and then. "When we milked 72 cows, you had to be here at five in the morning, five at night, and now, like Steph's basketball game tonight, we just go, that's it. We get done what we have to get done, and then we leave." Dick and Peggy can take every other weekend off. For their anniversary last year, they flew to a Packers game in Florida. "We never did that in the first 15 years we farmed. We never left."

Agriculture in Wisconsin remains a family concern. Not everyone who grows up on a farm continues to farm, but many go into related businesses. Dick's brother, for example, is with Northstar Breeding Service, and Dick and Peggy buy most of their semen from them. Peggy's brother works for Marawood Structures, which put up the Raus' newest free-stall barn.

Although there may be hundreds of cows with numbers instead of names, there's still a focus on relationships with animals. The older cows, especially, become pets. Peggy describes how her milkers develop attachments to certain cows. Their milking parlor has a basement which also serves as a storm cellar. One day last summer Peggy was warning her milkers to get down to the basement in any severe storm. She told them, "Forget the cows, just get yourselves down there." Her head milker asked, "Can I bring 1459 with me?" All the milkers feed cookies, Hostess cupcakes, and Doritos to another cow, 1541. One milker suggested to Peggy that since they mix bakery waste as part of the cows' integrated feed program, it was the same thing as feeding the cows cookies.

Most farms still follow the old principle, "Find a use for it." The original recyclers, farmers innovate, putting old things to work in new ways. For example, Duane Boon of Greenwood in Clark County recently expanded his herd to



Cows graze in the feeding alley in the free-stall barn at Dick and Peggy Rau's farm.

Photo by Andy Kraushaar

120 cows and bought a milking parlor system. Rather than build a whole new operation with all new buildings, Duane decided to modify his existing round-roof barn. He gutted out one end of it, air-hammering out the floor to install the pit for the milking parlor, and changing the gutter system and stanchion setup in the other end to create a holding area for the cows waiting to be milked. He connected his new free-stall barn to his old barn, so that the cows could be moved from one location to the other easily.

And sometimes old ideas are used to fit new purposes. In Dick and Peggy Rau's milking parlor pit, all the supplies needed to prepare the cows for milking — towels, teat dip, sanitized water — used to be kept in a barrel, and the milkers would have to run back and forth to get supplies. Then Dick's brother came up with a better idea. He welded together a trolley, much like an old silage cart, that is suspended from a track on the ceiling. Now, the milkers simply pull the trolley along as they milk. In another case, a neighbor found that old tractor tires cut in half make the perfect manure scraper for a free-stall barn. Using a metal bucket to scrape the concrete floor causes two problems: first, it eventually smooths out the floor too much, making it slippery for the cows; second, metal buckets scraped against concrete wear out rather quickly and are expensive to replace.

Using an old tire is cheaper and better for the floor.

The Raus, like other farmers in the area, buy their tractor-tire scrapers from a local farmer who makes them. This specialized market emphasizes how much dairy farmers rely on a healthy, supportive

environment. Few dairy farmers find themselves operating successfully in isolation.

In Clark County, many of the farms no longer operating are those owned by older farmers. Duane Boon says that those farms end up getting absorbed by other farms, since not many new farmers can afford to start up. "Like my dad said, I'm farming right now what basically was 10 independent farmers 30 years ago. It's kind of sad in a way." Peggy Rau shares Duane's attitude. "I like the old farms. . . . I happened to go sit out in the woodlot one day, and you could see around this area, how many people are 60, 60, 60, 60." She points around her to her neighbors:

Dick's brother farms right up the road half a mile, so that one's running. The farm over there with the green silo top, another big farmer that lives out on [County Road] A owns that, and there's hired people going through it constantly, so it's really not a family-run farm any more. That farm over there is currently running but not for long.

Farmers are well aware of the risks they take in this rapidly changing business, and at least for the Raus and the Boons, it increases their determination to pass on workable traditions.

Before they expanded, the Boons milked 60 cows and did all right, "but I came to the point where I'm 40 years old. If I keep milking 60 cows, my net worth will probably go down by the time I'm 60, so I either have to modernize and expand, or get out, or just milk it out till there's nothing left," Duane explains. "I've got kids coming up, I think they might be interested. Maybe not; if not, I've got to have something saleable, too."

Dick Rau's uncle, a retired farmer himself, says, "I remember when I was milking 12 cows. I thought I'd be a big success if I could get it up to 30 cows. By the time I retired, I was milking 70, and now. . . ." He gestures behind him at the complex that milks and cares for 700 animals.

Suggested Reading

- Belanus, Betty J. "Family Farm Folklore." In *Festival of American Folklife Program Book*, ed. Peter Seitel. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991.
- Leary, James P. "The Farmer and American Folklore." In *Festival of American Folklife Program Book*, ed. Peter Seitel. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1991.
- Mitchell, Roger. *From Fathers to Sons: A Wisconsin Family Farm*. (Special issue of *Midwestern Journal of Language and Folklore*.) Terre Haute: Indiana State University, 1984.
- Vogeler, Ingolf. "The Cultural Landscape of Wisconsin's Dairy Farming." In *Wisconsin Land and Life*, ed. Robert C. Ostergren and Thomas R. Vale. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- <http://www.wislink.org> (the electronic network for Wisconsin Dairy Producers)

Ruth Olson was raised on a dairy farm in northwestern Wisconsin and has done extensive fieldwork on the occupational, recreational, and ethnic life of rural communities in the northern part of the state, with an emphasis on issues of land use and agriculture. She teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and is on the staff of the Wisconsin Folklife Festival.