

## FARM FEATURE

### **FARR DAIRY FARMS: A FAMILY MEETING CHALLENGES WITH TECHNOLOGY AND CHANGE**

*By Julie Walker*

June is the nation's traditional Dairy Month! We're delighted to highlight one of the dairy farm families we serve, Farr Farms, of Niotla!

#### **The 'Back to the Future' Beginning!**

They moved to Tennessee long before it was cool to move to Tennessee. Well, actually, they moved 'back home' to Tennessee, where his family had roots in Monroe County.

The story of the modern-day Farr Dairy Farm began in 1979, when 21-year-old Jim and 19-year-old Rose were engaged. Jim was working as a millwright and pipefitter at the time in the Chicago, Illinois area, and Rose was in school to obtain her beautician's license.

But despite the generous pay of his millwright occupation, Jim wanted to have a career in farming and agriculture. So, he and his parents began to look for farm properties in several states, including Tennessee. At the time, farmland in nearby Indiana was selling for \$3-4,000 an acre, and TN farms were in the \$800-\$1,000-acre range.

Additionally, Tennessee was a second home. His parents, Ernest and Alva Farr, were Monroe County, TN natives, but had relocated to Calumet City, Illinois, in the late 1950s in order to find work.

Now - here's where the 'moving back' part comes in. Jim's mom and dad were visiting family in Tennessee in 1979. While there, Jim's dad learned of a farm that was coming up for auction in a few days. He went to look, and he and Jim talked about it over the phone. His dad even said, "This is the one you want."

Mr. Ernest did the bidding and bought the 193-acre farm at auction, without Jim having yet seen it. Soon, Jim and Rose were moving to Tennessee.

Although the purchased farm was an existing dairy, the cows and milking equipment were sold in that auction. So Jim not only bought the farm property, he ended up buying a 79-cow Holstein herd and a bull, and his dairy farming career began.

Rose, ever the supportive wife, had to go back to beautician's school in Tennessee, in order to become licensed here, a process which took six weeks. And somewhere in the middle of all that, they got married, and as Rose laughs about, "What honeymoon? Our honeymoon was spent in the barn milking cows!"

From those humble, yet adventurous, beginnings, the Farr farming operation has grown from the original 193 acres to now over 700 acres, and a milking herd of 240 dairy cows, and equally as many heifers.



**THE FARR FAMILY IN FRONT OF VMS MILKING UNITS:**  
ROSE, JESSICA, OLIVIA, OLIVER, STEPHEN & JIM FARR



Rose's business has grown from having a 'beauty chair,' to owning her own highly popular multi-chair shop, The Gallery, in downtown Athens. Son Stephen is a partner on part of the additional tracts.

Together as a couple, the Jim and Rose are known to be great contributors to the community, and are much appreciated for their light-hearted, yet tell-it-like it is, approach to life. They both love to laugh at all of life's circumstances, which is quite infectious when you're around them!

Their farm operation now includes son Stephen as a valued decision-maker and business partner. He and his wife, Jess, and children, Olivia and Oliver, are frequently on the farm - no doubt the kids love the calves! Their farm participation complements the younger couple's efforts as sought-after real estate agents and property managers.

### **Robotic Milkers (DeLaval VMS) and Farm Operations**

After 30-plus years of milking, their double-7 herringbone parlor (which had received several updates through the years) had exhausted its practical useful life by 2018. A new milking barn was the only solution if the milking operations were to remain.

Jim and Stephen spent a couple of years touring farms in several states to evaluate milking systems that worked for different types of farm operations. And finally, after weighing many factors, the decision was made to install 4 DeLaval VMS (voluntary Milking System) Pro milking units, otherwise known as 'robots.'

AgCentral, especially Eric Risser, Dairy Department Manager, and the entire Dairy Department offered support and insight along the way, often making arrangements and accompanying the Farris to the barns during their research tour.

Eric says, "It's been awesome to see the way the Farris have embraced the technology of the VMS data systems! They have used those reports for continued herd improvements, including reading data as a means to monitor herd health, and being able to care of problems before they become huge issues! It's been a pleasure working with them as they set and achieve new herd goals!

The new robot barn began operations in January of 2020. "Start-ups" are often ag community events, with experienced dairy cattle folks pitching in to help guide cattle into their new stalls. In the Farris' case, many neighbors and business colleagues joined in the process, assisting AgCentral personnel and DeLaval technicians.

Cows are creatures of habit, and once cows learn their new routines of being milked, quick improvements in milking performance are often seen. Such was the case with the Farr herd - within 3 weeks after start up, production per cow was up almost 10 lbs. of milk per day per cow!

One of the key data collection points is 'visits per cow to robotic stall per day.' At the current time, this level stays in the 2.8 avg. visits per day, range, which is typical of cows in robotic set-ups. That 2.8 visits equates to almost 3 milkings per day!

Jim notes that he really appreciates the ongoing support of neighbors and the community, and the help from other neighbors which also have robotic milking systems.



**A PHOTO FROM THE START-UP DAY WHEN ROBOTS WERE  
FIRST USED AND COWS WERE IN-TRAINING  
- ERIC RISSE AND JIM FARR**



Not only did the Farris install robots, but some improvements were made to the housing barn with cow comfort in mind. Changes made to the free stalls, leading to a more comfortable place for cows to lay down, and fans and cooling systems to abate summer temperatures were installed.

All elements add up to a herd environment that keeps the cows as comfortable as possible, leading to the highest quality of milk to be sent to the processing plant.

The Farr cows are fed a Total Mixed Ration (TMR). This means they grow the base forages on the farm, and then analyze those silages and hays on a regular basis - on the average, once a month. The silage and hay are evaluated for nutritional content, and then AgCentral blends the complementary grain, mineral, and supplement mix which is added to the forage base.

This is kind of like a 'cow-salad' if you will but provides a complete and nutritionally balanced diet for the performance level of the cows. Most dairy cows eat a better-balanced diet than most humans!

### The Crops

No dairy herd success occurs without fertile fields that grow nutritious crops harvested at the correct time. Jim relies on AgCentral Agronomy and Animal Nutrition Departments for advice in this regard. Soil analysis, measured against the desired crop, and then applying the correct fertilizers, and then selection of optimal seed varieties all lead to peak crop performance.

The manure from the cows is a nutrient rich fertilizer, and that is applied to the fields for organic matter and to cut costs of purchased fertilizer.

A corn silage base is the foundation of Jim's crop and feed program, complemented with grass hays, small grains, such as pearl millet and wheat. Cover crops, some of which are harvested for feed, are utilized to preserve top soil and improve soil tilth.

### An eye to the Future:

It is no secret that dairy farming is a challenging occupation, with many factors at play. Volatile pricing markets dependent on world factors affecting

At the current time, Farris Dairy Farm is looking for a 'working herdsman,' a daily decision maker familiar with cow care, and computer technology due to the robots.

Jim is willing to work with someone who may not have the full plate of skills, because he thinks attitude and commitment are important. "I know every person has different talents, and different skills. I'm willing to train someone in the skills that may have some gaps, so if someone is interested, please apply." He can be reached at 423-507-4202 if anyone wants more information.

Stephen says "We in America better start taking care of dairy farmers, or they will be few and far between. If I had my druthers, I probably would be dairy farming alone, but conditions tell me my family is best served with income outside of agriculture.

Stephen scratches his head because he thinks folks don't realize that milk is one of the most nutritionally important foods for humans, and feels that milk is best produced on a local, near-by farm. "It's a win-win for a community economy when we can produce foods nearby, and ensure we have some means to local food security!



A VIEW DOWN THE FEEDWAY WHERE THE COWS ARE EATING THEIR **NUTRITIONALLY BALANCE FEED RATION**





"Our milk goes to the Mayfield milk plant, and hits the regional market under the Mayfield, Fieldcrest, and Great Value brands. Look for Plant # 47-131 on the carton! I want this milk plant to survive, and I hope that our consumers realizes what a blessing it is to have that plant here, and to keep it operating. That happens when they buy products produced there! "

When asked where he predicted what Farr Farms would look like 25 years from now, Jim sighed as he said: "My hope and intent is that my grandkids want to farm, and are still farming here. However, reality tells me this farm won't be a dairy farm at that time, and what kind of agriculture business is here is really hard to predict. It may be beef, it may be something else. But my hope is that it is still a farm!

***Jim, we sure hope that too, because AgCentral is dependent on local farms for its future as well!***



GRANDDAUGHTER OLIVIA AND JIM FARR



GRANDSON OLIVER WITH THE MILK  
THAT HE LOVES TO DRINK