



Cows to heifers and back again

A fire that destroyed the Schmidt family's dairy facilities nearly two decades ago led them to heifer raising. In the grand scheme, it was one of the best things that could have happened.

by Hoard's Dairyman staff

WISCONSIN'S Door Peninsula is one of the state's most highly trafficked areas. Door County, Wis., also happens to be the home of S&S Jerseyland Dairy LLC. As you pull up to the farm, a 12-foot replica of the Schmidt family's chosen breed, the Jersey, greets you. Bearing the moniker, Buttercup, the cow overlooks the dairy from the hill upon which she stands.

For just over 100 years, the Schmidt family has dairied in Sturgeon Bay, Wis. Randy and his wife, Dena, are the fourth generation to farm the land that Randy's great-grandfather, William Schmidt, purchased in 1908. Throughout the 1970s and '80s, Randy's parents, Adrian Jr. and Kay, built the herd to 70 cows.

A barn fire in October of 1996 brought everything to a halt. With the facilities a total loss, the Schmidts sold their cows on December 19 of that year.

"We didn't know the future or if we were ready to start milking again," noted Schmidt. To start the farm up after the fire, they began custom raising heifers in the spring of 1997.

"At the time, we rebuilt with the intention to raise 400 to 500 heifers, but the business kept growing, and we added barns to accommodate more animals," noted Schmidt. As the operation gradually grew, the Schmidts built their freestall facilities with their goal to eventually milk cows again.

Throughout this time, the Schmidts also purchased land to feed their growing heifer population and future dairy herd. In September of 2001, Randy and Dena gave notice at their off-farm jobs and went into partnership on S&S Ag Enterprises.

At the tail end of 2007, one of dairy's best years, the Schmidts and a partner bought a neighboring farm, Peninsula Dairy, where they began milking 400 cows.

Four years later, they decided to discontinue their heifer business and transition back to dairy. At the business' peak, the Schmidts

were caring for 6,500 heifers. On November 15, 2012, S&S Ag Enterprises was transitioned into S&S Jerseyland Dairy.

Today, S&S Jerseyland, owned by Randy, Dena and his parents, milks just over 2,900 Jerseys. They also retained ownership of Peninsula Dairy, where 650 first-lactation heifers are milked.

Facilities drive the breed

"With the facilities we had from the heifer raising, we knew we would either have to remodel the barns or move to a smaller cow. Two existing barns we had for confirmed pregnant heifers were the right size for Jerseys," noted Schmidt.

"It all fell into place, and we took advantage of opportunities as they came," continued Schmidt. As people took out heifers, they filled the barns with purchased springers and planned to begin milking in November and December.

The Schmidts always made sure they had enough cattle to fill new barns before construction began and built to the same specifications as the existing barns. Moving from a high-forage heifer diet to a lower forage milk cow diet also gave them the ability to sell feed throughout the

start-up and helped the operation cash flow.

"Milking was the dream, and with hard work and dedication we got there," said Schmidt. Good people and a good lender with the same vision were also essential to the Schmidts' realization of their dream.

"We had a fairly smooth transition from heifers to cows; we were used to dealing with the animals and added milking to the routine. The major difference was that our milking cows needed more consistency than the heifers had," Schmidt noted.

Rotary brings efficiency

At Jerseyland Dairy, cows are milked 3x in a 70-stall rotary. The herd averages 70 pounds of milk per cow with a 5.1 F and 3.9 P. Daily, 240,000 pounds of milk is direct loaded and then shipped to Saputo for cheese production. "The added advantage with the Jerseys was that we were able to ship more fat and protein out the door and less water," added Schmidt.

Lactating cows are housed in four six-row, tunnel ventilated freestall barns. There are also three additional barns for older heifers. Stalls are 42 inches wide, and there are approximately 200 cows per pen.

The Schmidts tunnel ventilated the barns in the spring of 2013. "Tunnel ventilation really changed things; it improved the air quality, helped get moisture out of the barn and virtually eliminated freezing, steam and ice during the winter," he added.

Cows are bred in two barns, and tail chalk and ovsynch are used for heat detection. The dairy's pregnancy rates average 29 and 45 percent, for cows and heifers, respectively. All heifers are genomic tested, and sexed semen is used on the top animals. The bottom 25 percent are breed to Limousin.

"With Jerseys, breeding the lower end animals to beef adds value to the bull calf," said Schmidt.

All animals freshen in the maternity barn at Jerseyland and are given a calcium bolus at calving. "Having all calving animals at one site reduced our management needs at the other facility," said Schmidt. The maternity pen is walked every half hour, and cows are moved as soon as they show signs of calving.

After giving birth, colostrum is harvested and pasteurized, and the cow is moved to the fresh pen. Calves are moved to individual pens in the maternity barn for the first few days of life before going to a calf raiser.

Community and environment key

As the Schmidts have grown and transitioned, their neighbors and community have remained a priority. "We have an economic impact in the community and, in working with the local soil and water conservation department, we do all we can to showcase that we are stewards of the land." Each year the Schmidts bring students from the Southern Door School District out to the farm, fund an agricultural scholarship for students at the local high school and host a tractor safety class.

During the spring and fall, they also send out a newsletter to all neighbors within a five-mile radius updating them on the farm, while asking them to contact the dairy with any concerns they may have.

A methane digester was installed on-farm in 2010 and produces enough power for at least 600 homes. Energy is sold back to the grid. "The digester also provides the environmental benefit of reduced odor from the dairy. It also produces biosolids, which are used for bedding," added Schmidt.

"Looking back on the fire, it initially seemed like the worst possible thing that could have happened. But it turned out to be one of the best because it gave us a fresh start," said Schmidt. 🐄



RANDY AND DENA'S SONS, DEREK, TANNER AND DEVIN, are the farm's fifth generation and are actively involved in the operation. Randy's parents, Kay and Adrian (front row) were the third generation of Schmidts to dairy. "We've gotten to where we are because of our employees and have made a commitment to their education," said Schmidt.