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Learn how this progressive New York dairyman has helped bring young people into dairy

Dairy Summit will offer inside view of an innovative partnership

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Special for Farmshine

CLIFTON SPRINGS, N.Y.—The relationship between one generation and the next on the dairy farm is an act of balance. With an aging population of dairy owners in Pennsylvania, it is also a relationship that has the state's dairy industry hanging in the balance.

Transition of dairy farms from one generation to the next is a delicate subject involving communication and business decisions, future planning, tax considerations, and the intangible elements of personality, perspective and emotion as well as individual hopes, dreams and desires.

While George Mueller hasn't figured out all of the challenges associated with dairy farming (who has?): He has figured out a thing or two about building dairy business partnerships that work and last. He is also known for employing several young graduates over the years—giving them a vested interest in his western New York dairy farm, which has served as a launch pad for starting their own dairy businesses.

During the upcoming Pennsylvania Dairy Summit on Feb. 11 and 12 in Lancaster, Pa., Mueller will share experiences, insights, "secrets," and his positively progressive thinking, along with a healthy portion of practical details and advice for all generations in dairy.

After forming the family partnership in 1991, two years after youngest son John returned home to manage the dairy, Mueller's Willow Bend Farm near Clifton Springs, Ontario County, New York, grew from milking 600 to 1200 cows.

Then, in 2003, the Muellers merged Willow Bend with Kevin and Barb Nedrow's nearby Spring Hope Dairy. The Nedrows were milking 150 cows in a 70-stall stanchion barn, just the two of them, with one employee and five young daughters, the oldest now 12.

Together, they built a brand new 1000-cow satellite dairy at Spring Hope, which increased the total number of cows milked at two locations to 2,100 and combined acreage to 4,500.

The story of how they were able to do, together, what would have been difficult for each to do on their own, is good information for any future-minded dairy producer as well as young people with an eye toward a future in dairy.

The Willow Bend/Spring Hope partnership, satellite dairy and management practices will be the subject of Mueller's presentation to the full Summit audience on Thursday, Feb. 12, where he will share his "Secrets to 52 Years of Profitability and Steady Growth."

Both locations have a rolling herd average in the 27,000-lb range but are managed differently as far as facilities, bedding, and other factors.

"My son said: 'Dad, I need a challenge, and the men need a challenge.' The Nedrows are excellent managers, particularly in crops, so we joined with some excellent people," Mueller says about the merger. "It has worked out beautifully."

Mueller will also share his experiences and advice on how to orient young people into the dairy business. Even before his dairy's partnerships were formed, Mueller was already in the habit of using innovative partner-like principles with young dairy-loving employees.

Mueller believes having a formula for financial involvement has been a key ingredient for the success of their dairy and for the individual success of its former employees.

"They were financially involved in our business. If we expanded, it was to their advantage. If we increased production per cow, they benefited," Mueller explains, noting this is also important when bringing children into the business.

"If they are financially involved, they are going to enjoy the experience and enjoy doing things right for production," he adds.

For example, Rodney and Deb Brown started their Half Dutch Farm near Clifton Springs after Rodney had worked for George 11 years. During those years, Rodney developed his own herd within the Mueller herd, assembling 170 cows to start his own dairy farm.

"What we've done in the past with employees, and also in our arrangement with our children, and in forming the partnership with Spring Hope, has worked extremely well for us. I want to share with others how we've done it," says Mueller. He adds that a neighboring dairy is starting a partnership with a young Cornell graduate who just loves dairy, but was not raised on a dairy farm.

"These are all examples of what can be done," says Mueller. "Our main goal is to keep this business that Mary Lue and I have built, to keep it going. Our number two goal, if possible, is to keep the farm in the Mueller family, but that's not the first goal. Our first goal is to keep the business viable and running so that if the grand children are not interested in dairying, at least the dairy will keep going."

This mindset, along with a positive attitude, guided many of the decisions George and Mary Lue made with their children and in their partnership with the Nedrows. Mueller's strategies for building a partnership will be of interest to Summit-goers of all ages and situations.

Of the Muellers' four children, only one is working on the dairy farm. But the other children are also partners, so how the partnership is structured becomes very important to the future of the farm.

Mueller will delve into these details during a Dairy Summit "breakout session: "How to Build a Partnership that Lasts Many Generations."

Mueller believes in giving young people the chance to grow. "The younger generation needs to have patience," he says. "But on the part of the older generation, the problem can be in

letting go. It's a two-way street. We've got to let go and let the next generation take command. As farmers, we sometimes wait too long to do that."

For 2009 Dairy Summit information and registration, call 877-326-5993 or visit www.padairysummit.org.

PHOTO CAPTION:

"Dad, Please pass the farm..."

That is how George Mueller would caption this 1985 Christmas Card photo taken five years before the Mueller family formed their first partnership, in which all of the children were 'gifted' equally to start passing on the farm to the next generation. George will be a general session speaker and breakout session leader at the upcoming 2009 Dairy Summit where he will share valuable insights and experiences about bringing the next generation along in the dairy business. Pictured are George and Mary Lue Mueller (center), flanked by son Steve and daughter Ann (left) and son John and his wife Sara (right). John is currently the farm manager for Mueller's Willow Bend Farm, a partnership that now includes a neighboring satellite farm: Spring Hope Dairy. Not pictured is the oldest son Jeffrey.