



Getty Acres is owned and managed by the Wilkinson family, milking 240 cows and farming 4000 acres. The view to the right is from Larry and Doris Wilkinson's home overlooking the dairy farm. A photo of the family appears on page 30.

A member profile: Cultivating crops, cattle and sense of community

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

GETTYSBURG, Pa.—June is dairy month, and for the Wilkinson family it is also hay-making month, which is why you won't find many, if any, cows calving now at Getty Acres.

All told: the family farms 4,000 acres, 385 of which they own here in Adams County. The majority is planted to hay: Alfalfa for their dairy herd, and timothy baled and sold as feed hay to other dairies. About 4,000-5,000 tons of mulch hay are also sold annually to mushroom growers back in Chester County, where Larry and Doris farmed 32 years ago. Last year, the family baled 2,500 mid-sized bales and over 12,000 four-by-fours. That's a lot of hay.

Getty Acres is home to 240 milking cows with a rolling herd average of 23,365 (3x) pounds of milk. The cows are Larry's domain, but he relies quite a bit on his herd manager Eric Spence.

Larry's sons Ed and Dan are each one-third partners in the family farm business, which in addition to the dairy cows and hay operation, includes 165 replacement heifers and a 270-head steer feedlot stocked with male Holstein calves from their dairy and other dairies. (The family is pictured on page 30. In a future edition of Farmshine, look for information about Getty Acres' dairy beef operation and market opportunities for feeding dairy beef.)

The Wilkinsons grow soybeans, roasted for the dairy ration; high moisture corn and corn silage for the dairy and the steers; and barley, which they feed to the steers. They like to keep extra feed inventories on hand in a good year because as they point out, "This area is fickle when it comes to weather and crops."

Ed and Tina's children—Carl, 22, Lee, 19, Holly, 17, and Heather, 15—are older than Dan and Laurie's children Kendall, 13, and Ty, 11, so they've now traded places taking charge of the school tours the farm has been hosting since Carl was six years old. In May, they had 172 first graders touring the farm all at once.

"We started doing farm tours when Carl's teacher found out we had a farm, and we've done them ever since," Tina reflects. "We need to teach these children while they are young."

"Then they will teach the parents," Ed quips. "It's rewarding," say Doris and Laurie. "We have a stack of thank you notes from the last tour. It's always fun to see the pictures they draw about what they saw on the farm."

Life is busy here. They like to keep things moving. Yet laughter and camaraderie are part of the non-stop action, along with mutual respect and appreciation between generations.

The family also makes time to be joiners in service to both the ag community and the community at-large. They are members of Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP) and the Gettysburg Young Farmers. In fact, Larry was president of Young Farmers at the state level in 1990 and Dan in 1999. Ed was president of the Adams County Farm Bureau for eight years. His brother Dan has been president for the past three.

"We have always been interested in serving, but when there's an issue and you get involved in the leadership, it takes a year or two to figure the thing out. Then you work at it for a few years and before you know it, it's time for someone else to lead the group," says Ed about his leadership experiences.

Involvement does not stop at the farm gate for the Wilkinsons. "Community service is a different deal," he explains. "Everyone you serve with has regular day jobs. But it's nice because you get to develop a whole different social group beyond the farm."



(Above) At Getty Acres, Larry Wilkinson (right) and herd manager Eric Spence moved 70 cows to this new open bed-pack barn on Jan. 15. The facility has access to pasture, and shade cloth keeps it cool in the summer and a great setup for cows that are 60 days from dry-off. They've also found it's a good place to put some of the older and slower cows to rejuvenate them. (Right) While Larry farms with his sons and their families (in the background), his wife Doris runs an independent travel agency specializing in cruises for individuals and large groups. Their daughter works with Doris in the business, and their other son Earl, works for nearby AgComm. Larry is an avid traveler also, attending the PDMP Dairy Tours each year. The March 2010 Tour will visit dairies throughout the Northeast.

Ed and Tina have always been active in Jaycees, and they devote a lot of time to National Apple Harvest and the local Oakside Community Park project. Larry is a member of the local Lions Club and served as a past president. The girls are active in 4-H and FFA as well as playing field hockey and soccer.

Hard to imagine how they fit it all in as cell phones went off periodically through the interview. In fact, Ed tells his son Carl, "Take my cell phone for a little while, and you'll understand what managing the farm is all about."

Getty Acres employs eight full-time and three part-time workers, and in the summer, there's five or six others to help with the increased workload.

The three family partners all have their areas of focus on the farm, but everyone—from family members to employees—is able to do most every task that needs done. Dan runs the feed and mulch hay business, handling all of the scheduling and spraying all the crops. He also does the combining.

Ed oversees the other crops and handles the planting, manure applications, and chopping. His wife Tina keeps the books for the business and their son Carl, who previously worked as a mechanic off the farm, now works here full-time helping with crop work and overseeing the machinery repairs.

Milking is something everyone here takes a turn in. "Dad and Eric handle the milking with the help of an employee through the week, and then we all rotate through the milkings on the weekends," says Ed, whose older daughter Holly likes working with the cows.

Actually, one person can handle the third milking at night here, which happens in the 32-year-old Chore Boy rotary parlor. "It was the third one the company made," says Larry. "And it's the last one still in commission."

What makes this family farm operation work? "There's always something different to do," says Dan. "Things go pretty much non-stop around here. You get into spells where you're doing one thing for awhile, but every day is still different."

"The variety keeps things going," adds his

brother Ed. "We like being diversified without too many eggs in one basket."

Larry observes that a key to making the family business run smoothly is that, "We're not on top of each other. I'm in the barn with the cows. Ed's in the field baling. Dan's on the combine. And Carl's in the shop."

The six children between the two brothers all pitch in with tasks from feeding the young calves and the older Holstein steers at Ed's place, to moving trucks in the field so their fathers can keep moving with the machinery. When the kids milk, they do so often with their fathers, so it's a way to keep the family close.

While Ed and Dan aren't wild about the dairy part of the business, they say it is vital to their diversified farm. "The dairy is something that any of us can manage and not actually be in there physically milking the cows three times a day through the week," Ed explains.

Today, it's not like when the brothers were growing up and they'd milk in the morning, then head out to do the field work, and by the time the hay was ready, they'd have to quit and come back in to milk again.

"As long as we have a good herdsman, like Eric, to be that second level of management and take care of that while we're busy in the fields, it all works very well," Ed observes.

Since the ground they farm isn't considered to be good row crop production ground, the family sees value in putting the crops through the dairy cows and the steers.

The Wilkinsons are cultivating more than crops and cattle at Getty Acres. Family relationships, and friendships, are a big part of the farm. For example, employees eat from the freezers here, and there are half a dozen freezers stocked with well-fed Holstein steer beef.

As for family involvement, Dan says it's important to see this continue, to have the next generation take over. Ed enjoys "being able to bring my children in and work with them in the business."

For their father, Larry, there is satisfaction in having two sons take over the farming. "I've

done all that in the past—the planting and the baling—and I enjoyed it, but now the boys carry it on. I spend my time working with Eric managing the cows, or taking a load of steers to the market."

So how does this busy farm family make decisions? Larry and his sons describe the process as, "We'll have a rainy day and say let's meet for an hour, and it ends up being a couple hours. That's where we discuss big decisions. The second-level decisions are handled in passing on the fly."

That requires trust. But as the family points out, "The shares are one-third, one-third, one-third, so as long as we are all working to do the best we can, that is all you can do."

Larry recently started a profit team at the dairy to bring together the consultants who work with them. "We've had a huge improve-

ment in the herd since starting the profit team meetings," says long-time herdsman Eric Spence. "We've made changes that improved udder health and SCC dropped to 150,000."

Milking at 4:30 a.m., 2:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., cows are grouped into three groups, with the low group milked first in the morning and last in the afternoon, which keeps their 12-hour interval. The other

two (high group and two-year-olds) are milked three times.

Larry is pretty quick to pull the trigger to cull a cow if need be. "With the cost of veterinary care getting so high, we always ask ourselves: Should we doctor this cow?" he explains. "Once you add medicine, it can cut her out from being sold for beef. Often, I make the decision to get her on the truck and put a new one in her place. It seems to work out better that way because we really try to cull a cow while she is still good."

Last fall, they avoided overcrowding by building a simple bed-pack barn, which is rotated twice a day while the cows are milking.

"We had all these heifers coming fresh last fall and nowhere to put them," Larry explains. "We talked it over with our profit team and decided to build a barn."

They moved 70 cows to this dry-lot bed-pack barn on January 15. The facility has access to pasture, and shade cloth keeps it cooler in the summer heat. They've found it's a good place to put some of the older and slower cows to rejuvenate them. The simple facility was a good solution for this fall freshening herd, as there will be fewer cows here in the winter.

As for the future, Ed and Dan see environmental regulation and other challenges on the horizon, but they also see opportunities as technologies advance in alternative energy.

Talking about the current economic situation, Larry states that, "If you listen to the news, everything is down. If you pay too much attention to it, you'll get depressed. You just have to keep your head up."

"When I first came out here in 1977, I was in my 30s and full of fire. Then we had the drought of 1980 and the recession just like this in 1981-82," he recalls. "I just worked hard and kept going, and I didn't listen to the bad news. Now that this recession has come around, I look at Ed and Dan and also Eric here in the dairy, and I want to keep them motivated, so they don't get down."