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(Above) Chester Springs Creamery is a focal point at Milky Way Farm, but everything here relates back to the cows as the Matthews family continually seeks ways to connect with the growing community that completely surrounds them. Built in 2001, the creamery combines the design of a mainline Philadelphia architect with local Amish craftsmanship. The high ceilings and post-and-beam construction offer a bright open area for enjoying the ice cream inside as well as a patio with picnic tables and veranda overlooking the farm. The size of the creamery was geared to accommodate the large number of visitors during the fall 'pick your own pumpkins' season as well as school tours. All told: 5,000 children tour here each year, averaging 100 a day, and the fall pumpkin season draws 13,000 people. In addition to a century of farming in their roots, Sam and Melba Matthews and their daughters Carolyn and Jane all have teaching experience, which comes in handy when welcoming people to the farm. The farm and creamery website is www.milkywayfarm.com. (At Right) PDMP member Sam Matthews takes vanilla ice cream from the creamery to the 40 local day camp children, who have just finished their tour of the farm on this mild summer day.

Photos by Sherry Bunting



From ice cream to pumpkins, everything here relates back to the cows

 By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

CHESTER SPRINGS, Pa.—There aren't many farms left in northern Chester County anymore. In fact, these 103 acres—located 30 miles west of Philadelphia and three miles from the PA Turnpike—are home to the last remaining dairy farm in Uwchlan Township.

A blend of past and future, teaching and doing, preserving and sharing, Milky Way Farm has been in the family 100 years, and Sam and Melba Matthews have farmed here for 33 of them. Today their three children are involved in different ways:

Daughter Carolyn, a former teacher, now operates the farm's Chester Springs Creamery while her husband Lou Eaglehouse works off the farm. Daughter Jane is employed in education while her husband Tim Ferris works with various ventures on and off the farm. And son Thomas works for Lely and lives with his wife Jenna in New York, but they visit frequently and are involved in the major decisions at the farm.

The fourth and fifth generations here today continually look for ways to connect with the growing community that completely surrounds them. The farm's survival depends on it. It also depends on adopting a different mindset about progress. The farm today is diversified and includes several interdependent businesses—each one started as a way to support the cows. And in turn, it is the cows that are the draw for these other businesses. Everything here relates back to the cows.

Since July is National Ice Cream Month, a visit to Milky Way Farm this week was an ideal stop to see what these PDMP members and 2006 Dairy Industry Pacesetters are dishing up at the farm and creamery.

"The concept of 'bigger is better' is not what we're all about, and it doesn't work here," says Carolyn. The creamery, which opened in May of 2001, uses about 5% of the small herd's production, with the bulk of their milk shipped to Land O'Lakes.

The milk set aside for ice cream is sent to a small custom plant near Barto, where it is processed with cream and sugar to the Matthews' specifications, using natural stabilizers and no whey fillers. Here at the creamery, Carolyn and four of her staff fashion the ice cream mix into 35 flavors—each named after a cow that is or was part of the family's modest 35-cow milking herd made up of identified Holsteins and Jersey or Swedish-Red crosses and three purebred Brown Swiss.

Two of Chester Springs' newest flavors include Trudy's Razzamatazz Truffle—a vanilla base with raspberry swirled in and chocolate-raspberry truffle pieces—and Francine's French Pretzel Twist—a French vanilla base with chocolate covered pretzel pieces and caramel and peanut butter swirled in.

"The reality is in this dairy economy, there are more opportunities to cover costs by selling retail versus wholesale," she explains. "We're continually trying to figure out ways to live here on the income the farm can provide."



(Above) Carolyn (Matthews) Eaglehouse in the creamery with daughters Melissa, 4, and Anna, 2, enjoying their ice cream.

(At Right) Carolyn (left) and her mother Melba Matthews with Melissa and Anna and their older brother Matthew, nearly 8. He's quite proud of his Brown Swiss cow Willow and her twin heifers Walker and Windsor pastured here with the other heifers. "I like having cows that are a different kind at the farm. There are only a few, but growing," he says about the Swiss.



That's a tall order with high land values, high taxes, and no room to expand.

Family and community ties make it work. "I enjoy having the family all together working cooperatively here," says Melba. "It's nice to see the younger generation coming on and also giving the public the opportunity to come here and enjoy it. By providing a farm experience for the community, they in turn provide retail buyers to help us stay farming in this suburban area."

"People still keep coming here and liking it because we always have new stuff to see—new calves, new things. There's always something new happening on a farm," adds grandson Matthew Eaglehouse, 8, who helps with farm chores when he's not in school.

That's part of the thrill, his mother Carolyn observes. "There's a continuity of daily chores here, but constant change and variety also, and that really keeps you thinking."

In 2002, Milky Way Farm was one of the first seven dairies in the U.S. to install a Lely robotic milker, and they did so by incorporating the new technology within the existing 1819 barn. Amish craftsmen have been instrumental over the years in helping the family make renovations to the historical property. "They are experts when it comes to utilizing small spaces," Carolyn notes.

Sam is the primary farm operator here,

sharing the day-to-day cow responsibilities with Carolyn. Her brother-in-law Tim works with Sam primarily in the cropping as well as other ventures.

In addition to the dairy herd, the farm produces eggs, pork and lamb as well as some beef. The meats are processed for them at a USDA-inspected plant. They also grow some vegetables and work with other farmers to retail these products. They've even started pasteurizing about 5% of their milk to offer fluid whole and skim as well as pints of cream.

Basic business principles are important here as Carolyn manages the creamery staff of 24 part-time summer employees, most of them students. In addition to getting a good forearm workout scooping ice cream for customers, they assist in ordering ingredients and other aspects of production. "It's important for them to take ownership of what goes into a batch of ice cream," Carolyn relates.

The ice cream is sold by the ounce in cones, dishes and sundaes—parlor style. The creamery also offers quarts of some flavors, makes about 150-200 ice cream cakes a year, markets some ice cream wholesale to restaurants, and even ships ice cream to customers

through an innovative special delivery program, which is a sort of flavor-of-the-month mail order subscription that makes a nice gift. In addition to their regular creamery hours, they rent the beautiful post-and-beam facility for birthday parties and meetings.

"Ice cream is inter-generational," relates Carolyn, who took a retail class at Penn State before opening the creamery. "It's something all ages enjoy. Having the creamery at the farm helps make it a community gathering place."

Selling by the ounce instead of by the scoop, the creamery can tailor the cost to each customer's preference. 'Heavier' flavors, that are jam-packed with ingredients, can be sampled or indulged. "Some people may want just a little taste and others want three scoops piled high on a waffle cone," she explains. "The cost (per ounce) reflects what the customer is getting in terms of ingredients."

Viewed as an 'experience' or 'destination,' customers come here for the ice cream, but also to "sit and watch the world go by," says Carolyn. "Seeing the farm and the animals is the big draw. People come here to be part of what is here, and we really like sharing what we have here because it is special to us."

Interestingly, the steadily growing ice cream venture got its start from the family's highly successful pumpkin venture. The pumpkin venture got its start as a cash crop the family planted to—in effect—feed the cows.

They grow corn for silage and for heifer grain. They also grow some of their hay needs, but in 1986, they decided to grow and sell pumpkins as a cash crop and use that money to buy extra hay to feed the cows and the pelleted grain for the robotic milker. The pumpkin venture transformed to an October community event drawing 13,000 people each season to "pick your own pumpkins at Milky Way Farm."

With its unique architecture and spacious yet cozy indoor and outdoor areas for customers to enjoy their ice cream amid the sights and sounds of the farm, Carolyn is quick to point out the fall pumpkin crowds are what drove the size of the creamery building. There are no themes or special events, just simply an invitation to come enjoy the fall farm, pick pumpkins, enjoy some fall foods and of course ice cream.

With their roots in agriculture, the family is choc-full of teaching experience, which comes in handy for all of the educational opportunities Milky Way Farm provides. In addition to the retail ventures, they also host school tours throughout the spring and fall, and day care and camp groups over the summer. In a year's time as many as 5,000 children of all ages will tour the farm, averaging 100 students a day.

"We want to provide opportunities for children (and adults) to see what a farm is like and mostly to appreciate the value of farms," says Carolyn. "Everything we do here is symbiotic. As we experiment and expand areas that are growing, we try to do it in a way that is manageable."