



(Above) Dave and Janet Hileman at their home near Tyrone, Blair County, PA. Dave will be honored as 2009 Dairyman of the Year at World Dairy Expo next week. With son Ted living in Quarryville, Lancaster County, PA and daughter Lisa in North Carolina, Dave retired from dairying in April of 2008, after selling his herd, facilities and some of the farmland to Phil Kulp. (Top and Center Right) At home, from their veranda out back, Dave and Janet have a bird's eye view of their former dairy complex. Photos by Sherry Bunting



Hileman: Dairyman of Year

By SHERRY BUNTING
Special for Farmshine

TYRONE, Pa.—“He is so deserving,” is a typical reaction as people hear about Pennsylvania’s own David Hileman being recognized as 2009 Dairyman of the Year at World Dairy Expo next week. A humble Hileman will tell you this is something he never dreamed of.

“When they called, I was very much surprised. There are so many others worthy of this award, that it humbles me to realize someone would even think of me for this,” he said during an interview at his home in the Sinking Valley of Blair County one week before the Expo’s ‘Dinner with the Stars’ honors Hileman and three other industry legends Sept. 30 in Madison, Wisc.

In addition to serving as past president of the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP), Hileman is a former Master Farmer and past president of the Master Farmer Association. He has provided 20 years of leadership to the boards of Atlantic Breeders, Federated, Genex, and Cooperative Resources International (CRI), and he has served as a member of the PA Dairy Task Force. Hileman was also recognized in 2006 with the Keystone Farmer of the Year Award.

Dave Hileman is known for his calm leadership, innovation, and forward-thinking attitude at home and abroad. He has led discussions with Dutch cooperatives, helped launch joint ventures in India, and he has been a dairy presenter in the Netherlands, Latvia, Poland, France and Hungary.

Legendary baseball analogies in the World Dairy Expo press releases were a fitting tribute to Hileman, who has pursued his “field of dreams,” leading the dairy industry from the barn and the boardroom. Not to mention the fact that Dave and his wife Janet love baseball. They follow their local double-A team—the Altoona Curve—rarely missing a game.

Of course, there’s a little more time for that now. Hileman sold his dairy herd, milking complex and nearly half his acreage in Sinking Valley to Phil Kulp of Morrisons Cove on April 1, 2008. Exactly one year after selling the dairy herd, Dave brought home seven registered Angus cows that are now in the process of fall calving. He anticipates having a small beef cow herd of 15 to 20 cows.

“He missed the animals,” says Janet.

He also misses the people in this industry. Ask Hileman what has been the most rewarding and enjoyable part of dairying over the past three to four decades, and he doesn’t hesitate with his answer: “The wonderful people I’ve met and the friendships I’ve made. There are wonderful folks in this industry.”

Hileman admits he was always “happiest when things were the most hectic, always juggling 10 things and keeping it organized,” he relates. “I do miss the intensity of that.”

But even though he has retired from the dairy business, Hileman is busy as ever these days leading Dairy Discussion Groups through Penn State Dairy Alliance. He also consults on a biweekly basis with Phil Kulp—the new owner of Hilecrest Farms, LLC—and he facilitates the biweekly management team meetings including Hileman’s former employees who now run the satellite dairy for Kulp. Hileman also facilitates management team meetings for another dairyman on a monthly basis.

His involvement as a facilitator for the Dairy Discussion Groups with Penn State Dairy Alliance came about on a smaller scale 10 years ago when Hileman had hip surgery. “I thought, then, it would be nice to do something like this, and I had a period of time when I had to be careful about my activities,” he recalls. “I did a couple local discussion groups, calling together dairymen with similar interests.”

By the time Hileman healed from his surgery, he was back full-throttle at the farm, and there was no time to devote to facilitating discussion groups.

Later, while traveling in the Netherlands, he saw how well the concept of discussion groups was working there. “Lisa Holden (with the Penn State Dairy Alliance) happened to be traveling in the Netherlands at the same time, so we spent a day with discussion groups there, and that formed the foundation for the groups I’m working with here today.”

Since February, Hileman has organized and facilitated seven Dairy Discussion Groups throughout south central and western Pennsylvania, and he foresees growing the number of groups to 10 or 12. Current participants represent farm sizes ranging from 35 cows to 2600.

The groups meet monthly for two to four hours over lunch and “just talk about the things that are going on at their farms,” Hileman explains, adding that he rarely needs to use his default agenda because the participants become comfortable sharing since the groups are small with only five to 10 people.

Each group had a summer picnic at a member farm, and Hileman has spent the summer planning topics for their monthly meetings to resume through the end of the year.

“Even if we bring in an expert, we limit them to one hour because we don’t want to lose that interaction the dairymen have with each other,” Hileman explains. “The social aspect of the discussion group is a very big part of it. I feel we can’t be so involved in the teaching and presenting that we overlook this important social time. It’s a chance for dairymen to get away in the middle of the day and get together with other people and learn what’s going on in their lives. Unless things like this are organized by someone else, farmers just would not sit down and get together.”

Hileman has plenty of wisdom and experience to share, and he thoroughly enjoys what he is doing now that he is not milking cows.

“I’m learning a lot from Dave,” says Phil Kulp about Hileman. “We share a common vision and the goal to continue the dairy industry in this area. This farm and the production have done well for us, and I consider Dave to be an advisor, a mentor and a friend.”

Hileman admits the transition, after selling his dairy to Kulp, was a big adjustment. “I thoroughly enjoyed what I did,” he says about dairy farming. “Not being part of that intensity of the business every day is a big adjustment that you have to get yourself mentally prepared for. The Dairy Discussion Groups help keep me in touch with the dairy business.”

Hileman is quite happy with the “fit” his dairy provided for Kulp as well as the fact that his nine longtime and loyal employees were hired by Kulp to continue running the dairy.

Kulp had previously purchased the Long heifer facility

across the road from the Hileman farm. Located about 35 miles from Kulp Family Dairy LLC, Hileman’s former dairy facility is now home to Kulp’s springing and milking two-year-olds. They need only move the heifers across the road from the heifer farm to the Hilecrest Farm, and the smaller freestalls there are ideal for the first calvers.

Hileman has a great view of the dairy complex from his back door veranda, across the fields of alfalfa and corn surrounding the home he and Janet built in 1996. They kept 400 of their previous 700 acres, and today, Hileman rents some of those acres to Kulp. On the ground at the home farm where he and Janet live, Hileman grows corn, wheat, soybeans, and alfalfa, which he sells to Kulp. The fields surrounding his home are a wildlife paradise bordered by the mountains and 1000 acres of undisturbed woodland.

It’s an understatement to say Dave Hileman loves the Sinking Valley. His grandfather moved to this valley in 1922. Then in 1959, he and his parents and three sisters drove their 35 cows on-foot up the road to the farm where Dave and Janet live today. On those original 162 acres, Dave’s father built a 60-cow freestall barn and parlor set up in 1959.

“Back then, 60 cows was the definition of ‘big,’ in this valley,” Hileman recalls.

By 1974, Hileman had taken over and purchased the home farm from his parents. Over the years, he added farms and acreage—growing the business from 162 acres to 700 and from 60 cows to 450. His herd of registered Holsteins and a few Brown Swiss were known for high production with a rolling herd average of 26,500 pounds.

Hileman has always pursued efficient and profitable practices, and he has always loved the genetics, where he focused on breeding for longevity and lifetime production before it was popular. His three main criteria in sire selection were: productive life, pregnancy rate and lifetime net merit.

Through his years of dairy farming, Hileman did not raise his own heifers, and when he retired from dairying, he never considered heifer raising as a downsizing step before retirement. “I knew that wasn’t for me with my facilities,” he says. “The facilities are very functional and valuable for milking. I also wanted to bypass the ‘downsizing’ mode and transition right out of the dairy business—cold turkey.”

Hilecrest has long been a Dairy of Distinction, and the Hilemans have served for 18 years as chairman and secretary-treasurer for District 14, which includes Huntingdon, Fulton, Blair, Somerset, Cambria, and Bedford counties.

“In the 15th year, we thought of recognizing those dairies with 15 years of consecutive awards,” says Janet. “Each year, it’s amazing to see how few are left,” Dave adds.

Janet reports no applications were received in District 14 for 2009. “This is the first time that has ever happened,” she notes.

Dave and Janet are also involved in the development of future dairy leaders, having created a foundation to award scholarships to outstanding local youth.

For more of Dave Hileman’s insights about the process of farm transitions, the dairy industry’s younger generation, the value of Dairy Discussion Groups and organizations like PDMP, as well as his thoughts on the dairy business in general, look for a follow-up story in next week’s Farmshine.