

Member profiles

Risser's Meadow Vista chosen for World Expo 'tours'

By **SHERRY BUNTING**
 Special for Farmshine

BAINBRIDGE, Pa.—The Risser family has been farming near Bainbridge, Lancaster County for four generations. Brothers Don and Gerald Risser started the first transition 38 years ago — from a diversified farm to a dairy. Their passion for milking, feeding, and managing dairy cows has been passed on to their children as today they have sons in the Meadow Vista Dairy, LLC partnership and also working full-time at the farm.

Mutual respect for and confidence in each other and in their profit team, as well as a knack for challenging and expecting the best from each other, have helped this dairy transition.

"It starts with us," Don remarked during an interview back in 2007. "We have to have a positive outlook and provide the opportunities. If it were different, the guys wouldn't want to come back."

A positive outlook and tone of accountability are seeds planted among members of this growing family, who participate in the daily operation of the dairy, where 648 cows currently produce a rolling herd average of 29,357 pounds of milk.

Meadow Vista Dairy, LLC, will be one of eight "virtual dairy tours" chosen for the 2011 World Dairy Expo, where attendees can visit dairies from around the U.S. without leaving the Expo grounds in Madison, Wisconsin.

Meadow Vista's "virtual tour" is slated for Thursday, October 6 at 2:00 p.m. in Mendota 1 at the World Dairy Expo, which runs Oct. 4-8 with a 2011 theme: "Around the world of dairy in five days."

The eight "virtual tours" will focus on a variety of management topics, including: land conservation and forages, technology and innovation, unique marketing, robotic milkers, family transition, milk quality, reproductive success and transition cow management.

"When we found out we were selected, we were surprised," said a humble Don Risser in a phone interview recently. One aspect they will talk about



(Above) Three generations of the growing Risser family. Brothers Gerald (with Joyce, center left) and Don (with Mim, center right) are flanked by their sons and families: Jason (with Jessica) and Jordan (with Laura) on the left and Eric (with Heidi, Austin and Luke) and Justin (with Melissa and holding Gideon) on the right, as well as longtime herd manager Tanya Baldwin (far right). Photo provided by World Dairy Expo.

(Below) The facilities and sand separation lane at the 750-cow Meadow Vista Dairy, LLC, owned and operated by the Risser family, members of PDMP and recipients of the 2010 Pennsylvania Dairy Industry Pacesetter Award. Photo by Sherry Bunting



is "how we bring several generations into the business and transitioning the dairy farm."

The farm's forage production and land conservation practices are also key highlights for this "virtual tour."

Meadow Vista Dairy, LLC gained a new member this year as Gerald's son Justin, who manages the dairy herd, bought into the partnership Jan. 1st. Don's son Eric was already a member for quite a few years, and he manages the cropping and forage production.

Gerald's sons Jason and Jordan are also involved with their responsibilities in the day-to-day operations at Meadow Vista, and Jared, a student at Penn State University, will work at the farm again this summer after returning from studying abroad in Christchurch, New Zealand.

Meadow Vista's "virtual tour" is sponsored by Quality Liquid Feed (QLF) and will address land conservation and forage practices along with the transition of the dairy.

Located in the Chesapeake Bay watershed, producing quality forages, while implementing best management practices for crop production, is always top-of-mind for the Risser family. They farm 740 acres on which corn, alfalfa, grass hay and small grain crops are grown. In 2008, the farm achieved 100% no-till cropping. The use of rye as a cover crop (double cropped with corn) also helps limit phosphorus and nitrogen runoff as well as soil erosion.

Planning and precision are hallmarks of this multi-generational dairy. With detailed feed and animal records, the family is able to know the exact cost per ton of each crop.

They like to key in on dry matter intake and track the pounds of milk per pound of dry matter to see the trends and variations throughout the year. In turn, the use of the detailed records help to reduce wasted feed, maintain consistent feed throughout the year, and to allocate which crops are grown, how much fuel is used to plant and harvest crops, and how much fertilizer to apply.

Bower's Pleasant View recognized for quality assurance

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"We, the producers, are the last vestige that built America. We are in the food-producing business, but it is easy to become indentured with today's tasks and let someone else with other interests determine our future. In the high-speed information world we live in today, our consumers are constantly surrounded and easily influenced by misinformation... As producers, we must not only be at the table where crucial decisions are made, we must stand up and lead the discussion."

These words were written by Logan Bower, past president of the Professional Dairy Managers of Pennsylvania (PDMP).

During the recent Pennsylvania Cattlemen's Association annual meeting, Bower was presented with the Pennsylvania Beef Council's 2011 Dairy Beef Quality Assurance Award.

The award recognized Bower for his quality-conscious animal care practices at his 550-cow Pleasant View Farms near Blain, Perry County, and for his leadership through PDMP in bringing dairy stakeholders together to transform the former Dairy Beef Quality Assurance (DBQA) program into the Dairy Animal Care and Quality Assurance (DACQA) program, which in 2008 combined the tenets of national beef safety and quality assurance with nationally recognized guidelines for dairy animal well-being.

As the third generation owning and operating Pleasant View Farms, Bower is in the trenches operating his dairy with the help of 12 employees and his mother, Donna, who feeds the calves. With a heart for the producer, Bower's leadership brought PDMP together with the PA Beef Council, Center for Dairy Excellence (CDE), Penn State and other stakeholders to produce the DACQA program and manual.

"I've had an opportunity to be at the right places at the right time," he noted when the

DACQA program launched its first producer meeting at his farm in October 2008. "Our industry is changing so fast. Milking cows is not the same as it was 20, even five years ago. Today, it is more important than ever for producers to be up-to-date and dealing with today's issues to work toward solving them."

In 2008, Pennsylvania's DACQA program became the first producer-led program developed specifically with the guidelines of the National Dairy Animal Well-being Initiative (NDAWI) in mind.

Bower was instrumental in moving this producer-led effort forward as he served on the NDAWI coalition, based in Wisconsin, as PDMP president, and on the PA Beef Council board of directors. His service on these boards put him in a unique position to bring groups together around shared concerns and ideals because he saw these organizations working on issues with similar goals. "It was a no-brainer to see what could happen, and it all fell together," he reflects.

At his farm, Bower's attention to cow comfort and handling were highlighted in the June Dairy Month edition of the PA Beef Council's "Quality Care Matters" newsletter. According to the newsletter, Bower enhanced cow comfort



(Above) Logan Bower (right) is pictured with Paul Slayton during the first DACQA program meeting in October 2008 at Bower's Pleasant View Farms (below). Photos by Sherry Bunting



during two expansion projects after buying the farm from his parents in 1997. He replaced older, smaller freestalls with larger, better-designed freestalls with soft resting surfaces and the ability to group animals by their needs and stage of lactation. He also built a new transition barn in 2000 to improve the calving and transition environment for dry and closeup cows. Sprinklers and fans also help cool cows in summer.

Bower also recognizes that dairy cows are themselves food animals at the end of their productive lives. "We are consciously concerned about where we give injections," he said in the Quality Matters' interview. "I've visited Cargill Wyalusing and witnessed what improper injections

can do to the meat."

In addition to being more discriminate about where to give shots, Bower also believes dairy stockmanship is important and is more than just "getting the cows."

"It's positioning yourself to help the cows get where they need to go; there's a low stress way to help cows handle everyday routines," he explained, adding he learned many of his cattle handling techniques from Bud Williams, "an amazing Texas cowboy who can really work and handle cows."

Bower observes that as dairymen, "we can become so focused on ventilation, flooring, bedding, feed rations... that we can forget about the cow, herself, and how we handle her."

As for the DACQA program, Bower notes that, "In the dairy industry, we are usually skeptical when we... ask farmers to change practices," he said. "I think the animal welfare issue is flying under the radar, 'sub-clinical,' but at any moment, it can become 'clinical.' When it does, we have to be prepared with programs such as DACQA."

Reflecting on Bower's role in the quality assurance collaboration between the beef and dairy industries, PA Beef Council executive director Paul Slayton referred to Bower as "a great industry leader... blessed with the vision to see where the industry needed to go — ahead of time."

"(Bower) knew DACQA was necessary, that dairy was in the cross-hairs of animal activists long before producers realized it," said Slayton in Quality Matters. "A best management practice quality assurance program was of paramount importance to educate and equip every producer with the tools to enhance the value of the market dairy cow prior to slaughter. He was the right leader, at the right time."

"If you are going to promote a program, you better start with yourself," a humble Bower related. "Set an example, and others will follow."