

# First Person

Milking a dream for all it's worth

## 'I know all my cows by name; they know me and my boys'

When George Fruin bought his farm near Huntley in 1964, every house on the country road where he lives had a dairy barn. Today the houses are still occupied, but Fruin has one of only two working dairy farms on the road. "Ro-Da-Syl" is a 100-acre farm with a 100-head herd of registered Holsteins [black-and-white purebred cattle]. Fruin rents an additional 250 acres to raise corn, hay, oats and soybeans to feed his herd. He sells his milk to Oberweis Dairy in Aurora.

Fruin grew up on a dairy farm near Marshfield, Wis., and moved to McHenry County when he was 17 to work as a hired hand. He and Marion, his wife of 35 years, bought their first farm near Hampshire in 1962. They have four children and 10 grandchildren. "My girls, Sylvia and Becky, always said they'd never marry farmers, but they both did," Fruin says. His sons, Dan and Ross, are farmers; Dan farms with his father.

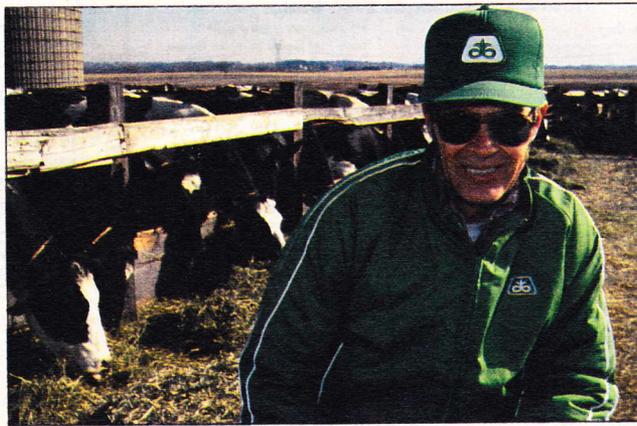
The 57-year-old Fruin has seen many changes in dairy farming over the years, but some things, he told writer *Marya Smith*, never change. "Cows still milk twice a day," he says.

**Y**ou don't learn farming out of a book. People don't last long when they come out from town. They think farming is all sitting on a tractor. They don't know all the work that's involved.

You have to be raised with it. Experience is the best teacher in farming.

Farming is still a whole-family deal. You've got to work together. My boys and girls worked from the time they were young, just as I did. My wife grew up on a farm, too. She can help milk, drive the tractor, bale hay if we need her. She also helps me manage. I'd say the key to farming successfully is good management. You can still make a good living at farming if you're a good manager. We learned the hard way, from our own mistakes. Some farmers overbuy on equipment, for instance. Money management is 99 percent of it.

My wife helps me with the paperwork, too. We have registered Holsteins—40 milking cows and 60 young stock, mainly heifers [females]. We register every calf's name and marks with the Holstein-Friesian Association in Brattleboro, Vt. You have to take two pictures of each calf within three months after it's born. There are never two cows alike. That registration number stays with that cow all her life. I only have seven "grade" cows, or nonpurebred cows, out of my whole herd. A dairy farmer can make a living whether he's milking grade or regis-



Dairy farmer George Fruin on his Ro-Da-Syl spread near Huntley.

tered. We get paid by the butterfat content, and the dairy doesn't care if it's coming from a \$300 cow or a \$10,000 cow. The advantage to registered cows is in the resale value of the cow and her offspring.

I know all my cows by name, and the names of most of their sires, too. They know me and my boys. If a stranger were to walk into the barn, they would know it immediately, have their ears back, be looking, moving around.

Cows keep you on schedule. It's important to milk them on a set pattern, 11 to 12 hours apart, and not vary that by more than half an hour. You can't milk them today at 6 a.m. and 5 p.m. and then decide to milk them tomorrow at 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. just because it suits you. I'm lucky my son can take over when I need a day to go somewhere, or my wife and I take a vacation.

I learned to milk by hand, but we don't even carry the milk in pails anymore. We use automatic pipeline milking; it's faster and more sanitary. The state dairy inspector comes around three times a year and checks the barn, the milk house, all the utensils. The county Dairy Herd Improvement Association tests each cow's milk once a month. They take a milk sample and send it to a lab in Iowa, where they test it for butterfat and protein content.

After the morning milking, you spend the next three hours every day doing chores, and then you go out in the fields until it's time for the 4 o'clock milking. That's from mid-April to Nov. 1. Winter is slower because the field work ends, but the chores always have to be done. You're never doing any one thing for very long, so it's never boring. You have to feed the cows twice a day. Feeding is also automated. I feed my cows the same winter or summer—hay, silage and grain—to keep milk production constant. The heifers I pasture, but I supplement their diet, too. Also, every day you have to clean the barn to keep it sanitary. I use an auto-

matic barn cleaner and manure spreader. I also have to be there to turn the milk cows in and out of the barnyard at regular times, depending on the weather. Dairy farming is a lot of work, but I'm my own boss. I wouldn't want to punch a clock.

I don't ever plan to stop farming unless I'm crippled. I haven't had many accidents. I got my ribs busted once when I slipped off a wagon while unloading silage, but I just taped them up and went back to work. And one time a cow stepped on my foot and fractured my ankle. They'll kick you once in a while. Still, I like barn chores. I also like being outdoors. I can't stand having a cab on the tractor. I feel cooped up, like a jail. I like the fresh air.

I grow enough crops to fill my own silos, to feed my own herd. I only have to buy salt and mineral and protein from the feed store. My sons sell their crops, and I help them with their planting and harvesting, and they help me with mine. I suppose the biggest worry for a dairy farmer is making hay. With other crops, you can wait out a rainy spell, and it won't affect the quality. But hay has to be made when it's at its prime, or you lose the nutritive value. A hot, sunny, dry week is ideal, but you don't always get it. During harvest it's not unusual to keep going in the fields until 11 or 12 o'clock at night. Especially with hay, you have to get it when it's ready, and you're often trying to beat out a rain forecast. Harvest is the only time I hire any extra help.

Weather is the biggest trouble with farming, but you can't fix that. If you could control it, you'd have it made. It's frustrating to get rain when you don't need it, say at harvest-time. I remember one year I couldn't fill my silos for a month because of the rain. The fields got so wet we couldn't get in them. The poorest year I ever had was when it was so dry I lost my whole corn crop. What makes a good year? When the prices of grain and dairy cattle are good. Lately everything has dropped. But you take the

bad with the good.

It costs a lot more to start farming today than it did when we started. Heck, then a good tractor was \$2,000. Now \$10,000 just buys you a garden tractor. A working tractor is \$30,000 to \$50,000. I don't buy equipment at farm sales or auctions. I go through a dealer every three or four years and get the trade-in on what I own for brand-new equipment. Otherwise you have a lot of junk sitting around.

Aside from being a good manager, another key to successful farming is being able to take care of things yourself. We do our own cement work, construction and fixing. It helps to be mechanically minded, especially these days with all the machinery we use. We're more automated than 50 years ago, but we work harder. In those days you put a harness on the horses, and nothing broke down. Now a good part of your time is spent repairing machinery. Just this morning the motor on my feeder broke, and I had to replace the belt. You'd go broke if you had to take it into town every time. And anyway, I needed it fixed today, not next week, so I could feed my cows. But there's always something that needs fixing.

**I**t's the same with the animals. We have a vet, but you can't call the vet in for every little thing. I do my own calving. You can tell within a day or two when the cow is going to calf. I've had three calf in one day, and three in a week isn't unusual. Some cows need more help than others. I'd say I lose two or three calves a year. And sometimes after calving the cow will get milk fever from the changes in her system, become paralyzed and die. Sure, it's hard to lose an animal, but you get used to it.

My only dream was to own my own dairy farm. I started with 20 milking cows and built up to 40. My herd, 100 head, is just right for me. I raise the heifers and sell most of the bull calves. When the heifers are bred I sell the extras to buyers from Taiwan and Mexico. I want to keep my milking cows to 40. That's mainly because the barn holds 50. I don't believe in overcrowding the barn. After a cow's had a calf, I'll milk her three months—that's her peak—and then, ideally, breed her again. A good producing cow has a calf every year. Not too many farmers use standing bulls any more. We buy semen and keep it frozen in our own tank in the barn. We keep a chart on each cow and do the breeding ourselves. Semen costs from \$5 to \$300 a shot, depending on the bull. One bull's is selling for \$10,000. You can't know for years what it's worth, until the bull's proven himself with his offspring.

You don't know how good a cow you've got, either, for several years. The greatest satisfaction is raising a good heifer and having her turn out to be a crackerjack cow. I've got one 2-year-old cow now that's the pick of the bunch. I think she's going to be one heck of a cow. It's a great feeling to raise a cow like that. It really makes you feel that you did something right. ■