

Diversifying for the Future

Ninety-nine percent of the nearly 70,000 dairy farms across the country are family owned according to the United States Department of Agriculture. The fact is often lost on consumers, who are three or four generations removed from farming and led by popular press to believe that factory farms are putting the family farm out of business. Sure, the face of farming is changing, but a constant is the importance of family in operation of the business.

In this month's *Jersey Journal*, we visited four families that milk Registered Jerseys for a living to see how family impacts their businesses. The farms are located across the country and represent a variety of operations, from a small farm with 30 cows to a large farm milking more than 3,000 cows. Most have passed the farm through multiple generations and all have a desire to ensure that their Registered Jersey businesses continue through future generations.

Though they are diverse, they have one thing in common—love of family and love of the Jersey cow.

Jim and Carol Ahlem, Hilmar, Calif., measure their success by more than just milk production and components, but by the happiness of their three children. While some kids grow up on dairy farms and then move down a different career path, the Ahlems have stayed the course and continue to work together in the agriculture industry. Grant, 30, and Vance, 29, both manage the family dairies while daughter Erin Mendes, 25, works for Fresno Medera Farm Credit Association.

“We have a very good operation,” said Jim on the choice for his family to continue operating the dairy. “It was natural, they’ve been raised with it and enjoy it.”

The Ahlems currently operate two dairies in California; the original family farm in Hilmar, Jim Ahlem Dairy, an additional farm 18 miles away in Denair, Ahlem Foothill Farms, and Jade Jerseys, a 500 head operation a mile from the home farm. On the original farm, handed down to Jim from his father in 1978, the family currently milks 2,100 Registered Jersey cows. The second operation, a partnership between Jim, Carol, Grant and Vance, milks an additional 1,900 registered Jersey cows. Jim is also a founder and owner of the Hilmar Cheese Company, the largest single-site cheesemaking operation in the world. The Ahlems also have Dalhart Heifer Ranch, in which they share ownership with five other partners.

“You have to branch out,” said Jim of the family’s many ventures. “They’ve taught me many new things, the younger

generation looks at more of the business end than we did.”

Taking the Reigns

Grant and Vance both attended college at Cal Poly, where they were exposed to a variety of different dairy operations and techniques. As a student, Grant interned with the Milk Advisory Board where he was able to travel around and learn about



The Ahlems outside the family dairy in Hilmar, Calif. James (Jim) and Carol are joined by their children Vance, Erin and Grant.

different dairy products, giving him a unique perspective to apply at their home dairy, which he manages. After graduation Vance participated in the Dairy Executive program, a post graduate feature at Cornell University that provides a forum and network to help producers succeed in the dairy industry. The different outlooks held by Grant and Vance recognize the volatility and strengths of the markets and also make significant impacts on the cheese company.

“My boys look at things differently, they look at the marketplace and know what’s going on there, giving them a broader perspective for the future,” said Jim. “I want them to be involved in more than just the dairy, to broaden their horizons and be

more industry involved.”

After learning the basics and technologies at Cal Poly, both Grant and Vance came back to work at the dairy, but not for their father, for the herdsman Joe Monteiro. As they worked their way up the ranks, they helped implement new practices.

The Ahlem family custom grows their calves; leaving the farm at birth and going to a local farm 40 miles from Hilmar, then returning at four months of age. Their heifers are now raised at Dalhart Heifer Ranch and return to Hilmar at 215 days pregnant. The Ahlems were also one of the first farms in the area to operate a rotary platform that floats on water, a concept implemented from New Zealand more than 15 years ago.

The Ahlem children have brought more to the family business than a new outlook and forward thinking; their involvement has allowed Jim to branch out among more industry organizations. He is a member of the California Milk Advisory Board, the National Dairy Board and has been active with National All-Jersey Inc., (NAJ) over the years serving as a board member and most recently as president. Jim finds the opportunity to serve such organizations as a true benefit, being able to see all the positive movements in the dairy industry.

Providing for the Future

Before taking a step back, Jim had the opportunity to expand his operation to include the new farm, Ahlem Foothill Farms, which Vance manages. Although happy with the production and state of his original farm, Jim saw the chance to provide future opportunities for his family with the purchase of the second farm. Had the children not been so involved in the dairy, he would have probably not taken this step.

“The reason I do what I do is for my kids,” said Jim. “I wouldn’t have expanded if I didn’t have anyone to pass the business on to.”

Before the addition, Jim planned on any expansions to their farm taking place in Texas, where they own land and operate

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Ahlem Farms

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their heifer ranch with extended family. Due to land availability and a tighter regulatory system in Calif., the Ahlems did not plan on ever expanding in their home state, but when the right situation presented itself it was too good to pass up.

“We have an option in Texas, but that’s for my boys to decide later on. It’s not for me,” said Jim of future development opportunities.

With the Ahlem Foothill Farms purchased, the younger generation questioned the importance of registering the newly acquired herd, debating the worth of additional expenses. They quickly saw the benefit as they became more involved in the management practices and are now fully invested in the Registered Jersey business at the farm.

“It has a lot to do with loyalty,” said Jim of the decision regarding the new unregistered herd. “You may not see the direct results, they’re more intangible.” Adding the importance of being involved in a group that thinks alike and has the same values, Jim says it was just the “right thing to do.”

When the dairy was purchased, none of the cows were registered, so the entire herd was brought up through the Genetic Recovery program. The Ahlems are very active in NAJ and AJCA, and programs such as REAP, Jersey Mate, Equity, and all the tracking programs like Jersey Tags and Heifer Management Reports, offered by the association. All have helped with the profitability of the farm and the efficiency of management.

Recognizing the Queen of Quality

While the Ahlems have been very successful with their use of the association management programs, it all comes back to the breed and cow.

“We’re thankful the Jersey cow steered us in this direction and provided many opportunities,” said Jim of his choice to raise Jerseys and later open the cheese operation. “We couldn’t get the local boards to recognize the value of Jersey products, so we built our own business.”

By identifying a need for a special market, the Ahlems and 11 other Jersey owners, have impacted many Jersey breeders. The Hilmar Cheese Company pays producers for what their milk is worth based on how much product can be produced, adapting to the different needs and wants of not only the cheese business, but the Jersey farmer.

“The Jersey breed gives us more opportunities, higher value milk and more

opportunities to be successful,” said Jim. “She’s a different cow, you have to treat her and her product different.”

Jim also credits his success to the family like atmosphere of the California Jersey community. Not only are his children involved in the dairy industry, his brothers, a sister and their children also raise Jersey cattle. A group area Jersey breeders meet regularly to share ideas and learn from each other as they navigate the ever-changing dairy industry.

“Jersey people have a different management practice, they seem to think alike,” said Jim of the importance of their close-knit family and community.

The different generations of Ahlems may not always think alike, but the end goal is the same for each; happiness, something regularly obtained by their lengthy history as dairy farmers.