YOUNG FARMER AND HOMEMAKER SERIES

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Starting in Dairy Farming

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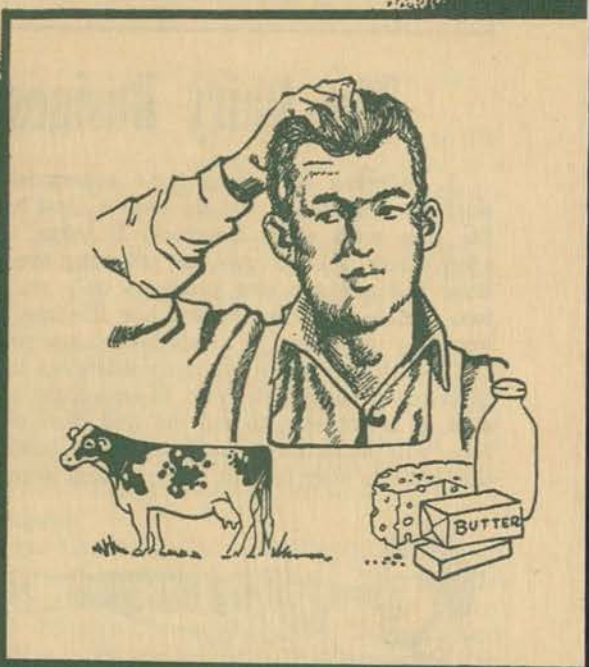


UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
Agricultural Extension Service
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

What About Dairy Farming?

A young farmer and his wife must make many decisions when starting farming. One of these is a choice of livestock enterprises. Dairying is one of the main farm enterprises in Minnesota. You may be asking, "Should we go into the dairy business?" This folder is written to help you answer this question.

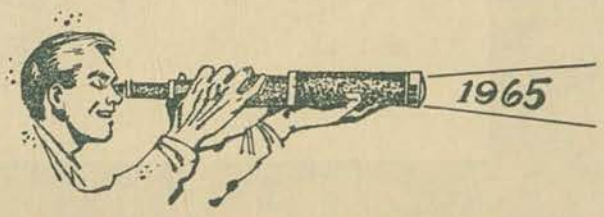
In coming to a conclusion as to whether you should start a dairy herd four main points must be considered:

1. **What are the advantages and disadvantages of dairying as compared to other livestock enterprises in general and as related to this farm?**
2. **Is dairying for me?**
3. **How can I best get started with a dairy herd?**
4. **What must I do to be a successful dairyman?**

The Dairy Business

1. **Dairying is a long time enterprise.** It takes longer to get into it and develop a good herd than is the case with other livestock. It takes three years after a cow is bred until her offspring are in production. The average cow produces only an average of two female offspring during her lifetime. Therefore, breeding up a herd is a relatively slow process.

You cannot make as many mistakes in the dairy business. It may take years to overcome a poor decision. It is not easy to sell out and start over. Therefore, you shouldn't go into the dairy business unless you plan to stay with it more or less permanently.



2. **Dairying requires more labor in proportion to income** than most other farm enterprises. The return per hour of actual work is usually lower than for most crops, poultry, swine, and beef cattle.

3. **Labor, however, is utilized better throughout the year.** The heaviest labor load for dairying is during the winter months when other work is at a low

point on most farms. This fact makes the annual labor income compare favorably with that of other farm enterprises that are more seasonal.

4. **Dairying requires a relatively high capital investment** in buildings, in equipment, and in the dairy herd in proportion to gross income. However, dairy farmers, because of steady income, are usually considered good risks by lending agencies.

5. **Dairying is a more stable enterprise.** The prices of both dairy cows and milk and butterfat fluctuate less than those of most other farm enterprises. The dairyman is usually more certain of the future.

6. **Dairying provides a year round income.** There is income every month of the year to meet current expenses.

7. **Dairying is a good supporter of soil conservation** since large quantities of soil building and conserving crops can be efficiently utilized in a dairy program.

Should You Go Into Dairying?

These are the factors that may help you decide.

★ **Your personal interest**

No one can be successful unless he has an enthusiastic interest in his work. To be successful as a dairyman you must like cows and enjoy working with them. It must be a hobby as well as a means of livelihood. Unless a farmer is definitely interested in developing an efficient herd, he had better do something else he likes better than milking cows.

★ **Experience**

Have you worked with a good herd of cows so you know you would be successful as a dairyman? While some inexperienced men have gone into the dairy business and been successful, there is nothing that takes the place of the experience gained from working closely with someone else's good herd.

★ **Labor supply**

Since dairying requires considerable labor, you should have sufficient labor available. This must be qualified labor. The wrong kind of labor can ruin a good herd through careless milking, feeding, and handling. The labor supply must be dependable. Can your labor be used to better advantage doing something else? On large farms maybe the labor will return more on a more extensive type of operation. Family labor can be utilized to better advantage in the dairy business than in many other farm enterprises.

★ **Is your farm adapted for dairying?**

Do you have buildings suitable for housing dairy cows? Is it arranged to save on labor? Is there ade-

quate storage space for hay and silage? Do you have a milk house and water supply that will meet requirements for producing top quality milk? Do legumes grow well on your farm? Are farm and buildings of sufficient size to support an economically sized herd?

★ **Financing**

Do you have sufficient funds or credit to start with a unit large enough to be feasible? If your capital is definitely limited, it may pay better to invest these funds in some other enterprise until you have acquired sufficient capital to invest in a dairy unit of economic size.

★ **Market**

A good market for your milk is very important. Available markets vary a great deal from area to area and between communities. The future in the dairy business lies in the marketing of high quality whole milk products. Is there such a market in your community and will they pay a premium for doing a good job?

★ **Can you do a good job?**

Are you a good enough feeder and manager to average 10,000 pounds or more of milk per cow for lower testing breeds or its equivalent for high test breeds after you have gotten well started—say in five years? If not, maybe you had better do something else since it is very doubtful if herds producing less than this in the future will really make any money for their owners. To do a good job as a dairyman requires closer supervision than is needed for other classes of livestock.

★ **Do you understand the changes taking place in the dairy business?**

The dairy industry has undergone considerable change in recent years. Every dairy farmer should be aware of these changes. Dairy farming is rapidly becoming a specialized business. The better herds have increased considerably in size. There are many herds of 40 or 50 cows or more. Herds producing an average of 400 pounds of butterfat per cow are as common today as 300 pound herds were 25 years ago. These trends will continue.

Mechanization and labor saving with these larger units means lower production costs. This means more competition for the smaller herd unless it produces at an efficient level. The size of the herd is no longer limited by the number of people in the family to do the hand milking. Dairying is becoming a streamlined business on many Minnesota farms. Herds of less than 20 cows will be considered small in the future. Are your facilities sufficient to have an economically favored unit of such size.

Dairying is for you if you like it, know from experience or feel you can be successful in it, have sufficient finances to get started, have a farm, equipment, and labor for it, and have a good market for what you produce.

Getting Started in

How best to start a dairy herd will depend largely on your financial position and the ownership or rental arrangement on the farm you operate. Here are some of the possible suggestions.

Partnership with Parent

Many couples have an opportunity to take over the operation of a farm in partnership with one of the couple's parents. In many cases this works out to the mutual advantage of both parties. The young couple usually furnishes the labor, usually only a small part of the capital to start with, while the parent furnishes the farm and most of the personal property.

A great many different arrangements exist as to division of income and expenses. Usually the operator gets a share interest in the increase in the dairy herd, thus enabling him to get started towards a herd of his own. Whatever the arrangements they should always be in writing and handled in a businesslike manner to avoid controversies later on.

Renting on a Livestock Share Basis

Occasionally a young couple can get started farming with a dairy herd with limited capital invested by renting a farm on a share basis where there is a good dairy herd. In many cases the landlord furnishes all of the cows to start with. The tenant usually shares in the increase in the herd. As cows are sold

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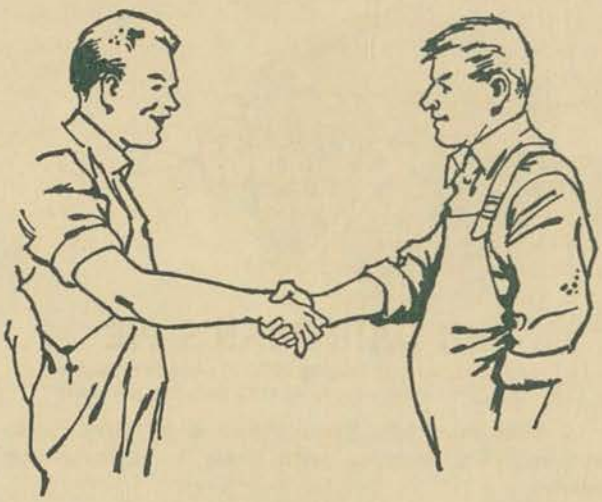

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off they are replaced by heifers in which the tenant has an interest.

Through this system the tenant makes no initial investment in the herd but gradually acquires a share interest in the younger animals coming into the herd. When the time comes to go on a farm of his own he will have several dairy cows and heifers of his own.

Owning or Cash Renting

Where you own or cash rent a farm you must provide your own livestock—so going into the dairy business means buying dairy cattle. This might be cows, heifers, or calves. In all cases you should buy cattle of good breeding. Even though she costs more, the cow with ability to produce well is the best investment.

Buying Cows

Buying cows has the advantage of having monthly income from the start. However, it requires more money per head. Unless you start out with at least ten cows, it may be better for you to pass up cows and buy heifers or calves and wait for income. Buying cows also presents some problems to the buyer.

1. **Buy from a person of integrity.** He knows more about the cows than you can see. Buy cows with your eyes open. Even then you will occasionally get an inferior animal.

2. **Don't buy old cows except at a discount.** Their years of usefulness are limited.

3. **Check for soundness of udder.** A blind quarter or lumps in the udder is an indication of mastitis. You may be buying trouble in such a cow.

4. **Find out if she has been calving regularly.**

5. **Check to see that she isn't a hard milker.**

6. **Remember, if cows are within a month of calving, they should be starting to spring.**

7. **Buy cows of good size and in good condition.** They are worth more. If they prove to be poor producers or undesirable from other standpoints you will recover more of your cost when putting them on the market.

8. **Cows with production records are your best buys** because you have evidence of what she has produced. Without production records to go by, you are taking a chance since some cows may look good and still be poor producers.

You will often find the cow that is for sale is the one someone else wanted to get rid of. Because of

the above problems with buying cows many people prefer to buy springing heifers to avoid diseased udders, slow breeders, and known low producers.

Buying Heifers

In buying heifers, breeding, dairy type, and size are of primary importance. If they are daughters of a proved sire you have good indications of what they might inherit from their sire. That is half of their breeding. What they got from their dams can be checked with records of the dams and to some extent their appearance. Buying heifers from a good producing herd is advisable.

The heifers should look like they will grow into good dairy cows. They should be of good size and thrifty. If close to calving, they should show signs of starting to spring and make up an udder.

Buying Calves

If you can delay income for a couple of years and are interested in getting as many animals as possible for the money, buying calves may be the answer. Instead of starting with eight cows you may buy 25 to 30 calves with the same money and have that many producers in two years.

The same thing holds for calves as with heifers regarding breeding, thriftiness, and size. It is advisable to buy calves a couple of months old after they get a start rather than a few days old, especially if they have to be moved in cold weather. Watch out for scours and colds in calves you may buy—a sick calf is a poor bet.

Whether you buy cows, heifers, or calves, buy from a healthy herd that is known to be free of such diseases as brucellosis. Buying cattle that have been properly calfhood vaccinated insures a high degree of immunity against later infection.

Equipment

Dairy farming requires a lot of equipment. While all of this is nice to have, if you have limited capital you should limit your investment to that which will give the greatest returns. Put your money where it will make the most for you. Silo unloaders and barn cleaners are labor savers, but unless the labor saved can be used elsewhere so that it pays for this equipment, chances are the money can be invested to better advantage elsewhere.

On the other hand it is poor business to waste labor because of inadequate equipment. It is especially a matter of matching labor saving values against equipment cost.

Barn arrangement and equipment can be handy without being unduly costly. It is especially important to have equipment needed for producing quality milk.

What About Later Success?

Basically, high production per cow is essential. Records kept on over 65,000 cows in the Dairy Herd Improvement Association in Minnesota in 1954 show that, on the average, cows producing less than 220 pounds of butterfat returned little or nothing for labor after other costs were taken care of. However, on the average, a 400 pound cow returned $1.10 per hour and a 500 pound cow returned $1.71 per hour.

While there is a great difference in net returns between herds of the same producing level these figures do point out the importance of high producing cows. Farm management studies show a similar relationship.

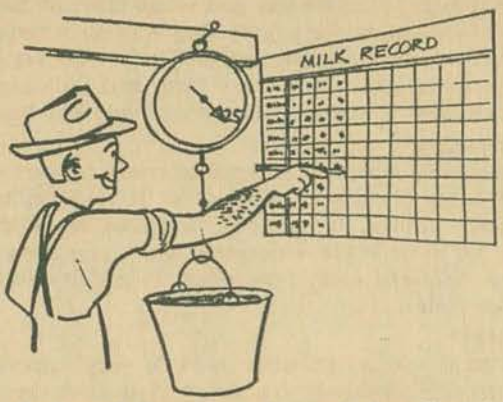
THE DAIRYMAN'S PIE

Based on a herd averaging 300-350 pounds of butterfat or 7,000-10,000 pounds of milk per cow per year.

1. **Like your job.** Having interest in dairy cattle and enjoying working with them is essential for success.

2. **Keep records.** A dairyman is working in the dark unless he has records to guide him in feeding, breeding, and calving. This means production, breeding, feeding, and calving records. As a member of the Dairy Herd Improvement Association, a dairyman has complete records on his herd.

While these records will guide you in your dairy operations, the successful dairy farmer must also keep many records on other farm enterprises to provide production and financial records of his whole farm business. The most complete of these are those carried out in the Farm Management Service.



3. **Get good breeding.** A cow's breeding is her inherited equipment to produce milk. Cows with breeding for high production will make money if given a chance. No matter how well they are fed and cared for, cows with inheritance for low production will never produce well nor make their owners any money. Get as good breeding as you can when you buy cattle. Use a good proved sire to improve the breeding in your young stock coming into the herd. Artificial breeding organizations have such sires.

4. **Feed efficiently.** Feed costs are one-half of the cost of producing milk. Efficient feeding means feeding the right amounts of the required nutrients from the cheapest sources. High quality roughage and pasture are the foundation in an efficient dairy ration. Concentrates are fed to provide needed nutrients not supplied in roughage. With legume roughage only home grown grains should be needed. Well managed pastures provide the cheapest feed.

Permanent pastures seldom provide an adequate pasture program. An abundance of permanent pasture should be only a minor reason for going into the dairy business. Buy only the protein and minerals you need and which will give you the most for your money. For further suggestions on feeding, see Extension Bulletin 218, "Feeding the Dairy Herd," and Extension Folder 190, "Summer Feeding of Dairy Cattle."

5. **Give cows good care and management.** The day to day care a cow gets goes a long way in determining what she will produce. Regular feeding and milking, kind handling, and proper milking procedures are all very important. This is the cowmanship part of your job as a dairyman.

6. **Maintain herd health.** This is essential in a good dairy herd. Good management is often tied in closely with maintaining herd health especially in the control of such diseases as mastitis.

7. **Calve regularly.** Regular calving affects production as well as the calf crop. This again is often a result of good management and herd health.

8. **Grow out heifers to reach proper size for calving** at two years of age. They are the future of your

herd. This means getting calves off to a good start and keeping them growing in good thrifty conditions.

9. **Produce high quality milk.** You can do a perfect job handling your cows and still largely waste your efforts unless you take proper care of your milk so as to produce a top quality product. Future sales of dairy products depend on marketing only high quality.

10. **Market your product carefully.** Sell your milk where you get greatest returns for top quality milk. The dairy plant that takes only quality milk usually pays more for it than the plant that will take practically everything that is delivered to them, irrespective of quality.

Is dairying for me? You must decide—we hope this folder will help you make this decision.

For More Information

You can obtain more detailed information on the dairy business in the following University of Minnesota publications:

Ext. Pamphlet 137, *Midsummer Slump*
Ext. Pamphlet 182, *Wipe Out Brucellosis*
Ext. Folder 106, *Produce Quality Milk*
Ext. Folder 119, *Faster Milking*
Ext. Folder 138, *What Can I Pay for a Dairy Barn*
Ext. Folder 147, *Livestock Pest Control*
Ext. Folder 160, *Your Dairy Calf—Feeding and Care*
Ext. Folder 175, *Don't Gamble with Mastitis*
Ext. Folder 176, *Know the Milk You Buy*
Ext. Folder 181, *Grass Silage*
Ext. Folder 182, *Forage Mixtures*
Ext. Folder 187, *Culling Pays*
Ext. Folder 190, *Summer Feeding of Dairy Cattle*
Ext. Bulletin 218, *Feeding the Dairy Herd*
Ext. Bulletin 276, *Dairying with a Future*
Exp. Station Bulletin 416, *Changes in the Dairy Farming Picture*
Minnesota Sheet 113, *Minnesota Milk House*

Consult your county Extension agents. They will be glad to work with you on problems like those discussed in this brief circular. Visit them in the county Extension office or invite them to stop at your home or farm when in the vicinity. If you know of a few other couples in your community with similar interests, suggest that they, too, get in touch with your county Extension office.

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