

Life after milk: Fourth-generation Westhampton dairy farm sells herd, changes gears

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WESTHAMPTON - Twenty-four years of memories came to Karl Norris as he milked his herd for the last time Thursday morning - from the day his grandfather taught him how to milk a cow at age 13 to the hard but rewarding work he shouldered since taking over the family business in 2000.

The Runnymede Farm, established on South Street in 1919 by Charles Norris, and now run by Karl Norris, shipped out its 66 milking cows before 10 a.m. Thursday, ending an era for the family business.

Farmers Karl and Lisa Norris said their decision to sell the milking herd was in part an effort to reorder their lives.

But it was also driven by tough realities in the dairy business.

They are hardly alone in making the difficult decision to change course on a family farm. Chip Hager, vice president of the Massachusetts Association of Dairy Farmers, said that even with state and federal assistance programs, steady increases in fuel, fertilizer and feed costs have turned into a "perfect storm" that is too difficult for many farmers to weather.

"Programs in place were designed for a normal downswing, not this super-duper one," Hager said.

The Norris family hopes to take their fourth-generation farm in a new direction. They will raise young milking stock to sell to other farmers, sell hay and gravel and get into the beef cattle business. In fact, they kept 60 calves and heifers.

"When people drive by our farm, it really won't look different," said Norris, who is 37. "The farm will still look the same as it always has."

And yet it was an emotional day Thursday, when the cows were loaded onto a truck and shipped off. The herd sold for an undisclosed amount to a Pennsylvania family that responded to Norris' advertisement in a regional farm newspaper.

The milking cows ranged in age from 2 to 12, each weighing an average of 1,500 pounds.

Diminishing returns

The transition at Runnymede Farm opens a new chapter in the lives of the Norris family members.

Dairy farming calls for a work schedule that is 12 hours a day, seven days a week and 12 months a

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KEVIN GUTTING

Karl Norris brings water to several cows the family is keeping on its Westhampton farm.



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year. That robbed family time from Norris, whose children's schedules are penciled in with piano lessons, horseback riding, Irish step dance and soccer and basketball games.

The minimum dairy-farming day is seven hours, Norris said. The winter days can be longer, with frequent delays due to frozen manure or failure to start the tractor.

"It wears on you after a while," he said.

Another deciding factor is business. The farm's gross income is less than half of what it was two years ago, due to low milk prices and high operating costs, Norris said.

The farm's 230-year-old barn poses a special problem in keeping up with the milking competition, Norris added. Norris and his employees clipped the cows to the barn's tie stalls and manually moved them to the milking parlor, which milks 12 cows at a time and holds 1,500 gallons of milk. Modern barns have free stalls, which allow the cows to move more easily.

"This old barn just isn't labor-efficient any more," he said. "If we keep going we'd have to build a new barn."

Young farmers like Norris are increasingly leaving the dairy business, said Hager, of the dairy association. He cited reasons such as high costs, difficulty in finding help and time constraints.

"You've got to love the business to stay in it and even if you love it, you can only deal with so much," Hager said. "At some point in time the need to do something different comes along for various reasons."

Hager noted the average age of a farmer in the United States is 60, a fact especially true of the dairy industry.

"That's going to catch up to us sooner than later," he said. "Eventually the older guys will move on to retire and there's not going to be anybody to take their place."

Family farming

About six hours after the cows loaded on the truck and headed for Pennsylvania, Norris and his wife Lisa, also 37, and their children Erin, 11, Gregory, 9, and Austin 7, fed the farm's remaining 60 calves and heifers, which are too young for milking.

The family plans to continue raising calves until the animals are old enough to milk, at which time the farm will sell the cows.

Norris, who had six part-time employees for his milking operation, no longer needs regular outside help, and will turn to his wife and children - making the family farm even more dependent on family.

"Now it's going to be a family affair," said Norris, who grew up a half-mile down the road from the farm. "This will give me a chance to work more closely with the kids to teach them how to feed the calves."

Sunshine warmed and lightened the inside of the barn Thursday afternoon, as the temperature reached nearly 70 degrees.

Calves could be heard chomping at their food. One heifer didn't lean over its food; it ate straight from the white bucket it had picked up with its mouth. The bucket swayed back and forth without pause. Smells of grain, manure and hay filled the air.

Around the corner from the calves stood empty stalls.

That is, all but one are empty.

"That cow right there is almost like a pet," Norris said, pointing to Hershey, the brown cow his family uses for milk.

Hershey is a 4-year-old registered Jersey that was born on the farm. Also born on the farm was Hershey's calf, Hershey's Little Kiss, which stays in a stall around the corner from its mother.

Hershey's mother was purchased in 1998 from Parsons Farm, now the only dairy farm left in Westhampton.

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