

Upper Valley Holsteins still going strong

By Don Benjamin Staff Writer, Oct 13, 2019

Fifty-three years ago, Irvin and Miriam Hartig purchased a small dairy in Austin and — thanks to their youngest daughter Polly Jo and her high school sweetheart — the enterprise has been in the family ever since. Andy Wick and Polly Jo Hartig met at Cedaredge High School. The couple married in 1971 and, when her parents offered them a chance to join the dairy business, the newlyweds purchased their own herd. In 1982, the Hartig's retired and the herds were merged.

Today the Upper Valley Holsteins' herd is comprised of 1,000 milk cows. Situated along 2100 Road in rural Austin, the dairy covers 58 acres but the operation impacts a much larger area by renting an additional 930 acres of farmland to grow feed. Two hundred of those acres are in alfalfa and the rest in corn which must be harvested each fall and stored as silage to carry the cows through the winter.

Upper Valley cows produce 11,000 gallons of raw milk every day. That impressive output is stored in cooling tanks until trucks arrive in the wee hours of the morning to carry the product to the Front Range and occasionally to Utah.

The dairy is highly automated but much of the work is still labor intensive. Cows are milked three times a day and 32 at a time in a broad milking parlor. An automated vacuum system does the actual milking but laborers are busy keeping the process organized. A computer program ensures that each cow is milked in a unique manner and keeps track of the milk output. Extracted milk travels through a closed series of filters and cooling mechanisms to refrigerated storage tanks.

Meanwhile, animals must be fed and watered and open air corrals must be regularly scraped clean and kept as dry as possible. At times, workers are helping with new calves and preparing trucks and other machinery for dairy tasks and silage hauling.

In the 24/7 dairy business, about two dozen workers are busy all day and every day. And one of the biggest challenges the dairy faces is attracting and keeping workers. “In recent years labor’s been a headache,” Andy said. “It’s hard to find people and hard to keep good help.”

Andy notes that the dairy business has changed over the years. “There isn’t one thing I can think of that we do the same,” he said. “The industry has evolved and we have to keep up with the times.” It helps, he feels, to have young people around. This includes his son Jeff, who is co-owner and manager, as well as Andy Luce, who serves as a dairy herdsman.

Jeff’s dairy roots run deep. He lives on the property in his grandfather’s house and he’s committed to keeping the family business going. His earliest memories of working at the dairy are from age 10. “I remember helping Mom feed calves and sitting on a tractor with Grandpa baling hay,” he said

Jeff graduated from Delta High School in 1991 and completed the diesel mechanics program at Delta-Montrose Technical College. Regarding the dairy industry’s future, Jeff believes, “It’s definitely turning into a corporate world. Decisions from a long way off can change things locally. But we put a lot of pride into what we do. We work hard to put out a high-quality product and quality is the reason we’ve survived.”

Luce serves as the dairy’s herd manager which makes him responsible for overall herd health. Each morning a computer printout alerts him to any cow that is down in milk production. Lower production may signal that an animal needs help and he’ll seek out the cow and provide assistance. With the help of other workers, Luce also monitors calving activity to make sure each cow’s pregnancy is progressing normally. Occasionally he has to lend a hand by repositioning an unborn calf.

Luce is a native of New York state where both sides of his family operate dairy farms. He earned his bachelors of science degree in animal science from Cornell University in 2007.

Like the Wick family, Luce sees similar challenges to the dairy industry. Going forward, he said, the dairy must “have a good labor force and maintain and ideally grow the market for milk.”

“Milk is one of the most complicated products in the grocery store,” Andy explained. “We’re selling a commodity so we have to look at dairying through a national and international lens.” Like corn and soybeans and other American farm products, 15% of the national milk product has to find a market overseas and Andy feels that “retaliatory tariffs have impacted the market negatively.”

Local market forces are also at play. When Andy and Polly Jo started in the dairy business, there were about 60 dairies in Western Colorado — now only four are left. Most recently, Montrose’s Whitfield Dairy ceased operation in February 2016.

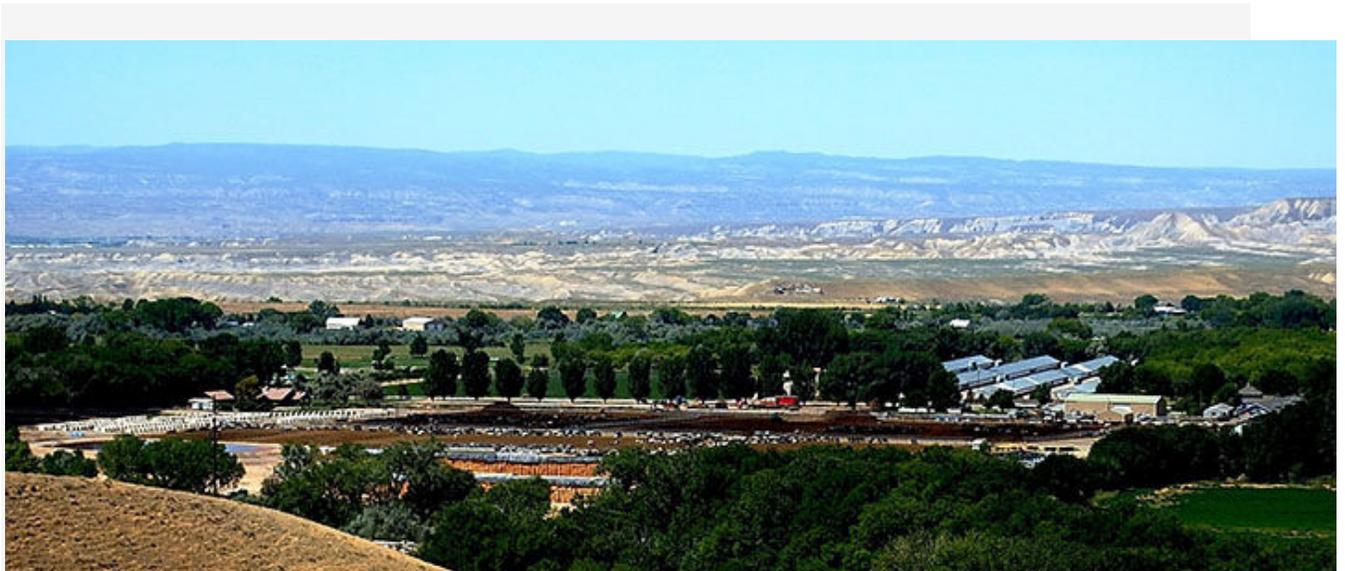
One reason for the decline in local dairies is the lack of a nearby processing plant. Since the Delta-based Meadow Gold plant closed in 2014, Western Slope dairy farmers are forced to pay “freight to market” to send raw milk to Denver.

The state’s raw milk processing plants are all on the Front Range, close to population centers where, Andy notes, processors can attract more labor. Plus Eastern Colorado is where most milk products are sold. Upper Valley Holsteins Inc. is a member of the Dairy Farmers of America which provides marketing and transport. To survive in the Colorado market, the Austin-based business has to pay the costs of truck freight to Denver and that ride is one of the dairy’s biggest expenses. “Milk is on wheels,” Andy said, pointing out that his raw milk travels to Denver for processing and then back over the mountain again as processed products bound for area grocery stores.

Upper Valley Holsteins is a busy and friendly place that welcomes elementary school kids who periodically tour the grounds. Andy enjoys the little kids but wishes he could talk to high school students to interest some of them in the dairy business. He has that chance at least once a year when the Cedaredge High School Future Farmers of America (FFA) come to help stabilize the dairy's silage pit.

For all the challenges, Andy feels that the dairy is on solid footing and ready to tackle the future. After conducting a recent tour of his modern dairy, Andy paused and gazed out at his herd and summed up his dairying philosophy.

“Cows,” he said, “are God’s gift to mankind. They can convert things people can’t even digest into something nutritious and wonderful.”



The Upper Valley Holsteins dairy farm covers 58 acres in rural Austin. The Uncompahgre Plateau is visible along the far horizon.

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Polly Jo and Andy Wick keep their family dairy going strong.

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Jeff Wick represents the next generation at Upper Valley Holsteins.

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Andy Luce maintains the health of the Upper Valley herd and Max the dog works as 'dairy supervisor.'

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Pregnant cows have their own special pen which is located close to the house so Polly Jo Wick can keep an eye on the expectant mothers.

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