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Tom, LuAnn Troxel to Quit Milking Cows After 33 Years

by Sherry Bunting

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Mornings at Troxel Dairy Farm have always been busy. That's to be expected when two industrious people love what they do and when what they do is dairy farming alongside a large animal veterinary practice. Both can be demanding 24/7 jobs, and for 33 years of marriage, Dr. Tom Troxel has pulled double duty—wife LuAnn right there with him in the trenches. She is thankful that after next week, he'll only have one job to do. The cows will be gone, but the South County Veterinary practice continues.

"Dairy isn't something you just do, it is something that defines you," said LuAnn Monday morning, as she and Tom and son Rudy were finishing chores and preparing for next week's complete dispersal of the milking and registered herd at their farm in Hanna.

Her easy smile hid the uncertainty of the transition ahead.

"Part of me is really sad, and part of me wonders about new opportunities we'll find in this next phase."

Tom confessed he is trying to be open-minded.

"But we'll miss it," he said, "I'm kind of a workaholic so I'll have to rethink things and find things to do that are more valuable than work."

He is nervous about the auction amid the low milk prices, but the sale plans were set into motion a year ago, when Tom and LuAnn knew that of their four sons —Rudy, Ned, Josh and Jackson—there would be no next generation to take the reins.

Rather than sell the herd immediately, they waited to calve-in some of the genetic progress Rudy has made in his work with the herd over the past four years. This way they are able to sell animals of known value with genomic testing behind them and see some 2-year-olds calve-in and milk to get a glimpse of what had been developed before passing them on to new homes.

The milking herd of 140 cows produces high quality milk with somatic cell count consistently under 100,000 and currently averages 75,000. Healthy animals and high quality milk have always been high priorities.

"The genetic improvement has been quite something, considering that four years ago we had just one registered Holstein, and today we have 130 that are registered," said Tom, crediting son Rudy's skill and zeal for genetics.

Rudy's philosophy in transitioning the herd from grade to registered dovetailed with his parents' longstanding emphasis on healthy cattle and preventive care. He bred not for show, but for working cattle "to exemplify the true working Holstein," he explained the science-driven approach to breeding a true commercial cow.

"We have rarely had a cow under 1 or 2 in their DPR, and we have cattle at 5, 6, 7, even over 8 in productive

life," Rudy said.

LuAnn said the decision to discontinue the dairy was a difficult one.

"It was something that took weeks, even months to accept," she said.

"We've ridden these cycles up and down for over 30 years," she added. "We haven't invested in new facilities. The dairy needs infrastructure and improvements. Our next generation made their family decisions not to buy the dairy farm."

"We weren't ready for the next generation," Tom interjected. "Look around. We have lean-to's, not a new 21st Century building."

Together they wondered, aloud, if investing in new facilities years ago may have produced a different outcome.

"We were so busy working and raising a family that we didn't really take the time to plan that," said LuAnn when asked what advice she might have for other farm families with next-generation uncertainty. "We always wanted our sons to make their own decisions on this. We love our four boys, their wives and their families and respect their decision to do what is best for their families."

She observes that planning for the next-generation is a challenge, "but I would recommend long term planning, not waiting like we did when it was too late for the planning to help."

Rudy, who graduated from Purdue with a degree in ag education, has taken an area sales manager position with Genex-CRI to follow the genetics path, which was seeded in junior high with his poultry projects and blossomed with his hand in the dairy herd over the past four years.

"This farm has been going since 1949 and has raised two families," said Tom. His parents, Phil and Mary Troxel, started farming here almost 70 years ago. His mother was raised on a dairy farm and ahead of her time as a "dairy girl," taking predominant care of the herd. Tom, one of eight children, was immersed in the farm early after his father suffered a stroke while he was still in high school.

Tom and LuAnn eventually took over the dairy after they married, and have operated Tom's large animal practice there.

Standing in the October sunshine discussing the upcoming sale, the cows walk right up and LuAnn reflects on the bond between a dairy producer and the cows.

"I fed every one of these individually as calves," she said, noting that while they can seem like children or grandchildren at times, "there's a difference."

"But you do spend more time with the cattle than the grandkids," Tom interrupted, grinning at the reality of daily cattle care.

For years, the dairy has hosted media, consumer events, school field trips and trainings for vet tech students.

They have both served on numerous boards over the years. In addition to serving as a past president of Indiana Dairy Producers and currently on the board of the Dairy Girl Network, LuAnn also serves on the American Dairy Assn.-Indiana board—a position that will end when the milking ends, as has Tom's former position on the Foremost Farms cooperative board.

While there may be fewer opportunities to be involved in organizations that promote dairy, the Troxels want to be involved wherever they can in the dairy industry

"The people in this industry are special. With few exceptions, dairy producers are honest, hard-working people

who care about things other than themselves," LuAnn said.

"People say 'it's in your blood,' and I guess that's because dairying is systemic," LuAnn observed. "It will be a little challenging to define who I am because everything from family relationships to daily routines to friendships and service have been within the context of the dairy farm. I'm not sure what it will be like, but I think it will be fine."

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