

MOO

If you take a gallon of milk for granted, keep this in mind: Dairy farmers have no such luck.

In 2019, the prices they received for their milk were the lowest in 15 years, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The dairy industry has long struggled with lower demand, and the coronavirus pandemic presents new complications.

June is National Dairy Month, and we asked our friends at **Virginia Farm Bureau Federation** to share some stories of perseverance from the extended Richmond area.

We check in with a fifth-generation dairy farm that sees part of its future in robotics. And we visit another farm that is targeting something more traditional: ice cream!

Get yourself a glass (or a scoop) and enjoy.

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DAIRY FARM

Oakmulgee

BY ADAM CULLER

As dairies across America look to diversify operations to survive, Oakmulgee Dairy Farm is a hundred years ahead of the curve.

And not just because of its new robots.

Established in Amelia County in 1895, Oakmulgee is one of Virginia's oldest continually run dairies. But it's had its share of business shifts, starting with the ingenuity of patriarch Oliver Moyer — who wasn't even in the milk business initially.

The farm's beginnings were instead rooted in orchards and a cannery to distribute fruits

and vegetables. By the turn of the century, though, operations started to pivot when Moyer figured out how to dispose of leftover produce: He bought dairy cows to eat it.

By the 1920s, the farm had become primarily a dairy. Today, Oakmulgee boasts more than 600 animals and new-age technology, yet Moyer's fourth- and fifth-generation descendants still embrace his resourcefulness as they steer the farm through uncertain times.

"Dairy farming has become more about how you manage your business than what it was in the past," said Jeremy Moyer, 37, who owns



ABOVE: A cow checks out the scene as Brady Blankenship (left) and Brian Hayes prepare for the 3 p.m. milking, which will last a couple of hours. The cows are milked twice a day, every day.

LEFT: Two generations of Moyers — brothers Brandon (from left) and Jeremy, with dad Larkin — are at the heart of current operations at the Oakmulgee family farm in Amelia County.

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and operates the farm with his father, Larkin, and brother, Brandon. "Now you can work as hard as you want, but if you make some bad decisions, it doesn't matter how hard you worked: You're not going to stay in business."

Business at Oakmulgee means milking hundreds of cows twice a day, every day. The milk is delivered to a nearby processing plant and can reach store shelves within 48 hours.

Moyer credits his ancestors for their astute business sense, and he carries it forward in ways — related to feed, family and finances — that wouldn't be apparent when you're buying a gallon at the supermarket.

Milk prices have been declining since 2014, so the Moyers try to minimize risk and lower expenses with built-in solutions. By farming 1,400 acres of their own land, they supply feed for their cows. With multiple generations interested in full-time careers on the farm, there is less need for nonfamily labor, which can be hard to find. And the farm's history of low debt helps weather the industry's slump.

Robotic milking machines are new to Oakmulgee, and other automation will help feed the cows and clean the barn floor.

Moyer noted that dairy farming always has a degree of variability, but the family isn't simply waiting for higher prices to return. Instead, they take advantage of the futures market to improve their profit margin.

For example, when the market price for milk this past May was \$5 below production cost per hundredweight, Oakmulgee used what is called forward pricing to lock in a rate above its production cost. Although this technique sometimes means lower market prices, it mitigates risk and allows the family to plan ahead.

"Forward pricing of milk is available to a lot of people, but out of everyone I talk to, no one really does it," Moyer said. "If I know that I've sold two-thirds of my milk at a profitable level, that relieves a whole lot of stress because I know what my income is going to be, versus leaving it up to the market to decide."

Given some financial flexibility, Oakmulgee has adopted new technology to streamline operations. The farm has updated its milking parlor seven times over its history, with three of the updates built in Moyer's lifetime.

The most recent, which is set to be completed this spring and summer, will mark a first

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in the Richmond region: robotic milking machines, plus automation for feeding the cows and removing waste from the barn floor.

Moyer hopes the robotics eventually will create more opportunities for diversification — not out of necessity but as another avenue for expansion. Early ideas include raising additional crop varieties, direct-marketing beef and adding agritourism activities, with the farm being less than an hour west of Richmond.

While Oakmulgee hasn't avoided all of the trials of modern dairy farming, Moyer said the family can step back and appreciate what they have when times are tough — including the enjoyment of working with family and raising his children on the farm.

As for Oakmulgee's successes, he credits the multigenerational bond. The four generations of Moyers who continue to live and work on the farm include his grandfather, Charles, who lives next door, and Charles' three great-grandchildren.

"I know I wouldn't be here without the work of every generation before me," Moyer said. "They helped build the foundation, and every generation has just built on what the generation before has done. We've taken the same kind of work ethic and principles and ramped it up. That's how our family has always operated." ■

Adam Culler is a staff writer at Virginia Farm Bureau Federation

YOUR NOT-SO-SECRET CODE

51



BY ADAM CULLER

Want to buy milk from a Virginia farm? Take down this number: 51.

If you're at the store, look near the top (or on the lid) of a milk container. You'll see a five-digit hyphenated code, and the first two digits indicate where the milk was processed. If the code begins with 51, the milk was processed in Virginia. (To identify the exact processing facility, you can visit whereismilkfrom.com and type in the full code.)

"Throughout the year, most of the milk processed in Virginia will come from Virginia farms," said Tony Banks, senior assistant director of agriculture, development and innovation for Virginia Farm Bureau Federation. "However, just because the plant is located in Virginia, it doesn't mean that 100% of the milk is from Virginia farms."

To get milk and other dairy products to local grocers, most Virginia dairy farmers use dairy cooperatives to market their products. These co-ops are owned by farmers and often have their own milk processing plants. (Co-ops without processing plants connect farmers with retail markets and increase their bargaining power with food suppliers.)

"Dairy cooperatives market about 80% of the milk produced in the United States, so the cooperatives' role in our nation's milk supply is significant," Banks said.

"Ideally, the cooperatives' farmer-owners share in any profits and losses after marketing and any processing expenses."



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DAIRY FARM

Richlands

Dairy farmer Coley Jones Drinkwater has sweet visions for the future at Richlands.

BY NICOLE ZEMA

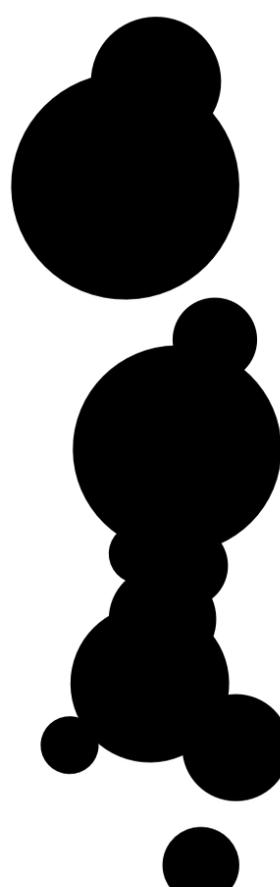
Small family dairy farms have been dealt a bad hand in the modern economy. While many folded, Richlands Dairy Farm has doubled down — as in a double scoop, in a waffle cone.

On U.S. Route 460 in Nottoway County, not even an hour southwest of Richmond, a lot is riding on ice cream.

Richlands supports four families whose

connection to the land stretches back to the mid-1700s. The dairy farm has been operating since 1952, but with Americans consuming less fluid milk — and with farmers facing chronic oversupply and stagnant prices — the Jones clan had to consider how to sustain its legacy.

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“We definitely have deep family roots here, and we’ve always been close as a family,” said Coley Jones Drinkwater, one of the leaders at Richlands. “So we had to sit down and have a tough conversation about what we’re going to do. We can’t just keep losing money and remain a viable business.”

So they looked beyond the milking parlor. Their operation, now Richlands Dairy Farm and Creamery, has become a local agritourism enterprise. Visitors can see real farm life up close, shop for regional farm produce and, yes, savor a 24-flavor jackpot of ice cream, churned on site by people who really know dairy.

Before enjoying a selection (chocolate-covered ginger candy, anyone?), consider the economics behind that scoop.

Among major changes in the milk marketplace, some large retailers have opened their own processing plants, instead of relying on farmer-owned cooperatives to process and provide dairy products. These retailers have contracted directly with fewer, but larger, dairy farms.

Those large farms can sell milk more cheaply than small and medium-size dairies.

“Profit margins are slim,” Drinkwater said. “For the last several decades, it’s ‘get big or get out.’ We reached a point where milk prices hit a low and stuck for two years. All milk economists said don’t expect prices to go up anytime soon, because the game has changed. We were losing money every day.”

Selling the farm was off the table, but Richlands would have to get creative with its milk.

Cheese was an option, and Drinkwater was making it at home. But the aging process would create a monthslong delay in return on investment.

With ice cream, though, the odds were better. “It’s an affordable luxury for almost everyone, and it will bring people to the farm more so than cheese would,” Drinkwater said. “And we can make the ice cream today and eat it tomorrow. So we changed the business model.”

So while fluctuating markets won’t fetch a fair price for Richlands milk, its creamery, which opened in June 2019, will.

“With cyclic price fluctuation, an economist will do their best to say what the price is going to do, and a lot of our decision-making was based on those projections,” Drinkwater said. “But as the creamery grows, we can pay the farm more for the milk. That’s a novelty in farming.”

Though the current coronavirus pandemic is affecting recent operations, Richlands Creamery has served as a local gathering place. While ice cream is the main attraction, customers also can purchase whole and 2% milk “and really good chocolate milk,” Drinkwater said with pride.

There’s also The Kitchen Table, which is a restaurant that serves lunch and dinner, plus the retail farm store where Richlands sources other local farm goods. Prod-



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ABOVE: It’s a family affair at Richlands, a dairy farm since 1952. At front left are Coley Jones Drinkwater with daughter Hayden, next to Brittany Jones with children Leland and Hazel. At back (from left) are TR, Hugh and Tracey Jones.

RIGHT: Brittany Jones gets acquainted with a week-old calf.



Chocolate, 2% and whole milk are staples from Richlands, which has become an agritourism enterprise.

ucts include jam from a strawberry farmer in Brunswick County and goat milk products from a Dinwiddie County farm.

“Part of the overall business plan for this is not only promote our own milk but other local products as well,” Drinkwater said. “We wanted to create a strong local food movement right here.”

And that includes the creamery’s dipping cabinet. Densely packed with silky texture, Richlands ice cream is full of authentic flavor and occasional wild-card creativity.

“My uncle really likes that chocolate-covered ginger candy,” Drinkwater said. “We came up with this dark-chocolate-covered ginger that has crystalized ginger in it and gingerbread cookie chunks.”

Not everybody likes that flavor — she’s among them, she admits — “but those who do, really like it.” As for vanilla or chocolate, “they still reign supreme.”

On weekends, Richlands might draw families from the Richmond area, Lynchburg and even North Carolina. And they can get more than ice cream.

“You can spend a few hours, sit on the porch and rock, watch your kids play on the playground,” Drinkwater said. “When the weather’s nicer, you can take a hayride around the farm, take a walking tour, visit the pumpkin patch.”

Notably, the agritourism experience allows families to meet the cows whose milk ultimately is churned and double-scooped into that waffle cone.

“We try to provide an educational component,” Drinkwater said. “This is where your milk comes from. This is the story of how it gets to you. I’m proud of our family and the care that goes into our cows and our land.”

She added: “For my brother, sister-in-law and myself, we wanted to raise our kids on a farm. We don’t make a lot of money for the amount of work we put in. We don’t have great benefits. But as far as where to raise your kids, a farm is hard to beat.” ■

Nicole Zema is a staff writer at Virginia Farm Bureau Federation