

Happy herd

Marshalls create unique organic, robotic dairy

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

The 550 cows at Keith and Deanne Marshall's Unionville dairy farm would seem to live an enviable life. They eat when they want. They get milked when they want. They have high-energy organic grasses in their pastures and they rotate among those daily. They even have waterbed-like stalls in the milking parlor that further their comfort before their milking.

It's quite an operation. And it's definitely not a traditional dairy farm.

"We cater to their every need," Deanne Marshall says with genuine affection for their 550-member, mixed-breed herd. "They're very comfortable. They've got it made!"

That's not to mean the dairy business is easy, though. For the Marshalls' cows it may be, but the dairy didn't get here easily.

Marshall said her husband, his brother and her father-in-law purchased the farm more than 40 years ago, but only in the last few years have she and Keith reimagined and specifically re-engineered their dairy farm operation to more of what she called a "European" operation.

"I don't think there is anyone else in the United States with an operation like this," she said. "We're definitely the only organic, robotic dairy in this area."

Organic. Driving into the farm, any visitor is keenly alerted to that designation as signs mark the farm as a "bio-secure area," regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture. To qualify, the Marshalls' entire operation is inspected thoroughly and regularly. They use no penicillin, no antibiotics on their cattle, whose milk is sold and marketed under grocery giant Harris-Teeter's organic label.

Robotic. The dairy has nine, fascinatingly efficient robotic milking machines that do everything from cleaning the dairy cows' udders, to testing the milk for impurities and calculating production per milking quarter. A large red cow outside the dairy office is a symbol of the Lely company that makes the Marshalls' nine robotic milking machines that measure and perform just about everything imaginable as part of the operation. Collars around each cow's neck identify them to the

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Dairy cows at the Marshall farm in Unionville have a tremendous amount of freedom. They can eat when they want, milk when they feel like it and lounge on comfortable, water bed-like pads in the barn. When they're ready to be milked, they enter a stall that cleans their udders, and connects a robotic milker that records an array of data and tests the milk as it's being collected. Deanne Marshall visits with one of the calves in the calving barn. The farm collects more than 60,000 gallons of milk daily. For more photos, visit www.orangenews.com.

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machines, which can allow or prevent access to milking, not to mention alert the Marshalls and their staff if any of the herd have become sick or otherwise compromised. From her phone, Marshall can receive alerts or check in on the condition of any in the herd.

This “European” model of dairying puts the herd on small pastures with daily, rotational grazing. The Marshalls plant clover, rye, fescue and supplement the grasses with natural nutrients (including peanuts and other supplements) that are roasted and blended with feed freely distributed in the efficient and bovinely luxurious milking parlor. Marshall credits her husband, Keith, with the entire design of the operation, which appears

simultaneously airy and yet compact. Through it all, the herd flows at its discretion, except for a few hours early each morning when they’re turned out to the pasture so farm staff can clean the milking barn. Even that is a marvel. A special floor, designed and constructed in Belgium, allows waste to channel into an underground pit below and away. Automatic feeders distribute food to happy, hungry herd members as others lounge on soft, nearby beds that respond to their movements. When they cows feel ready to milk, they know the way to the machines, though their collars won’t permit access if they’re not ready to return.

Once in the robotic milking stall, a gate encloses the cow,

while the machine offers the cow food during the seven-to-nine-minute milking process. As the cow munches away, a cleaning process begins with the robot cleaning and sterilizing the cow’s udder before a laser connects multiple milking tubes to each teat on the udder. A computer screen on the vending-machine size apparatus illustrates the output from each quarter of the cow’s teat as a glass bowl captures the “liquid gold” from six different supply lines. The computer identifies when the cow’s production is complete and tests each batch before sending it on to the bulk tank nearby.

“We never touch the milk,” Deanne Marshall says. “The computer tells us everything we need to know about the

cow and the milk.”

The dairy harvests more than 60,000 gallons of milk daily filling enormous stainless steel tanks in a nearby building.

Marshall said the goal is to fill a visiting milk tanker truck every other day which hauls the milk to a processing plant in North Carolina.

The Marshalls began building their specialized operation in 2015 and began operating it in earnest in August 2017. It took four to five weeks to “train” the cows, she said, but once the herd learned the routine, it helped model the behavior for new members.

“When a new cow comes in, they see what the others are doing and fall in,” Marshall said.

Most of the herd is home-

grown in nearby calving barns that separate new members by age range. Ultimately, they’ll end up eating, lounging and milking in the parlor across the farm.

Last month, the Marshalls welcomed county officials, business leaders and friends to an open house at the dairy, offering tours of the comprehensive operation.

Marshall was quick to credit the farm staff for the dairy’s success.

“It’s taken a few years, but we’ve gotten into a good groove,” she said. “We’ve got awesome employees who know how to avoid or fix problems. We’ve got great people here.”

And hundreds of happy looking cows.

A smashing success

O.C. Fair draws good weather, record crowds

BY JEFF POOLE
Editor

Looking out over the Orange County Fairgrounds from Old Gordonsville Road Saturday evening, it was difficult to see an open patch of grass between the thousands of cars filling the 100-acre property. Even as the sun set and the demolition derby cars crashed, smoked and sputtered, a steady stream of vehicles was filtering onto the property for one of the most successful fairs ever.

Fair officials estimate it was a “record-breaking” year, though there aren’t official attendance records.

Still, when fair association vice president Tony Rogers is directing cars to park in the horse show ring, it’s pretty clear the event is successful.

A lot of the success at the Orange County Fair hinges upon the weather. This year, it experienced a “perfect storm” between canceling last year’s event and the sunny skies, moderate temperatures and timely breezes last week.

“The weather was wonderful.



PHOTOS BY JEFF POOLE

Pictured at top, Jenna Walker competes in the horseshow, which kicked off the fair last Wednesday afternoon. Bottom photo, Sadie Garth watches Sadie Wentz show her hog during the 4-H auction Saturday evening in the Orange County Farm Bureau pavilion. For more on the fair, see page A1 and www.orangenews.com.

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We couldn't have ordered any better," Orange County Extension Agent Kaci Daniel said. "Two nights we were actually a little chilly, which is extremely rare at the fair. The public came out in large numbers, especially on Wednesday and Thursday which often are slower nights."

"I just think people were glad to be out, especially after we weren't able to have the fair last year," said fair association board member Cynthia Smith. "The weather was so much in our favor and the combination of that and not having the fair last year made it a tremendous event."

Fair association secretary Sarah Altman described this year's event, staged last Wednesday through Saturday, as "a raging success."

"Everything from the weather to the turnout couldn't have been better," she said. "I think everyone missed the fair last year and it was nice to see the community embrace it and welcome it back again this year."

She estimated attendance at more than 10,000 and said between 5,000 and 6,000 people attended Saturday alone.

Absent concrete attendance figures, Daniel said the 4-H Dairy Club milkshake wagon sold twice as many milkshakes as it normally does.

Both Altman and Rogers noted attendance Wednesday and Thursday were substantially higher than usual.

This year, admission to the fair Wednesday was free, thanks to an anonymous local donor.

"Wednesday was a free night this year and really brought in a good crowd," Altman said. "This is something that we will continue to do, as long as we continue to have a sponsor to cover it."

"Maybe the turnout was good because it was free or maybe people were just ready to be out," Rogers added. "I heard from so many people who were just so happy to be out. Some of them came up and just were eager to talk. I saw a lot of young people who were excited to see their friends from school they hadn't seen all school year."

The introduction of the new diesel

street truck dirt drag races helped drive attendance Thursday night.

The races were the first in a series with other regional county fairs, with points and prizes accumulating for those who participate throughout the summer.

"This is something that we have been working on with four other fairs to make up a truck racing circuit," Altman continued. "It's been really nice collaborating with other fairs. Seeing what other fairs do gives us ideas on how to improve our county fair."

Another new addition to this year's fair was the Farm Bureau pavilion.

"That made life a lot easier on the 4-Hers," Altman said. "The beef cattle and sheep were able to be housed under a 'real' structure for the first time ever. This was a major improvement over past fairs."

"The new Orange Farm Bureau show pavilion was a huge blessing and the fair board's hard work showed in the beautiful grounds," Daniel added.

Even though there were fewer 4-H youth showing animals this year, Daniel still called in "an incredible year."

"While our numbers were down, we celebrated quality over quantity," she said. "Everyone was happy to be back in-person and morale was high. The kids were happy, helpful and very hard-working. I saw so much camaraderie, mentoring between more experienced and newer members, teamwork as kids led animals and cleaned out stalls. That's what we're after: character development, leadership, 'making the best better.' I want blue ribbon kids before blue ribbon projects. This was definitely one of the best fairs we've ever had."

One of the annual highlights of the fair is the annual 4-H auction on Saturday evening. Despite fewer animals for sale, the community continued to support the youth and 4-H overwhelmingly.

"The community's support in the auction just blew us away," Daniel said. "We had record prices, including a goat that sold for \$40 a pound!"

The 4-H Therapeutic Adventure Camp of Orange (TACO) had the highest selling club item, a gift basket filled

with local merchandise and gift cards, that went for \$3,400. The 4-H Archery Club designed and sold custom cornhole boards for \$1,750. Other club items auctioned included the True Blue Cloverbud Club selling a Betsy McGinnis original artwork for \$1,500, the 4-H Livestock Cloverbuds getting \$1,700 for a pair of Adirondack chairs and the 4-H Dairy Club auctioning off a gallon of milk for \$2,100.

Daniel said the auction grossed \$125,000 and \$12,575 of that goes to the various 4-H clubs to support club activities.

"The Orange community clearly loves its young people and believes in supporting them. Grateful doesn't begin to describe how this makes us feel," she added.

Rogers said even though there may have been fewer animals for auction bidders, their generosity wasn't diminished. He said that illustrates the community's support not only for the 4-H youth, but also the fair.

"We appreciate our supporters and sponsors so much," he said. "We couldn't do it without our sponsors. They've stuck with us and they're starting to see how the property is developing. In the past, a lot of where their money was going was in the ground (with cable or pipes) or in the air (with lights). Now they're seeing the results and they like what they see."

"We're just blown away by the support we receive," Smith added. "The community is definitely behind us."

Altman also credited the community support—sponsors and fairgoers and countless volunteers—for the event's success.

"The volunteers just stepped up and worked through everything," Rogers said. "We appreciate everything they do for us. If anyone attended the fair liked what they saw, we want them to be a part of it. They can volunteer. We need some younger folks with fresh ideas."

Between now and next June, fair organizers will reflect on a successful week and look for ways to improve on the 2022 Orange County Fair.

Still, it may be hard to top this year's event.

"We had people from all over the place—from Utah, Texas, Colorado, Maine, Connecticut, New Mexico. Some of them were just on vacation and passing through, heard about us and stopped in," Rogers noted. "It was just great. The weather was perfect. Everything just fell into place." "We had a wonderfully successful fair this year," fair assistant treasurer Carol Koontz added. "It was great to see all of the fairgoers and I had quite a few comments that it was their first time and they really enjoyed the fair and can't wait to come again."

UCC celebrates 150 years

Village Road church Homecoming is Oct. 10

BY JEFF POOLE

Editor

Driving down Village Road, you wouldn't think Unionville Christian Church is 150 years old. But the modern brick structure belies its rich history.

The current church

structure dates back only 52 years and follows a tragic chapter in the church's history—one that tested the faith of the members and the community, but proved they were more than up to the task.

The church traces its origins to Elijah R. Perry who solicited funds from

several churches and raised the money to purchase land and a home that would serve as the initial meeting place of what would become the church. A stained glass window in the front of the sanctuary, as well as archival items in the

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Unionville Christian Church (23286 Village Road, Unionville) will be celebrating 150 years at its homecoming Sunday, Oct. 10, at 11 a.m. Former minister, David Whitten, will be the guest speaker with a fellowship meal following the worship service.

PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

church foyer, pay tribute to the congregation's founding father.

Perry was a Civil War veteran and reportedly "walked the country" to raise \$140 to start the new church in 1871. He married Sophia Standard Boston, of Unionville, and the couple had 15 children. Perry served as minister, janitor and supplied food for the all-day meetings of the new congregation. In 1878, W.A. Luck deeded a lot to church trustees and by 1899, the congregation had constructed a wooden-frame structure on Village Road at a cost of \$500. A church history, compiled by Kay Higgins, notes that stones for the new church foundation were provided by Jim Davis and delivered to the site by ox cart.

The church grew and expanded with additions in 1937 and 1955.

Then came the morning of Jan. 5, 1969.

When church members arrived that morning for their Sunday service, they found the church engulfed in flames. No one is sure how the fire started.

Longtime church member Paul Wright remembers arriving at the church that morning only to see smoke billowing and flames shooting from the windows.

"It was just disheartening," he said.

The greatest blessings often are discovered through hardship and by the end of that calendar year, the church members had worked together to construct the church building that stands on the site today.

"We all came together and got it done," Wright said. "A lot of people worked on it and did what they could to finish it."

Local boys Bobby Exline, the son of then-minister Warren Exline, and Garrett Lee



PHOTO BY JEFF POOLE

Minister Michael Jackson stands in the pulpit of Unionville Christian Church with a photograph of Elijah R. Perry, the church's founder. The Village Road church has a case of memorabilia in its foyer highlighting the history of the 150-year-old congregation. For additional photos, see www.orangenews.com.

salvaged a number of items from the wreckage, including a portion of the church bell—also on display in the current church foyer. Other items include nails melded together by the heat, rusted keys and door plates. The current church sits on the same site where the original wooden structure had been.

In its dedication ceremony Dec. 7, 1969, the scripture lesson for the service came from Solomon's prayer of dedication in 2 Chronicles, 6:14. "LORD God of Israel, there is no God in heaven or on earth like You, who keep Your covenant and mercy with Your servants who walk before You with all their hearts.

Michael Jackson is the current minister of the church and marveled at the ability of that congregation to fully replace the burned structure within a 12-month period.

"That would be unheard of today," he said.

Since Perry's founding of the church, there have been more than three dozen ministers. Jackson has led the congregation the past nine years and through, perhaps the most difficult challenge it's faced since the fire more than 50 years ago—the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jackson said the church missed one service in March 2020, but quickly adapted to an online version before returning in person. He recalled recording his first online service in an empty sanctuary with a selfie-stick attached to a music stand. Like most churches, Unionville adapted to public health concerns to serve the spiritual and fellowship needs of its church family.

As such, the Oct. 10 homecoming and 150th anniversary celebration won't be of

the same scale it would be in a normal year, he acknowledged. The church will hold its regular Sunday worship—which also is streamed on Jackson's Facebook page and later uploaded to the church page—followed by a luncheon outside on the church grounds.

"We're not sure what it's going to look like right now," Jackson said. "We want to be careful and prudent so everyone feels comfortable."

He said he'd hoped to have a bigger celebration but recognized the pandemic would limit the size and scale of the event—particularly with older church members or those who might otherwise travel to attend.

Fifty years ago, the Orange Review reported Miss Elizabeth Perry, 84, the daughter of the church's founder, Elijah R. Perry, attended the centennial service, in addition to many former ministers and members.

No matter who attends the 150th anniversary service, Jackson wants people to know the church is open and welcoming. He cites the congregation's association with the "restoration movement" and its independence from a distant, disengaged governing council.

"The restoration movement started more than 200 years ago and relies on scripture as the ultimate determinant of truth," he said. "It says 'let's restore the church to the church of the New Testament' without man made creeds and doctrines. We seek to do things the way scripture says to do them.

"Why would some denominational headquarters elsewhere determine what happens here or how we spend our money here?" he asks rhetorically.

Locally, the church actively supports the Love Outreach Food Pantry, where Jackson serves as a board member, as well as the ThriveWomen's Healthcare of Central Virginia (formerly the Orange Pregnancy Center). It also supports state missions, including a camp in Mechanicsville and a mountain mission school in Grundy, as well as international missions in Africa, Thailand and India.

"Our church is an individual church and we firmly believe in the Bible and Jesus Christ," Wright added. "It's a good church. We've gone through some hard times and I wish people would come back so the church can get back to where it should be. It's been the backbone of my life. I don't know what I'd do without it."

"I have very fond memories of Unionville Christian Church and looked forward to attending with my parents and siblings every Sunday," said longtime church member and current Dogwood Village resident Phil Brown. "Church family was a very important part of my life as I was growing up, we loved and supported each other through the good times as well as the difficult times."

Fellow Dogwood resident Erba Burton agreed. "My husband and I were saved at Unionville Christian Church and we became members. I have always had a special place in my heart for the church and the members."

Unionville Christian Church is located at 23286 Village Road, Unionville, and can be reached by calling (540) 854-4535. Worship service is held at 11 a.m. To view recorded services or for more information, visit the church on Facebook at www.facebook.com/Unionville-Christian-Church-120146947996686/.