

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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Building a Successful Dairy Business in Hard Times

These farmers' cows help to put Lebanon dairy on the map

Interview with Robin & Lincoln Chesmer
Partners, Graywall Farm, Lebanon

Saving Connecticut's fast-diminishing stock of farmland is the first necessary step in helping to maintain a robust farming sector in the state. The second critical stage is to maintain that land as active working land. That of course requires that established and new farmers step up to work it. Back in the day, farm families were the main source for new farmers. Today, agricultural schools and apprenticeships often serve that purpose.

In the case of the father-son team of Robin and Lincoln Chesmer, they entered the state dairy business in 1989 without a family background in farming and with no formal training. Yet, through hard work, astute management and creative marketing the Chesmers have managed to build Graywall Farm into one of the state's best dairy operations, despite crisis conditions that diminish Connecticut's 169 remaining dairy farms by one or more each month.

Living the dream of becoming a dairy farmer

ROBIN: I wasn't brought up in agriculture. I was actually born in England and had exposure to a dairy farm at a very young age. Loved it and ever since, I wanted to be a farmer when I grew up. And here I am, I grew up and I'm a dairy farmer.

I always had an interest in agriculture – at every opportunity I'd raise chickens, pigs or whatever. And then my wife and I purchased a farm here in Lebanon in the mid-70s and then I raised dairy replacements and some beef cattle. And the opportunity came along to take over this farm and I went after it.

LINCOLN: As a kid, I was always around animals. I always enjoyed it but I never really thought it would be what I would do for a living. After my senior year of high school, we started leasing this farm. Then I went away to Rhode Island School of Design to become an architect. After about two-and-a-half years, I decided that's not quite what I wanted to do. I kind of felt I wanted to be an architect and have a hobby farm. But why not just have a farm and make it my career?

ROBIN: Graywall Farm is a 400-cow dairy farm. In addition to the dairy cows, we have 350-head young stock. We've been in business since 1989 at this location, which is when we leased an operating farm and purchased the cows and the equipment. Then the previous owner sold the development rights to the state of Connecticut. and we were able to purchase it at its agricultural value. Today we crop about 350 acres of grass and 400 acres-plus of corn. It's close to 800 acres of cropland.

LINCOLN: It's an exciting business. I never realized what was involved. I think a lot of people don't realize what's involved with dairy farming. We took some trips to some progressive farms

out in New York when we first started. And it really changed my attitude of what you can do. You can be a successful businessperson with a lot of challenges. And those challenges are part of what makes it very exciting -- it's not just milking cows. There's nutrition and finances and a lot of big day-to-day decisions

ROBIN: Systems too. Setting up the systems to operate efficiently. Everything from your labor input, to the way the cows are handled and the way they're housed, our cropping systems. There's a lot to it, to get everything clicking together and operating efficiently.

For work and for pleasure, it's all about the land

LINCOLN: Well, land is the biggest obstacle. Securing enough land. We don't just need the land for the animals; we also need it to distribute the manure from the cows. And there's a real balance there, a real recycling. You take the feed, you give it to the cows, the cows give you milk, but they also give you a lot of manure. And the best thing to do is put it back on the land. You need 2 acres per cow basically, a cow and its calf

ROBIN: We own a little over 700 acres and that's not all cropland. On any given farm, you might own 100 acres, but only 50 or 60 of it will be actual production, productive cropland. The rest is either swamps or steep slopes. That's just the way Connecticut is. So we own 700 acres. Of those 700 acres, about 400 acres is viable cropland. And then we rent an additional 400 acres, which actually sits on probably 1,000 acres.

We spend as much time managing manure as we do managing milk. It's a huge part of the business that takes up a lot of our time and a lot of management.

The biggest challenge, I think, is staying efficient. And it's just not operation, it's also cash flow. As dairy farmers, we're price takers, we're not price makers. So the economics of it all are a challenge, which is why we feel we have to put so much emphasis on cost control and efficiencies of operation. And Lincoln's done a superb job of that.

LINCOLN: The land that we rent is beautiful and the land that we own is beautiful. You get half a mile off the road and you're looking back at scenery across the valley. It's impressive. You get the rows of grass and the cows in the distance.

ROBIN: We'll go out and mow hay together and it's actually fun. Some people have a motorboat or something, go around the lake. We go around the field mowing hay and it's just a pleasure to see the hay getting mowed. It's very enjoyable. And as you're mowing, there are hawks and wildlife and coyotes. There are all sorts of things. It's an uplifting experience to watch the sunset, and so on.

Farms in other parts of the country, in neighboring New York for instance, they have a lot more land that they can acquire. So they can grow their cow numbers and they can grow their businesses. In Connecticut, we don't have that luxury of the available land base. There's a lot of competition for the land. There are other uses, development pressures, etc. So we feel we need to be as efficient as we possibly can. We want to grow the dairy business as much as we can, but we also recognize that we need to look into other options.

To meet consumer demand, put your cows on the carton

ROBIN: There's a group of six farmers from eastern Connecticut that are working together to market our milk on a cooperative basis under the label of the Farmer's Cow. It's Connecticut fresh milk from local Connecticut farms.

So we can take advantage of that huge consumer base that's right at our doorstep. When you think about it, the marketplace between Boston and New York is one of the largest consumer markets in the world. And we as dairy farmers have been taking absolutely no advantage of that.

We found an extremely enthusiastic response to our initiative to market milk. And it started before we even came up with this project. We've held farm tours here. And we'd have families come and the common question was, where can we buy your milk? And you could never directly say where they could buy your milk, because you were never really sure where your milk went.

So I think there's a huge interest in local. And in our case, the advantage we have is we're the source. We're the farmers. And you can actually come and visit us. You can come to the farm and you can see where and how your milk is produced. And we think that's a big advantage. We can let people know where their food comes from.

In a race against time, the need to save state farmland

ROBIN: Connecticut's Farmland Preservation program is a valuable tool to agriculture and it has been key to our operation. It's because of the program that we were able to get into business.

We have the pleasure to lease some properties from some dairy farmers that were superb dairy farmers. They really built up their crop base, have nice meticulous farms and we have the pleasure to crop that land now. It's enjoyable.

We need a viable agriculture Farmland Preservation Program if we're going to even think about buying that land. It's a highly competitive market for the land. We're competing against developers. We need to be able to step up to the plate. As an agricultural producer, we can't afford to pay those kinds of prices and stay in agriculture production. But with a viable Farmland Preservation Program as a tool, we can.

But in some respects it is too little, too late. We really squandered some years in the mid-90s where we could have purchased a lot of land at a reasonable price but the program was not funded. And we're going to pay for that as a state. But the money that it's going to take now to even to begin to catch up is going to be difficult. To fund it to the level that it needs to be funded.

Just in the town of Lebanon, we have over 11,000 acres of viable crop land and if you think about the price of land that it is today, you could spend all the state's money just on the town of Lebanon. There are some excellent initiatives being taken to create creative sources for funding for farmland preservation. But, really, more needs to be done. There's no question about it.

There's going to be demise on the number of dairy operators. I think the reduction of the number of dairy cows is not going to follow the same formulas as the numbers of the dairy operators. You know, just like here, we're milking the cows that 30 years ago would have been on ten farms. And I think you're going to see that happen. On this operation, we've already purchased three herds that were local herds that were in milk production a few years ago.