

Farmer Profile
Paul & Shirley Hoover
Willow Bank Jerseys
By Michele Gauger

Paul Hoover, his wife Shirley and their five children operate Willow Bank Jerseys in Greencastle, Pennsylvania (Franklin County). Neither Paul nor Shirley grew up on a dairy farm, but Paul had worked for a few farmers as a young adult and always had an interest in farming. In 1991, some college friends approached Paul and his family to form a farming partnership, but this cooperative effort dissolved in 1993. Paul and his family decided to keep farming the land they were living on, which they had started renting during the partnership.

During 1993-1997, with little knowledge of how to run a dairy operation, the Hoovers were able to earn enough profit to pay off their \$20,000 loan and found themselves free of debt. Paul says, "While I did not know much about dairying, I did know a lot about repairing old equipment. So by buying old, nearly worn out machines, we were able to 'save' money by not spending much initially." Of course constant repairs demanded time and money as they went on and equipment has been replaced one by one as they have gained resources.

Paul says, "We used minimal debt to acquire machinery and to purchase some cows. Also the establishment of pastures and intensive grazing allowed us to spend as little as possible on feed. I remember going to the feed mill and just asking for a 'feed mix that would be good for milk cows', since I wasn't sure of the correct components."

In those first years, Paul regularly attended educational offerings through businesses and the Extension office so he could "work smarter, not harder." He also noted he watched his neighbors to make sure he was on schedule with field work – now they tell him that they watch to see what he is doing!

According to Paul, "A mentor of mine at the time was Doug Martin from the Chambersburg area. I once mentioned to him how ignorant I was at understanding everything about dairy. He said to me 'your ignorance is probably the best asset you have.' What he meant was that it is good to not have any preconceived ideas and not be afraid to try something that should or could not work."

In 2000 the Hoovers switched from a conventional free stall confinement system to a seasonal, grass-based dairy. "We made the switch for many reasons, but probably the greatest reward is to have some free time in August thru December and lots of free time in January and February when the cows are dry. After busy spring months, it is nice to have some time later on in the year to help others" (Paul and his family are members of the Mennonite Church and often go on mission or service trips like cleaning up after Hurricane Katrina or the flooding in Binghamton NY) according to Paul.

Today their farm has about 75 Jersey cows on about 160 acres, which includes cow pastures, some row crop fields and timothy. Their milk is sold through the Dairy Farmers of America Cooperative. "We are getting a good price for our milk right now and back when we first started our farm, we were included on a special route that picked up only Jersey milk," Paul said.

For more information about Willow Bank Jerseys, contact Paul and Shirley Hoover at 405 Milnor Road, Greencastle, PA 17225, email 7hoovers@earthlink.net or call 717-597-1337.

Interview with Paul Hoover

What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

As I look to the future I see several serious problems emerging in farming today, indeed some of which are already here. The average age of farmers keeps going up and this is a bad sign for a multitude of reasons, but perhaps the biggest ones are:

- Young people have a very difficult time getting into dairy
- Farming may not provide reliable income sufficient to live on, costs go up and prices vary dramatically
- Endless hours with small returns, though be sure there are many intangible returns difficult to quantify, i.e. the satisfaction of jobs well done, the satisfaction of hard labor, seeing nature up close, choosing your hours (to a degree), the pain of a bad decision turning into a lesson learned, that independence we farmers are noted for, time spent with family working together to accomplish a goal, even the hard teaching of life and death all around us
- The sheer difficulty of getting into farming
- Our society values the farmer less and less, so unless you are "born" into the farming arena, rarely does an "outsider" start up
- Competition for land.
- Options for young people tend not to lead to farming or even attract many

What is unique about your farm?

I started farming at age 35, coming from another state (Ohio), after getting my feet wet, we changed our methods from the conventional free stall confinement system to a seasonal, grass based dairy. We are not organic, though I use those methods, the reality is most farmers use no more expensive resources than they feel they have to.

The farm I rent is in plain view of busy Interstate 81 and the number of people who "watch us" amazes me. Friends will say I saw you doing such and such and we have one who says he takes a "pasture walk" every Sunday as he drives by to church, and some people find their way off the Interstate to ask questions.

The farm is historical in that the owners' ancestors settled here and the original log cabin still somewhat exists. It is also worth several million dollars being at exit #3 of the Interstate, which is also why I cannot buy it and have limited time here until it gets developed.

How has your operation evolved over the years?

I grew up on a small general farm, milked a Jersey cow by hand, but really knew little about farming as I just did what my dad told me. Growing up I worked with numerous farmers for a while and did farm repairs for 10 years.

Then a good friend invited our family to join theirs in a partnership. We moved here in 1991 and January 1993 we dissolved the partnership and I was on my own. At this point in life we had about \$80,000 in equity and got a \$20,000 loan to get going.

Those first years were rough! We usually had to “rob Peter to pay Paul,” and the school of hard knocks claimed a big share of our time and money. We learned the hard way not to post-dip cows in windy, sub-freezing temps; we learned to screen any cows we bought into the herd for Johne’s disease and mastitis; we learned what grasses will flourish in permanent pasture in our area and which ones will not; we learned to respect the damage rocks can inflict on equipment; we learned the hard way where we could save money on feed components and where scrimping quickly hurt milk production; we learned where hiring some custom work done resulted in much better feed quality and where we could do all the work ourselves. Being ignorant of cow medical care we paid our vet a lot to learn how and what we could do ourselves.

Needless to say after about five years I felt like I was no longer crawling, but with the loan paid and no debts, I was trying to figure out what to do next. By this time I had put about a third of the farm into pastures and had a decent rotational grazing setup. So I asked several people I respected to spend some time with me to look at the farm and see what we could possibly do. In retrospect I probably set myself up to go in the direction I did, seasonal dairying, by choosing counselors that were involved in that.

My veterinarian, my feed representative, two successful dairying friends and I met regularly, looked at our Dairy Herd Improvement Association (DHIA) reports and any other hard data including milk checks, kept an eye on cow conditioning and they listened to my strengths and weaknesses as a farm manager. My personality lends itself to focusing on one main task at a time, so by going seasonal I can focus on calving or breeding or dry-off or whatever all at once as a herd rather than try to keep track of where each cow is individually.

We crunched the numbers and realized that we could incorporate some of the financial efficiencies of a large dairy into a small one, such as buying bulk calf feed and milk replacement at a discount once per year rather than small amounts throughout the year, and grouping the cows and replacement stock. Partly because of our experience with frozen teats, I had already started a window when we did not calve in January and February, so we started lengthening that time on both ends and in three years we were seasonal.

My team helped me to look ahead when I needed to be doing what, in order to accomplish this goal. It has been one of the best decisions I ever made. Some time soon I will need to list all the benefits transitioning to a seasonal dairy has made, along with a much shorter list of the down side.

It has also helped that in 1993 Franklin County started a grazing group. In this organization we visited each others farms biweekly literally walking the pastures and more importantly just talking with each other, sharing what we were doing and gathering ideas to try. While you can never reproduce a copy of a farm in another location, it was the norm to at least bring home at least one idea if not several, and the encouragement of others was invaluable. We still meet, but monthly now. It is intriguing to watch how farms develop and change. At my last “walk” here in April I was challenged to make

some changes, which have been successful. As “iron sharpens iron” we benefit from each other.

The farm has grown from 39 cows in 1993 and peaked in 2000 with 85. None of our five children are excited about becoming dairy farmers. Our oldest is a philosopher, dreamer, writer; the next wants to work in videography; the next is studying to be a museum curator; the next a musician and the last wants to be a nurse. So with 3 children in college I downsized to 65 doing most of the work myself.

One thing I started my second year was to hire a high school student to milk one time per week. That way if I need someone to cover for a weekend or a day trip, they know what is going on and few preparations must be made. Usually I can keep this labor for 4 years or so.

Why did you join PASA?

I was a member of an organization in Ohio that was similar to PASA. So when we moved to Pennsylvania, we joined PASA for the community of people to learn from and “stretch” our thinking in ways other groups don’t.