



Milkin' it

As the last dairy cow walked out of the barn forever, Robin Lenzendorf couldn't help but shed a tear. Those cows weren't just numbers; they were family. This was Meadow Lawn's reality six years ago, and almost immediately the operation took a turn for the Business Breed.

by Lindsay King

The first round of black Angus hides were a stark contrast to the painted Holsteins that once filled the Eastman, Wis., pens. After almost 100 years in milking, the barn was reborn as a calving shed.

Robin — known as Rueben by the locals — remembers when milking 28 cows was a daunting task in his childhood. He is one of nine Lenzendorf siblings. At its peak, just six years ago, Meadow Lawn milked 60 cows twice a day, every single day.

“I milked cows in that barn for about 48 years before we decided to get out of the business,” Robin says. “When you have 60 cows that you see twice a day, they don't have numbers — they have names. You think a lot of 'em.”

Robin and his wife, Shelly, figured they would slowly phase out of the milking business and focus solely on their row crops. That simply wasn't the case and perhaps that was the blessing they didn't know they needed.

“I had some spring heifers to sell and a man came to look at them, when he commented on how nice the cow herd was,” Robin says. “I guess I said they were for sale. He made a phone call and a month later we milked them for the last time.”

Rightfully so, Robin wanted a good home for his girls and that's exactly what they got.

Now what?

After that, Robin's days were filled with crops, crops and more crops. Their 400 acres kept Robin out and about, but his sons — Kevin and Mike — thought their dad might be bored. At least that's how they presented their new business venture.

"That first winter after selling the cows was tough; dad hadn't known anything else in his life," says Kevin Lenzendorf, the younger of Robin's two sons. "I was also trying to think of something that would help me pay off student loans."

The boys talked with their dad and told him they would be keeping him busy for the next 18 months by raising Holstein calves as feeders. Those months quickly turned into six years.

A simple text — "We should start a registered Angus herd." — between Kevin and Mike was the catalyst of the three dairymen phasing out the Holsteins in pursuit of the Business Breed.

What started out as just five females, has grown into a cow herd of more than 100 and what Robin's oldest son, Mike, calls their obsession.

Foundation five

"I've always had a lot of respect for the Angus breed," Robin says. He's the sole manager of the farm Monday through Friday. The boys work full-time town jobs, so they help during the busy times and on weekends.

With his dairy senses tingling, Robin maneuvered his way through the registered seedstock business for the first time. Finding the leading ladies to set the tone for Meadow Lawn Angus fell on Kevin's shoulders. After all, this crazy endeavor was originally his idea.

"I went to some friends of ours at Mill Coulee Angus to get our herd started," Kevin says. "They set out five cows they thought would be good for starting an entire herd."

Their first calves hit the ground in February of 2015. After primarily raising Holsteins, the Lenzendorfs were surprised by what an Angus cow could get done during gestation.

"I can still remember that first calf," Mike says. "Looking at that first one, we thought we'd be surprised if he weighed 60 pounds."

A KM Obligation son out of a Barbar cow tipped the scales at 89 pounds (lb.). That's all it took to get everyone on the beef bandwagon.

Although Robin says he didn't get into the genetics when he was raising Holsteins, it's now one of his favorite pastimes.

"It's really interesting to keep up with the bulls and how they are doing," Robin says. "The differences you can see in a calf when you cross a cow to a different bull is unbelievable."

The focal point of the operation comes down to the use of data and technology. They keep track of everything through the American Angus Association, but on top of that they came up with their own measurements.

"We measure how long it takes a calf to get up and start suckling," Mike explains. "We can track calves out of certain sires and look at their consistency to make decisions. We even label our cows on their mothering ability."

Running an efficient operation is a driving force behind renovation and innovation. There's one building on the Lenzendorf place that's always been part of the operation and is a derivative of their forward progress.

The old barn

It stands tall and proud; years are visible from the worn paint and battered siding. The outside is only a small indicator of the pure gold just beyond the doors.

"That barn has meant a lot to just about everybody in our family; it's almost like a landmark for us," Kevin says.

It was the place where Robin and Shelly caught up with their kids at the end of the day during afternoon milking.



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It was also the gathering place on the farm because, quite frankly, the family spent a majority of their time there.

“Looking back at it, there were a lot of interactions with people over the milk cart in that barn,” Kevin says. “A lot of business took place there; it was pretty special.”

The barn revival came in November 2018 when 15 calving stalls replaced the milking stanchions. It was time for the barn to reign supreme again, but in a new era.

“We filled in all the gutters, tore out the pipeline

and set it up with stalls on either side of an aisle down the center of the barn,” Mike says.

The main barn is just one of many pieces of the property that got a facelift. In fact, Robin and Shelly have never shied away from making improvements. New barns and improved infrastructure were just part of the dairy business, and the same holds true with the beef cattle.

When the black cattle first arrived, the boys weren't equipped for breeding season when it came to equipment. At one point, two rows of corn-fodder round bales served as an alley to a gate functioning as a squeeze chute.

Reproductive efficiency wasn't exactly high in that first year. As time has passed, things have changed for the better.

“We can actually breed and work calves with just one person now,” Mike says of their double-alley Bud Box chute system. “We are very big on investing back into our operation when it comes to buildings and making improvements.”



Mike and Kevin agree, the immeasurable docility of their herd is a direct reflection of their dad, Robin.





New beginnings

Starting from nothing is one thing, but moving from one side of the spectrum to the other is something else entirely. Robin and his boys wouldn't have done anything differently. In fact, they recommend it.

"You need to have big dreams to go after," Kevin says. "What has helped us is looking at challenges as an opportunity, and finding the good in those situations."

Striking out without fear of the future was a key ingredient in Meadow Lawn's path to success. Agriculture, especially raising cattle, is inherently a risky business. Moving forward with passion, precision and an open mind helped land well-deserved recognition for the Lenzendorfs.

"We had our first open house sale last year and people can't hardly believe what's happened in the last six years," Mike says. "In December we were invited to sell an animal at the National Finals Angus Sale in Las Vegas."

This type of recognition is great, but Robin finds solace in the quiet days he spends with his animals. It's not uncommon to stumble upon the 61-year-old scratching the back of a herd bull out in the pasture.

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PHOTOS BY KENDRA MARIE PHOTOGRAPHY

Monday through Friday, Robin (center) runs the operation by himself. On the weekends, his sons - Mike and Kevin - keep things rolling.

Chalk it up to his upbringing on the dairy farm or something else, it's uncanny how his soft voice and quiet demeanor set the tone for Meadow Lawn's trip to the top: slowly, surely, determined.

A new beginning was exactly what the Lenzendorfs needed, and it couldn't have come at a better time. **AJ**