The Kiefer Family – milking cows for over 60 years

The Kiefer Family dairy farm northeast of Strasburg has been operating for over 60 years. Leo Kiefer took over the family farm in 1980. He remembers as a child, milking with his parents, Joe and Julia Kiefer, and his eight siblings.

“I think I was about five or six years old when I first started milking the cows,” Leo said.

Leo’s mom, Julia (daughter of Mike and Rose Jacob) also grew up on a dairy farm northeast of Linton. Mike and Rose had nine children, and about 50 dairy cows.

“We all had to help with milking the cows, the boys and the girls. Everybody helped until the job was done,” Julia said.

Every morning, around 7 a.m. they started their chores, and milked again then in the evening around 6 p.m. The children were in charge of feeding the little calves and the pigs, in addition to milking.

“Joe’s parents, Leo’s grandparents, John and Theresa Kiefer, milked about 10 to 15 cows. Joe and Julia Kiefer started milking in the mid-1950s and usually had 15 to 25 dairy cows. All of their nine children helped with the milking chores. They woke the first early in the morning, and were milking by 6 a.m.”

“We had to get the milking done before the bus picked us up to go to school,” Leo said. He remembers when the milk truck from Hague would come to their farm to pick up the cream they would sell.

“They got the cream from us and they would bring us the empty jugs so mom could refill them again,” he said.

Leo remembers his mom separating the cream, and she made other products such as butter and cottage cheese.

“Leo also remembers when the cream was used to feed the calves to a sled and get the square bales for the cows with it. ‘Dad would say the horses’ names and they would take off with the sled,’ Leo said. ‘I always got rides on the sled, but I didn’t have to do the work. I just enjoyed the ride!’”

After his dad finished with the bales, they would clean the barn using the sled. Those rides didn’t last for too many years, as his dad got a tractor which helped with the workload on the farm.

“Leo will keep at it as he enjoys being on the farm and likes his livestock. ‘I enjoy working with the livestock and would much rather do that than work with grains,’ Leo said.

“Some were saying that milk prices are like a roller coaster ride,” Leo said. “But recently, they have stabilized some.”

The prices have fluctuated over the years, and presently, Leo receives about $18 per hundredweight, with the premiums.

The dairy industry was expected to stabilize over the next year or two, and the milk prices looked a bit more promising for 2017, according to dairy industry experts.

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The milk that was produced was used to feed the calves and pigs, and some was sold, along with the cream.

“We would separate the milk and cream, and the milk truck would pick it up every week and sometimes, more often. We also took some to the creamery in Linton,” Julia said.

Farmers couldn’t save the milk for a long period of time as they had no cool place to keep it, so it had to be sold.

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“The pastures don’t look good right now, plus we had a winter kill on the alfalfa,” Leo said. “We had the best corn crop ever.”

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Leo’s 45 dairy cows casually walk to the milk parlor as Leo rounds them up for milking time.

Joe Kiefer is holding his youngest daughter, Clarice, as he milks the cows.

The Kiefer sisters with their mom, Julia, on her 85th birthday, are, left to right, Lillian (Kuntz), Clarice (Gauer), Marietta (Dietz) and Lorraine Kiefer.

The Kiefer brothers with their mom, Julia, on her 85th birthday, are, left to right, Roger, Joe, Leo, Tom and Darrel.

Leo, as a young teenager, is milking while his younger brother, Darrel, is playing with a cat.

Adam Hulm, son of Andy and Lisa Hulm, was at his first day on the job at the Leo Kiefer farm on Mon., May 15.