

An Educated Expansion

District 8 OYDC Andy & Bobbie Zagata put Andy's MSU education to work when expanding the Zagata family dairy farm



Even before Andy Zagata graduated with his bachelor's degree in Animal Science from Michigan State University, he put his education to work, planning an expansion that would take his family's dairy from 50 milk cows to over 400 within five years.

At first, Andy had a hard time convincing his parents, Mike and Lorene Zagata, that expanding the dairy portion of their farm was the way to go.

"My dad was a little leery about building a new cow barn," Andy explains. "But when I showed him I had everything on paper – financial statements, etc., he was fine with it."

At the time, the farm was diversified, including dairy, dairy steers and cash crops. Andy suggested they discontinue everything but the dairy side of the farm. Mike had mixed feelings about doing that, but Andy had worked out convincing financial scenarios that demonstrated they could make more money by going totally dairy and utilizing the cash crop fields to grow feed for the cows.

"We went through a big change, we were milking only 50 cows, cash cropping and raising Holstein steers – so we were a real diversified farm," Andy says. "We are now only dairy and grow all of our forages and some grain for feed."

Through his MSU classes, Andy learned how to create a business plan that was financially feasible enough to secure a bank loan. His first plan included an expensive state-of-the-art parlor. Andy's MSU Dairy Advisor, Joe Domecq, pointed out that a parlor that grand

would also carry a hefty debt load and suggested a more affordable renovation of their current stanchion set-up.

“Once I got Andy to understand that their farm needed to be run as a business, particularly if he wanted to be a part of the farm in the future, he really became aggressive in his approach to business,” Joe says. “He was already a pretty good cowman, he worked hard to become a good business man, and he, his family and the farm have a bright future.”

With the business plan complete and on paper, Andy and Mike didn’t have any problems securing financing through their ag lender. Soon renovations were underway to turn the farm’s 9-cow stanchion barn into a double-6 step up parlor. A 4-row freestall was also erected and the herd grew to 230 cows. Since that time, the Zagatas have built another 4-row freestall and grown the herd to over 400.

“We were at 440 at one time, but that was just too overcrowded,” Andy says. “We like to keep cow numbers right around 400.”

Through the recent bout of low milk prices, the farm has been able to financially support Andy, his wife Bobbie and their son, Carl, as well as Mike and Lorene.

“It has been good ever since the expansion even with low milk prices,” Andy says. “We are careful about making decisions as far as purchasing goes. We bought used milking equipment for the parlor and we might not buy a new tractor but we will get a used one that gets the job done.”

There is one new thing that Andy and Bobbie still have their sights set on – a new parlor.

“Our goal is to build a new milking center with a parallel parlor,” the couple says. “It might not be financially realistic at this time, but it is something to look forward to in the future.”

The Zagatas built their new freestall barns in an area of the farm that is far away from the road and existing buildings. This will enable them to easily add more barns, manure storage and a new milking center.

Bobbie will soon receive her bachelor’s degree in Nursing. She will continue to do the farm’s bookkeeping and plans to implement new treatment protocols for the herd in addition to working as an RN.

“The people on our farm are diversified,” Bobbie says. “We have interests outside of agriculture and dairy because we did not all come from a farming background. Those qualities give us a different way of looking at things.”

A closer Look



Oak River Farm

Andy and Bobbie Zagata with their son: Carl Robert Steff, 6.

Location: Sebawaing, Michigan

MMPA Members of: MMPA District 8 and the West Huron Local

Herd Size: 450 milking and dry

Replacements: 400

Acreage Farmed: 500

Milking set-up: Double-6 Step-up Parlor

Agriculture and dairy involvement:

Bobbie is a Dairy Communicator for MMPA’s West Huron Local. The couple volunteer in the “Little Red Barn” serving milk and dairy treats at various festivals and fairs in their area. They also host pre-school farm tours on the farm.

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our farm is: The people on the farm are diversified. We have interests outside of agriculture and dairy because we did not all come from a farming background. Those qualities give us a different way of looking at things.