

A Different Approach

*The sale of some acreage on their farm allowed District 8 OYDC
Dennis and Sara Lee to build a new freestall barn debt-free.*



When the bank told District 8 OYDC Dennis and Sara Lee it wouldn't help them finance a new freestall barn that the couple was sure would help them boost their bottom line and provide a better environment for their cows, the Lees found a way to finance the barn debt-free.

"We wanted to build a barn, and the banker said 'no,' so we sold 80 acres of land and built a barn debt-free," Dennis says. "We figured the new barn would bring us more income than the 80 acres did, and we don't have the stress of the monthly bank payment."

The new barn improves both cow and human comfort in nearly every way possible. The new freestalls are much larger and bedded with sand instead of sawdust. The drive-through alley has reduced feeding time, replacing an old, high-maintenance conveyor.

Since moving the cows into the new barn, the Lees say they have seen "tremendous" results including improved cow comfort, reduced cull rates, reduced somatic cell counts and overall cow health.

"We had a cull rate of about 50 percent in the old barn – which is extremely high," Sara says. "We dropped down to 27 percent with the new barn."

With most of their income coming from dairy farming, the Lees want to keep their focus on the cows. They're not crop farmers, nor do they care to specialize in cropping and all the

equipment that comes along with it. They've chosen instead to work with one of several cropping neighbors to custom-grow feed for their herd.

"So much of our time was being taken away from the cows with field work," Sara says. "When we sat down with pen and paper, financially it was the smartest thing for us to do. It also helps us not to have so much hired help and equipment."

Dennis explains that his neighbor's equipment is newer, bigger and can do a better job in less time than their equipment could.

"We don't do any crop farming now," Dennis says. "We own the fields but we pay the neighbor to custom grow everything. He has better equipment and can do it in half the time. We had older equipment that didn't always work as well. He can finish our harvest in a couple days – it would take much longer when we did it."

Dennis and Sara both work with the cows on a daily basis. The couple's five children, Benjamin, 14, Abigail, 12, Eliza, 10, Miranda, 7, and Cassidy, 5, also have important roles in the daily farm chores, like feeding cows and calves. The children are home schooled, giving them the opportunity to help on the farm.

"They all go out and do chores, then we come in and do their school work," Sara says. "We home school through satellite – we record the classes and the kids can watch it when they are ready to that day."

Several families in the area that home school their children have formed a group that meets weekly for band, gym or art projects – meetings that also give the children a chance to socialize with kids of their own ages.

"Home schooling is more flexible, and it lets the kids do more," Dennis explains.

The Lee children agree, saying they like being able to be out with the cows during the day, coming in to do their school work each day when they want.

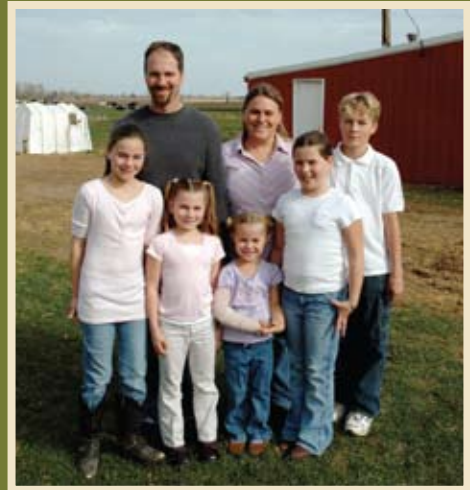
"We get to do a lot more than other kids do," Benjamin says.

Time will tell whether some or all of the children will become the fifth generation to dairy on the farm. Dennis and Sara say some of the older children have already expressed an interest. To make room for their kids to join the farming operation, the Lees plan to increase their herd to approximately 400 cows.

The Lees' dairy has undergone many changes over the past few years, many of which sprang from ideas that were a little different than what traditional farms may do. For the Lees, those decisions have made both farming and family life more enjoyable – and even a little less stressful.

"Don't be afraid to try something new," Sara advises other young dairy farmers. "Financing our new barn and having our crops custom grown and harvested has really worked out well for us."

~ Lees Dairy Farm ~



One Thing that Makes a Difference on Our Farm is...

We love what we do and our children are here to do it with us because we home school.

~ MMPA Members of ~

District 8

Deckerville Local

~ Herd size ~

200 milking and dry

~ Replacements ~

150

~ Acres Farmed ~

540

~ Milking Set-Up ~

Double-8 herringbone parlor

~ Ag and Dairy Involvement ~

Dennis serves as an alternate delegate to the MMPA Deckerville Local. He is a Sanilac County Dairy Banquet board member and Sara is a Sanilac County 4-H leader.