

# Driven to Dairy

*District 7 OYDC Rob Rowley and his wife, Cheryl, wanted to dairy farm bad enough that they used bucket milkers until they could afford to install a pipeline system.*



There's no contesting the claim that dairy farming is in the blood of the Rowley family. While most families tally their milking heritage in generations, the Rowleys count back in centuries. The family can trace their dairy farming roots back to 16th century England, where their ancestors — 16 to 17 generations ago — first began raising dairy cows.

Robert Rowley, Sr. nearly broke that tradition for a few years when he got out of dairy farming to focus on the family's milk hauling business. His son, Rob, followed in his footsteps, making the rounds between dairies throughout St. Clair and Macomb counties. In 2008, the family will have been hauling milk as MMPA members for 82 years.

As much as the younger Rob enjoyed hauling milk, he felt he was missing out on daily interaction with the cows. He and his father were running a beef feed lot, but Rob felt that wasn't enough. He wanted to dairy farm.

"What really enticed me to milk cows was running the milk truck," Rob says. "I ran it for four years. We had 11 shippers at the time and I purchased my last stop out. He wanted to sell out and I wanted to start dairy farming."

Rob and Cheryl got married in late July 2004 and brought the cows home a week later. They were short on capital, and lacked adequate milking facilities, but the newlyweds found a way to purchase half the cows (Rob's dad purchased the other half) and some milking equipment. Rob's dad also provides housing for the cows.

"It's always been Rob's dream to dairy, it's all he ever talked about,"

Cheryl says.

For the first year, the couple milked 35 cows twice a day into three DeLaval buckets. Rob and Cheryl estimate they physically carried approximately 2,000 pounds of milk each day during that first year.

“When we got the cows, we wanted to make sure we could pay for what we got, so if we had to get out, we could do so without being in a lot of debt,” Rob recalls of their humble beginnings.

As the dairy’s income grew, they installed a pipeline system, which cut their milking time in half. Rob keeps the buckets around just in case, because he can operate the vacuum with the tractor if the power goes out, or if a cow can’t make it to the parlor.

“It took us three hours per milking with the buckets,” Cheryl says. “Now it only takes an hour and a half per milking, with double the cows.”

More cows and faster milking times with the new pipeline system led the Rowleys to their next project: improved cow housing.

Rob’s milk-hauling experience exposed him to a lot of different dairy operations, offering just as many ideas for housing scenarios on his own farm. In the end, he went with a compost barn, a low-cost solution providing high comfort for both cows and people.

“I got the idea from one of our shippers, it is a little different, but the same concept.” Rob says. “When we were looking to build a new barn, we figured it would be a cost-effective way of doing it, and it requires a lot less labor, too.”

The compost barn is set up like a freestall barn, with alley feeding, but with loose housing instead of stalls. The large area is bedded with dried sawdust, and the bedding and manure are stirred daily with a cultivator.

“We clean out the barn once a year, so it gives us one year of manure storage,” Rob says. “The compost is breaking down all the time, so the smell is not as bad as a lagoon, and it’s very easy to manage.”

“It also keeps the cows more comfortable, keeping them warmer in the winter,” Cheryl adds. “On cold days, you can see steam coming up from the compost.”

The setup works well for the Rowleys, enabling them to employ limited labor, consisting only of Rob’s younger brother Ted, and, when she is not at school, his younger sister, Jackie.

Improved cow comfort means keeping animals in the herd longer, another Rowley dairy priority.

“We strive for production, but would rather be able to breed a cow back twice instead of once,” Rob says. “Older cows get along better in our housing situation.”

The compost barn could hold 150 cows comfortably, so the Rowleys are working to grow the herd to at least that level. They also want to add a milking parlor, maybe add a small beef feedlot and increase their cropping acres.

“Doing all of that down here is going to be one of our challenges,” Rob says of the farm, located in a county that has become a suburb of metropolitan Detroit.

## ~ Rowley Dairy Farm ~



Rob and Cheryl Rowley with the oldest cow in their herd, a 13-year old Holstein named “Old Lady.”

*The Rowleys are expecting their first child in May.*

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

*It’s all a matter of time spent.*

~ *MMPA Members of* ~  
St. Clair-Macomb Local  
District 7

~ *Herd size* ~  
90 milking and dry

~ *Replacements* ~  
45

~ *Milking Set-Up* ~  
Flat barn parlor

~ *Ag and Dairy Involvement* ~

Rob currently serves on Michigan Farm Bureau’s Dairy Advisory and Market Committee, and is currently enrolled in MFB’s ProFILE leadership development program. He serves on the St. Clair County Farm Bureau Board of Directors, and on the county-level Policy Development, National Affairs and Young Farmer committees.