

Preserving A Legacy

2008 MMPA District 8 OYDC Hans and Michelle Shell



Since joining MMPA in 1926, the Shell family has shipped milk to the cooperative from the family's Crosswell area centennial farm.

"Hans' grandfather, Russell A. Shell, signed the first family contract with MMPA on June 26, 1926," Michelle says. "We've been shipping milk from this same location ever since. Our farm was established in 1864 and is recognized by the State of Michigan as a Centennial Farm. We look forward to celebrating 150 years of the Shell family farming at this location in 2014."

Reverence for the land their forefathers farmed is very important to the Shells. The farm is located several miles north of Port Huron and three miles from Lake Huron, which limits the amount of cropland available. Michigan's economic struggles have slowed the new housing market recently, but over the past 20 years, the Shells have felt the crunch of urban encroachment through a large number of new homes going up around the farm. At one time, the Shells remember having several dairy farms in their township. Now there are only two farms in the township—the Shell's, with 77 cows and another small dairy with about 20 cows.

"We have taken every opportunity we can to add to our cropland over the last few years," Hans says. "We do not plan to grow our dairy herd because of our desire to always be able to dairy farm at our current location. If we should ever lose our rental property we will always be able to support our current herd size on the property we own."

Landowners in the area are reluctant to sell land for farmland due to potential development opportunities, but are willing to rent it to farmers. Hans rents a majority of the land he grows crops on, with only half of his harvest going to feed the cows. Diversifying the farm through cash cropping has allowed Hans to remain on the family homestead without worrying about making ends meet with a small dairy herd.

"Over the past few years, we've taken on a couple hundred extra acres and we purchased a no-till drill," Hans says of the cropland he and his father,

William Shell, farm. "We've had good luck with it. This year and last year were good for crops—the yields on the corn were terrific."

The Shells have found that while farming in a relatively populated area does have drawbacks; it also gives them the opportunity to teach young people about dairy farming by opening up their farm to tours. Like many farming parents, Hans and Michelle started the tours when their daughters, Mikayla, 14, and Miranda, 12, were young, because the girl's teachers had inquired about it. Now that they're older, the girls enjoy staying home on farm tour day to help with the tours.

"A big reason we decided to keep the tours going was because now kids don't have access to farming," Michelle says. "We felt it was really important because farming in this area—especially dairy farms—are few and far between. A lot of people who live here work in Port Huron or metro Detroit."

"We tell the teachers to bring all the parents they can," Hans says. "Getting the parents out here and educating them is very important."

The Shells place straw bales on the ground for the students and their parents to sit on when they arrive. Hans and Michelle start out by introducing the tour guides, giving a short overview of the farm and what the students will see on the tour. Whenever any questions come up (many times from the parents), Hans tries to answer them right away, so everyone can learn a little more about the farm.

"We get a lot of questions about how often we milk the cows," Hans says. "It's hard for people to really grasp that our cows are milked twice a day, every day."

When the actual tour begins, the Shells split the students up into small groups, each starting their tour at a different location: the milking parlor, petting the calves, seeing and touching what the cows eat and climbing up in a tractor.

Once they've seen the farm, the tour group meets back at the straw bales to clean their hands and enjoy an ice cream or other dairy treat. The Shells also hand out UDIM goody bags to the students.

"They always send us thank you cards and tell us what they thought was best about the farm," Michelle says. "We're committed to educating people about dairy farming and enjoy offering farm tours to local kindergarteners, clubs and groups." The tours leave a lasting impression on some students, who, years after touring the farm will come up to Michelle in the store and tell her how much they liked touring the farm.

The Shells consider themselves fortunate that they are able to farm on the same land as their ancestors and raise their children in a farming environment.

"I really like raising kids on a farm," Michelle says. "I feel their values are different—they have a better appreciation for things and a better understanding of what hard work is."

Although he is following in his family's footsteps by dairy farming, Hans is quick to point out that his decision to dairy was not based solely on "keeping the family farm going," instead, he enjoys all aspects of dairy farming.

"I enjoy working with cattle, being outside and owning my own business," Hans says. "I have always been a do it myself kind of person. I look at the whole aspect of dairy farming as doing something I like."

"Not many people have a job they love," Michelle says. "Hans loves what he does."

Shell Farms, Inc.



Hans and Michelle Shell, with their children:
Miranda, 12 and Mikayla, 14

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

Our commitment to preserving the family legacy.

~ *MMPA Member of* ~
District 8

Southern Sanilac local

~ *Herd size* ~
77 milking and dry

~ *Replacements* ~
70

~ *Acres Farmed* ~
1,100

~ *Milking Set-Up* ~
Double 6 herringbone parlor

~ Ag and Dairy Involvement ~

Through MMPA, Hans is the Secretary/Treasurer of the Southern Sanilac Local. He has previously served on the MMPA Resolutions & Districting Committees and as a District 8 delegate. Hans & Michelle represented District 8 as OYDC in 2001. In the community, both Hans and Michelle serve on committees at the Croswell First United Methodist Church. Michelle is a volunteer for the local Farm Bureau's Project R.E.D program, a Sanilac County 4-H leader, treasurer of the Croswell-Lexington Band Boosters, and a Stampin' Up! Independent Demonstrator. Previously, Hans has served on the Worth Township Planning Commission and Michelle has served on the Croswell-Lexington Board of Education.