

Promoting Dairy Every Step of the Way

Horning Farms, MSU Dairy Farmer of the Year



By Mindy Pratt

In 2004, I met with Earl Horning to interview him about his son Jeff, who, with his wife, Lynda, had just been named MMPA's 2004 Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators. My intent was to get a few quotes from Earl about his son, and Earl was willing to do that, but only after I'd watched a new three-a-day of dairy promotion video he'd just received in the mail.

That's just one example of Earl's enthusiasm for dairy promotion, a passion shared by his wife, Diane. The Horning's passion for dairy promotion as well as the Horning family's long standing in the dairy industry were cited as reasons for choosing them as this year's Michigan State University Dairy Farmer of the Year during the Great Lakes Regional Dairy Conference held in Frankenmuth Feb. 11-13. The MSU citation states that Earl's "key contribution has been in providing statewide

leadership as board chair to the United Dairy Industry of Michigan since 1997."

"Under Earl's leadership as president of the UDIM Board of Directors for the past 12 years, UDIM has received national recognition for creating innovative marketing programs, resulting in increased sales and consumer demand for dairy products. A recent example of this is the partnership with McDonald's in Michigan to successfully test market milk based coffee products," says Nick Bellows, CEO, UDIM. "In addition, UDIM's long standing partnership with the Michigan Department of Education has consistently resulted in annual increases in dairy consumption for milk and other dairy products in Michigan's schools."

"I live for dairy promotion and look for new ways and ideas to promote dairy," Earl says. "We

concentrated on three-a-day of dairy and now we're promoting how farmers care for their animals."

Earl and Diane have demonstrated both their zest for dairy promotion as well as their concern for their dairy herd since the pair started farming with Earl's family in the mid 1960s.

"We've been a dairy farm here for six generations, having the opportunity through our parents to be able to continue to do what we're able to do here," Earl says of his family's farm, which was established in Manchester in 1877.

Diane also grew up on a farm with dairy cows in Saline. She said she'd never go back to a farm after she graduated from MSU but after sharing rides to college with Earl, she changed her mind. Both Earl and Diane graduated from MSU; Earl with a bachelor's degree in animal science and Diane with a

bachelor's degree in elementary education.

The pair settled down on Earl's family farm and Earl farmed with his father for many years. Soon after Earl returned from college, the Hornings built a new milking parlor—a double four herringbone—and doubled their herd from 40 to 80 cows.

While they were growing up, both of the Hornings children, Tricia and Jeff, helped out around the farm. After graduating from MSU, Jeff decided he would like to join Horning Dairy Farm.

When Jeff returned, the Hornings expanded their parlor to its current state, installing a double 10 parallel parlor. They also erected a 155 stall freestall barn and added to the herd. When the herd reached over 200 cows in 2004, the Hornings expanded the freestall barn, installing 200 additional stalls. Today, Horning Farms houses approximately 360 milking and dry cows, and 400 replacements.

While caring for and expanding their own successful dairy business, Earl and Diane were able to find time to get involved in the dairy industry, promoting dairy's importance and making the dairy industry successful.

The Hornings whet their appetite in dairy involvement in 1970 when they earned the title of MMPA's Outstanding Young Dairy Cooperators.

"Once that happened, I got to be a member of the Advisory Committee and from there I was elected to the UDIM Board," Earl says. "Over the years, I became Chairman of UDIM, which has given me a great opportunity to encourage people to communicate with others about the dairy industry."

He says he's particularly proud to "be part of dairy promotion in Michigan," saying his experience has been positive. He commends the dairy farmers and promotion

staff who work tirelessly on dairy promotion in the state, commenting that "the group has been very aggressive in promoting dairy in Michigan," bringing pride to our state on a national scale. Eight years ago, he was elected to the MMPA Board of Directors as the District 1 Director.

"When I go to national meetings and I go and listen to people, I am very proud of what we're doing here," Earl says. "We enjoy meeting and greeting people from all over the country to see what they are doing in their markets and see if you can adapt it to your market. Michigan is a very, very positive place to be in the dairy industry."

Diane promotes dairy and agriculture in general through her involvement in the Michigan Farm Bureau, serving on committees and the board of directors at the state level. She recently went back on the state level Promotion and Education Committee, who are promoting the "Farmers Care" theme. Diane is also an MMPA Dairy Communicator.

Earl and Diane are tireless dairy promoters and successful dairy farmers. The couple say they couldn't do both without having

good help at home on the farm.

"We have always had good employees," Diane says. "That was the difference. We could get away for meetings and vacations."

The Hornings admit that everything doesn't always go smoothly at home, but advises other farmers in their situation to realize it will likely work out.

"When you are away you have to be able to communicate with people and accept that sometimes things don't go as you'd want them to go," Earl adds.

The couple also says they would never have been able to receive such an honor as being named the Dairy Farmer of the Year were it not for the assistance they received at home as well as those within the dairy industry who work to promote dairy programs.

"It's a privilege to be nominated for this award," Earl says. "It takes everyone in the dairy business to help us accomplish what we've achieved over the years. You need to have good communicators and partners to help you get your programs accomplished."



Earl and Diane Horning were joined at the Dairy Industry Recognition Banquet by their children and grandchildren.