Brookside Dairy Operation Has Long History

Brookside Dairy near Clitherall, MN, has a long and storied history. It was originally purchased by Ken Herbranson's great-grandfather in 1874 from a man who had suffered two winters in a dugout and wanted nothing more than enough money to return to Norway. As it turns out, another man's misfortune turned into good fortune for the Herbransons. Ken had returned to the family farm in 1981 to partner with his father Robert and brother Arlan after finishing college and working as an ag equipment rep. In 1988, he and his brother bought the farm from their father.

They farm ~2,000 acres, half owned and half rented. Corn, alfalfa/grass mixtures, soybeans, and a little wheat to make straw are grown to supply their 500-cow dairy. The farm has soil types from light to heavy, with the lighter soils under pivot irrigation. "The work is hard, but we are fortunate to work with a group of dedicated long-term employees who get it all done and do it well."

"Our corn silage is 60% brown mid-rib (BMR) and 40% conventional silage varieties, a compromise between the higher digestibility of BMR and higher tonnage of conventional varieties," says Ken. The mix "seems to increase milk production 4-5 lbs/day." It is stored in "drive-over piles" covered with a two layer oxygen barrier, then covered with tires, and edges sealed with dirt. For the past 5 years, they have applied sodium sulfate to their silage and haylage and found it to be more reliable in preserving feed than inoculants.

To keep forage production at optimum levels, Brookside Dairy employs an agronomist. They keep alfalfa stands in production 3-4 years before rotating, using the nitrogen credit to support the following crop. They seed hilly ground to 1 bu oats along with 14 lbs hybrid alfalfa and 2-3 lbs tall fescue. Lime is applied prior to seeding, and soils are tested annually. They fertilize in fall and again after first or second cutting, as needed, and closely monitor fields to control bugs.

"We make baleage for heifers out of first cutting and have found hybrid alfalfa yields more. It seems to be a little hardier and comes back quickly after cutting," says Ken. Hay is usually cut at bud stage with a self-propelled windrower and raked the next day with a double horizontal-type rake making a single windrow out of two 16' swaths laid wide to dry quickly. "We harvest with a self-propelled chopper pulling a dump wagon and haul with tandem trucks. We then shape and pack with a large tractor and blade. Baleage is done much the same except we let it dry down another day or two," Ken adds.

They take 3-4 cuttings a year and make 5'x5' bales to fit their in-line wrapper. Ken has found wrapping saves leaves and, thus, protein. "By wrapping bales we end up with more hay, and cattle eat it all. For best results we have found it is better to avoid baling too wet."

"The biggest challenge in growing hay has always been stand establishment," he adds. "If the weather doesn't cooperate it's a struggle. We've had some success by having the seed blown on after rolling the field and then incorporating it with shallow vertical tillage. We have also successfully no-tilled it in after a wheat harvest. We've found a few pounds of fescue in alfalfa increases tonnage and suppresses weeds as alfalfa thins out a bit. We think the resulting forage has a better protein profile which is healthier for our cows."

Herbransons built a new freestall barn in 1996 for 300 cows and expanded it to 500 cows a few years later. To enhance their milk production, Ken has worked with the University of Minnesota in its crossbreeding study. "We've crossed 60% of our Holstein herd with Montbiliarde and 'Viking Red' breeds," says Ken. "Our three-way crosses have proved to excel in reproduction, health traits, and cull value while holding their own in milk production compared to our registered Holsteins. We've found the crossbreeds to be more profitable all the way around. We maintain a 90 lb tank average/day on a diet of corn silage, alfalfa/grass haylage and baleage, canola meal, earlage, and dry concentrate."

CowManager ear tag monitors have been extremely valuable in maintaining a healthy, productive herd. "Tags are able to detect herd heat and illness and electronically notify you for early intervention. They have proved to be one of our best investments."

Ken has supported the dairy industry by serving as secretary of the 10-state Midwest Dairy Association, as well as chair of its Minnesota Division. He is a Midwest Forage Association member as well, adding, "We are long-time members and find MFA information to be extremely helpful in forage production here at Brookside Dairy."

Ken with grandsons Lance and August.