

A photograph of a man and a young boy in a barn. The man, wearing a black t-shirt with a logo and a red and white baseball cap, is leaning over and petting a black and white cow. The boy, wearing an orange t-shirt with a pattern, is also reaching out to touch the cow. The cow has a red collar with the number 1153 and a yellow tag. The background shows other cows in stalls.

2026

Summer Farm Living

A Publication of the Steele County Times & Dodge County Independent

CONVENTIONAL TO ORGANIC



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Tom and Karen Wencil in the barn. The Wencil's operate an organic farm and sell the milk to Organic Valley.

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Wencil family switches up dairy production

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Tom and Karen Wencil and their family operate an organic dairy farm in Steele County, northwest of Blooming Prairie.

They currently milk about 140 cows, mostly Holsteins, on their 500-acre farm. Tom said In addition to the Holsteins, some are crossed with Flekvieh, a breed from Germany and Austria.

The farm, Wencil said, includes 120 acres of pasture, which allows the cows to be outside during the grazing months. In addition to the pastureland, they have 120 acres in hay, 120 acres in corn, 70 rye, 40 acres of soybeans and some cover crops such as oats.

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture

"Organic made it feasible for them to come back."

Karen Wencil

Organic Dairy Farmer

estimates that Minnesota has more than 700 certified organic farms and more than 230 certified organic food processors and businesses.

The Wencil farm has been in the family for generations and has been designated a Century Farm in 2013. Wencil said his father had questioned the increasing use of herbicides "way back when" so he was a supporter when he switched the farm to organic production in 2002.

He said the family

decided that they needed to make the change if their two sons, Wayne and Chris, who were heading off to college, were going to be able to keep operating the farm. Wayne and Chris are now working at the farm along with Wayne's family, wife Linnea and children Jayden, Cameron and Alison.

"Organic made it feasible for them to come back," Karen Wencil said. Milk prices have not been as consistent as crops such as corn but more of a "roller

See WENCIL on 19 ►

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5 generations of milking

Schmity Holsteins maintains largest herd in Steele County

BY RICK BUSSLER

For nearly a century and a half milk has been produced at the Schmidt farm southwest of Owatonna. And it appears that legacy is not in jeopardy of ending any time soon.

Current owner, Jon Schmidt, is the fifth generation to operate what's today known as Schmity Holsteins. The farm began
See **HOLSTEINS** on 20 ►



Jon Schmidt maintains a milking herd of 240 cows on a five-generation family farm southwest of Owatonna. Cows have been milked on the Schmidt farm every day since 1884.



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CHECKEL AND JACKS

Farm enthusiast collects “weird stuff”

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Jim Checkel is a collector. He showed off some of his collections when Sen. Tina Smith stopped by his farm to talk about rural health care, including ambulance service, his work with the Mayo Clinic in encouraging Mayo medical students to consider working in rural communities and the farm bill.

Those issues were certainly covered but a good bit of the time was spent looking at the many farm-related things Checkel has collected over the years and informally has on display in the buildings at his farm south of Kasson.

For background, Checkel grew up on the family farm, and planned to become a farmer and work full-time on the farm after high school. His parents had other ideas and wanted him to go to college which he did and earned an associate's degree in auto mechanics.

He applied to the Mayo Clinic because he thought he could work on the clinic's vehicles. There were no jobs available working on vehicles, but he was offered a position in one of the research

labs. His skills were recognized and he advanced to a senior researcher position in the allergy department.

But he still kept his farm roots, living on the family farm, tending to farm duties after working at Mayo during the day.

Over the years his collection of farm equipment and tools grew and grew. They are now organized in buildings on the farm.

He has a collection of tractors, including a home-made one built by long-time Dodge County resident Ken Foley that he bought Foley's estate sale.

He also is storing a 1927 Model T that a woman who lives in the Cities had been storing in Kasson. When she lost that storage space, he offered his shed and it has now been there for two-and-a-half years.

“I collect weird stuff,” Checkel admitted.

Perhaps he was thinking of the 219 different pieces of barbed wire that he has displayed in one of the sheds. The barbed wire was of interest to Smith because her grandfather had collected barbed wire in Texas.

Or maybe it was the jacks. It is well known in Dodge County that he has

a very large jack collection. He explained to Smith that when he talks about his jacks collection many people think he is referring to the children's toy.

But he means heavy mechanical jacks. He said he won a farm jack like that at a hardware store in the 1980s. That started his interest in jacks, and he now has hundreds of them. Ten companies made jacks for Model T Fords. He has them all. He has a Yellow Cab jack. Jacks from different tractor manufacturers including John Deere, Oliver, Case and others. He has railroad jacks and one of the most unusual, he said, is the jack from a casket manufacturing company.

There are some older wooden jacks, he said, including one from an 1847 Conestoga wagon. He also has a collection of little miniature jacks.

He also has a collection of arrowheads he has found around the area.

Checkel has now retired from the lab at Mayo Clinic, but he is still involved.

When he worked in the labs at Mayo, he became aware of the

See **WEIRD STUFF** on 8 ►



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Jim Checkel shows off the 1927 Model T he is storing for a Twin Cities resident.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Jim Checkel shows off some of his massive jack collection.

MEET THE DAIRY PRINCESSES

Eight young women are representing Steele County as dairy princesses this year. We would like you to meet them this week and learn more about what has led them to becoming ambassadors of the dairy industry.



Princess:

Adeline Schroht-17

Parents: Brooke and Kyle Limoseth and Aaron Schroht

Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

I have grown up around agriculture and dairy, and I want to give back to an industry that has shaped who I am today.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Attending events, meeting new people and promoting dairy in fun and creative ways.

High School/College Activities:

National Honor Society, HOSA executive board member, Japanese research study for inequality in health care, Wyldlife

leader, Sunday School teacher, varsity lacrosse and varsity volleyball.

Describe your dairy farm:

My dairy farm is a sixth-generation farm. Each morning starts with early feeding and milking the cows, and the day ends the same.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

Cleaning stalls, bedding, feeding, milking, sanitizing milk equipment and cleaning allies.

Accomplishment most proud of:

Presenting my I.S. Japanese Research study, "Inequality in Healthcare" to students from Japan. Being able to bring awareness to these struggles is very important to me.

Future goals:

I am attending St. Benedicts while playing lacrosse and volleyball. I will be studying pre-med in hopes to scrub into surgeries in the future.



Princess:

Jena Hanson-19

Parents: Steve and Suzy Hanson

Home: Owatonna

Special Note: Finalist for Princess Kay of the Milky Way

Why serve as dairy princess:

I would like to be a dairy princess because the dairy industry is very important to me. I want to be able to share my knowledge and passion of dairy with the community. As well as creating new connections with people to better increase my knowledge of the industry and to help build relationships that will benefit me in my future career. With the connections I have made so far from FFA to my mentorships, job shadows and internships, I was able to kickstart my success in pursuing my first couple of years in agriculture, and I can wait to further expand within the industry.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Sharing my knowledge about the dairy industry and promoting dairy products. As well as working hands, on with all ages within the community from kids at daycare visits to adults within the community.

High school/college activities:

In high school, I was part of FFA, 4-H, choir, orchestra (violin), a first-grade religious education teacher and girls varsity tennis.

In college, I am part of the Numen Center, Dairy Club and was a member of Women in Agriculture Club.

Describe your dairy farm:

The dairy farm I currently work as an intern is Kashome Holsteins in Medford. There I help milk around 160 head of cows. The cows that we milk only consist of the Holstein breed.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

I help prepare the parlor for milking, milk the cows, and clean up the parlor after milking. We start milking in the mornings at 6 a.m. and go to 9 a.m., and at night we start at 4 p.m. and go until 7 p.m.

Accomplishment most proud of:

Holding my role of vice president of the Owatonna FFA chapter. I held this role in the years of 2023-24. Within this time, our chapter held its 100th year banquet, which the officer team planned and put on. This had been the biggest banquet our chapter has had in a very long time, and I was grateful to be one of the main leaders within it.

Future goals:

To graduate from the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. As well as finding a job within the dairy industry. Currently, I have gotten in contact with many dairy nutri-

tionists and have been able to do a shadow job and set up more for the future. I would love to be able to expand on these job shadow opportunities and start a career in one of the companies I have been able to work with.

I also hope within this time to get to be able to purchase my own home as well as starting a family.



Princess:

Isabella Schultz-18

Parents: Grant and Julie Schultz

Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

Being a dairy princess would allow me to better serve the dairy industry here in Steele County. I love the dairy and agriculture industry and being a princess gives me the chance to share what I love with all those around me.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Sharing what it means to be a part of the dairy industry and the good that comes from all these people and animals involved

in this industry with those who have never experienced it.

High School/college activities:

In high school, I was a two-sport captain for cross country and track. I was president of the concert choir, drum major in the marching band and in pepband. I was a parliamentarian of Owatonna's National Honor Society. I was a member of the student council, DECA and Owatonna Students for Life.

In college, I am a part of the UMary run club, intramurals, concert choir and am in a bible study. Lastly, I have been a part of 4-H since fourth grade, and this will be my last year. 4-H along with all these activities have made such a large impact in my life, and I am so grateful for all the memories that have come from it.

Describe your dairy farm:

I do not live on a dairy farm; however, I have been a part of two different family farms. I am currently a part of Nelson's farm and love helping with what I am able to. Prior to working with the Nelson's, I was a part of Clover Glen Farms.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

On the dairy farm, I will help out with chores as I am able. I have helped out with milking but more often I help out with calf chores.

Accomplishment most proud of:

My senior track season. After my senior cross-country season, I found out that I had a very serious iron deficiency. This caused a lot of problems during cross country, and I was scared that my track season would still be filled with pain, and I would not PR. However, I had the best season I had ever had and PRd by over 45 seconds in the 3200m. I was not the best runner on the track, but I pushed myself to my limits and saw it pay off.

Future goals:

In the next five years, I plan to have just graduated with my master's degree in occupational therapy. I then plan to move back to the Owatonna area where I hope to work as a pediatric OT. Looking at my goals for the next 10 years, I see myself growing as an OT and starting a family. While I will not be pursuing a career actively in the dairy industry, I know that I will always be a part of this industry, and I will always keep agriculture a part of my life.



Princess: Anna Cox- 19
Parents: Andy and Lindsay Cox
Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

I am passionate about the dairy industry and enjoy spending time with others spreading knowledge about dairy. I enjoyed my many years of being a dairy ambassador and was excited to take a higher role of involvement. This will be my third year as a princess which shows how much I have enjoyed it.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Going to public events where I get to personally interact with others creating positive relationships with the community establishing a strong bond between our dairy farmers and the local public.

High School/college activities:

In high school, I ran track and cross country and was involved in FFA, NHS and 4-H. In college, I am majoring in business management with a master's in business administration. I was the tailgate director at college this fall, I enjoy participating in intramural sports and being involved in discipleship/bible groups and exploring around Arkansas.

Describe your dairy farm:

I grew up showing for and helping on Clover Glen Farms, with a herd of Holstein and Brown Swiss. In the summer of 2023, they began to sell their herd and are no longer an active dairy. I showed and helped around at Nelson-Way as they have a herd of Holstein, Brown Swiss, Ayrshires and Guernseys.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

Previously at Clover Glen, I would help with calf chores, miling and would come to help for other animals upkeep such as hoof trimming and vet checks. At NelsonWay, I help with evening chores and tasks, anything else they need my help with around the farm.

Accomplishment most proud of:

In academics an accomplishment I am proud of is being on the Dean's List every semester while at the University. This displays my work ethic and standard work quality of work. I also balance academy and personal life.

A personal accomplishment is something I am currently still in the midst of. I decided to study abroad this semester which was very far out of my comfort zone and some days still are. I have learned so much about myself, increased in independence, confidence and have lived in a world so much larger than anything I have witnessed. Europe being my class has expanded my world view and perspectives on life. Though an amazing experience, it was still a scary thing to step into, and I am proud of myself for that and what I have gained from it.

Future goals:

In five years, I will have hopefully graduated from Harding University with a degree and master's in business management. I hope to find a position that allows me to use my knowledge and skill set and in a position that allows me

to move up. In 10 years, I hope to have settled into a career that I love and am passionate about even if it is something I can't even fathom doing today. I also hope to continue traveling around increasing my knowledge of different cultures and continuing to learn.



Princess: Madison Homuth- 20
Parents: Jon and Casey Homuth
Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

I want to promote the dairy industry to the younger generations in order to keep the dairy industry from fading and becoming non-existent. I want to be a leader for other girls that are wanting to become a dairy princess and show that hard work does pay off and after years, you can still accomplish your dreams.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Learning new things and working with the younger kids to teach them about dairy cows, production of milk, farm life, hard work and why it is important to keep dairy farms around.

High School/college activities:

National Honor Society, Big Brothers Big Sisters,

Best Buddies and Miracle League.

Describe your dairy farm:

The dairy farm that I am with is Schmitz Holsteins. They have 450 head of Holsteins, and they milk about 200. The cows are milked twice a day. The farm is a family-owned farm with over 200 acres of land where corn, grain and alfalfa are grown to feed the animals.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

When I help on the farm, I help work with the animals for show season as well as helping with chores, feeding, sometimes milking if needed, and helping with cutting their hair for show season as well. I make sure that the animals have easy access to their water and food.

Accomplishment most proud of:

My ability to work full time as a resident assistant at Ecumen Brooks and also managing to stay on track with school. I have done this for about two years now and I am very proud of being able to maintain my grades and manage to work as much as I do already. Another accomplishment that I am proud of was being inducted into the National Honor Society my sophomore year. This was a big accomplishment because it is not a club that very many students can get into because it is based on your academics and your grades and how well you are able to maintain your GPA. These are just two of the many accomplishments that I am proud of.

Future goals:

My goals for the next five years include graduating from St. Mary's University

of Minnesota from the nursing program, becoming a registered nurse and working in pediatrics, hopefully in the NICU or PICU. I also want to add a minor major in sign language. I have watched how much sign language has helped my little sisters in communicating with them while they are learning to speak. With this added knowledge in pediatrics, I'll be able to help communicate with the littles and will also be able to communicate with others who might be hard of hearing.



Princess: Ali Slater- 20
Parents: Chris and Andrea Slater
Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

I like to educate young kids about dairy and farms.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Getting to do the fun events and having fun doing it this summer. Also doing the milking contest.

High School/college activities:

I am taking a break from college and mainly working.

Describe your dairy farm:

It started in 1844 and my uncle is the fifth generation.

See **PRINCESSES** on 19 ►

2 dairy princesses serve Dodge County

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Two young women, Josie Sauder and Ellyssa Robinson, are serving as Dodge County Dairy Princesses for 2026.

The two have already started their duties appearing at several events including talking to Pine Island second graders at an annual event at the Alberts Brothers Dairy Farm. Sauder also participated in the parade at this year's Cheese Festival in Pine Island.

Sauder is the daughter of Stan and Amy Sauder from Pine Island. She grew up on her sixth-generation, 600-cow dairy farm and is currently working full time at the farm, where she is involved in everything that goes along with dairy farming.

Growing up on a dairy farm, she said that she always looked up to the dairy princesses.

She said she loves talking about the dairy industry and what farmers do to ensure their cows get the best care possible. She said her goal as a dairy princess is to share her knowledge and passion about dairy and be an advocate for the dairy industry.

Her sponsor for the Dairy Princess selection is Cactus Creek in Zumbrota.

Robinson is the daughter of Shane and Jacinta Robinson of Dodge Center and is a 2014 graduate of Triton High School. She is the youngest of four children who grew up on the sixth-generation family farm. "I love dairy," she said, "not just the animals but the product."

Like most dairy princesses, she said what she wants to do in the role is to inform people about the industry and be an advocate for the industry and dairy farmers.

She said has enjoyed the visits the dairy princesses have already had with school children and is looking forward to the events, parades and county fair that are coming up this summer, including working at the malt stand at the Dodge County Fair and helping pass out the ribbons.

She currently works at Central Livestock in Zumbrota.

Her sponsor is Central Livestock in Zumbrota.

Both young women will be appearing at events over the next year to advocate for dairy products and the dairy industry.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Ellyssa Robinson and Josie Sauder are already busy making appearances as Dodge County Dairy Princesses.

"I love dairy, not just the animals but the product."

Ellyssa Robinson

Dodge Dairy Princess

Farm enthusiast collects "weird stuff"

◀ **WEIRD STUFF** from 5 fact that many medical staff members were not familiar with the injuries and illnesses that often come with farm life even though Mayo is located in southeastern Minnesota surrounded by farms and agricultural businesses.

That led him to invite colleagues to his farm where he could show them allergens. He could run coveralls filled with newspaper or straw through a power takeoff and show what the injuries could be. Or explain the mold that can grow in grain elevators.

Several years ago, a new rural medicine elective at the medical school was started by the Zumbro Valley Medical Society. It was natural that Checkel be asked to help design the curriculum. The curriculum has been expanded and includes such topics of

rural health issues including mental health issues in rural communities and the problems that rural ambulance services face. Students visit the communities to see the issues first-hand, including a stop at Checkel's farm.

It is also hoped that

some of the medical students may consider practicing medicine in rural communities.

At a town hall discussion held last fall in Owatonna by Minnesota Public Radio on rural health, one of those who commented was a Mayo medical student from New York City who said that as a result of the Mayo

elective he was seriously considering a rural practice.

Checkel said he is now renting out his cropland, although he still lives on the family farm. He is active in community affairs, especially those involving rural medical care and, of course, he's still on the lookout for things to collect.

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Steele County dairy farm embraces robotics

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

As dairy farms consolidate and have larger herds, there is a trend starting to rely more on automated systems, including robotic milkers, to streamline dairy farming.

Milk prices haven't really gone up in years, said Reid Balzer, a Steele County resident who works for Lely North America, one of the companies that is providing automated robotic systems, helping dairy farmers.

As a result, Balzer said,

there is an increasing interest in using robotics on the dairy farm. The increasing size of the herds have also meant more employees are needed and "no one wants to milk cows," he said.

While there are a few farms with 30 to 60 cows moving towards robotics, he said, most are the larger operations.

So far, Balzer Dairy Farm, which currently is milking 116 cows on 500 acres, is the only one in Steele County to make use of the robotic system, said Rick Balzer, who runs the

farm with his wife Cathy and son Scott.

By using the robotics system, Balzer said, it not only saves time and employee costs, but it also helps them better monitor the cows.

Gone are the days of the farmer milking the cow early in the morning and again in the afternoon. Using robots, the cows basically decide when they need to be milked and head to the stall for milking.

Because of the ID tag the cow has on her collar, the machine immediately



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Rick Balzer can check the health and activity of each of the cows on the farm at the computer. The cow's collar and the milking robot record all the information gathered and send it to the computer.

recognizes the cow, cleans the udder and attaches the milking cups via laser or camera sensors. It then starts pumping the milk and automatically unattaches itself when milking is completed.

The ID tag does more than just identify which cow it is. It can tell how long since her last milking, how much food she has consumed since the feed is available during the milking process, how much milk she has given and how active the cow is. There is even a pedometer on the collar that shows the rumination of the cow. Rumination is re-chewing and swallowing. They typically spend 7 to 9 hours a day ruminating.

Knowing how much time is spent ruminating can tell the farmer a lot about the animal's health. Rumination time drops when the cow is in heat and also in the hours up to and leading into calv-

ing. Sick cows also show changes in rumination time.

The milk is at about 102 degrees at the time of milking and is automatically pumped to a cooler where the temperature is reduced and it is at 63 degrees when it enters the bulk tank where it is further cooled. It is held in the bulk tank until the truck comes to pick up the milk and take it to the processing plant.

Twice a day, Balzer said, the entire robotic system shuts down to give the equipment a complete washing.

All this information and more is relayed to the computer where Balzer can call up the statistics on each individual cow. The computer shows the statistics over time making it easier to track production and determine if the cow is healthy or showing signs of a health concern.

Feed is available to the cow during the milking procedure, he said, and it is actually more comfortable for the cow to be milked more than twice a day.

Still, Balzer said, the machine can reject the cow coming to be milked if the milking times are to close together.

Reid Balzer said that Leley is a 150-year-old company that got its start in the Netherlands in making forage equipment and moved into robotics in about 1998. The forage division has since been sold.

Using robotics, Reid Balzer said, is good for both the farmer and cows. It can save the farmer time in the milking chores and also reduce some of the work that is more boring. At the same time, it also is good for the cow as her health can be constantly monitored.

"It's in the farmer's best interest to do what is best for the cows," he said.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

The milking robot at Rick Balzer's farm has a stall the cow walks into when it is time to milk. The machine first washes the cow's udders, attaches the cups and starts the milking all the while the cow is able to eat its food. When the milking is finished the machine automatically unattaches from the cow who is then free to leave.

Refuel with milk

BY BRENDA MILLER

All farmers are athletes. Some farmers are actual real-life marathon runners and others participate in local 5K races, but all are endurance athletes mentally and physically. Think about everyday dairy farm chores: milking cows, pushing up feed with a broom or scraper, walking back and forth in the barn/parlor, cleaning stalls, in/out of a skid steer or tractor, operating machinery, fetching cows, record keeping, and doing bookwork. How about throwing bales or pitching silage or manure? Sound familiar? All farmers need to rest and refuel their bodies when energy levels are low, or fatigue sets in to reduce chance of injury and help prevent accidents.

The human body is made up of bone, muscle, fat, blood, organs, connective tissue, and averages about 53% water overall. Elementally speaking, 99% of the body is composed of oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, and phosphorus. The body needs to maintain certain levels of all those elements in order to function properly. In addition, a body needs vitamins to complement those minerals for the body to stay fully restored. When a person sweats, their body is depleted of electrolytes and thus needs to rehydrate. Some ingredients in electrolytes are calcium, potassium, sodium and magnesium. When a baby calf gets scours the caretaker feeds the calf electrolytes to replenish those nutrients lost, same idea.

When a person's body is not properly maintained it can become prone to injury due to conditions such as: dehydration,

stress fractures, fatigue, and a weakened immune system. Dairy farmers are pretty lucky as they have the perfect solution to help keep their bodies fully maintained right there on the farm. It's milk! The wholesome and nutritious product cows produce every day. However, an even tastier recovery drink after a long, hard day is a tall glass of chocolate milk. For some, chocolate milk is a little more palatable after an endurance event than white milk.

Why milk or chocolate milk? Milk is nature's most natural recovery drink. It has 13 essential vitamins and minerals that all work together to nourish a body. Just one, 8 ounce serving of milk contains a good chunk of daily nutritional needs: calcium (25%), protein (16%), vitamin D (15%), phosphorus (20%), vitamin A (15%), riboflavin (30%), vitamin B12 (50%), pantothenic acid (20%), niacin (15%), zinc (10%), selenium (10%), iodine (60%), and potassium (10%). These vitamins and minerals work together to build and maintain strong bones, teeth, a healthy immune system, boost energy, and help to reduce the risk of stress fractures. In addition, milk provides the right mix of proteins and carbohydrates to refuel and rebuild tired muscles, fluids to rehydrate the body, and electrolytes to help replenish the elements lost when sweating.

Chocolate milk can be a great snack and give the body a boost of energy all while nourishing bones, muscles, and organs. If your current pick-me-up consists of a can of soda and cookies/candy/processed sugars, give chocolate milk a try, your body will thank you. Or at least have



On The Farm

BRENDA MILLER

a treat of milk and cookies instead. From an economics standpoint, in today's market (depending upon where you shop), a gallon of milk (128oz) will cost half as much or less than a twelve pack of soda (144oz).

Farmers are true endurance athletes, oftentimes without even knowing it. Some put on 8-12 miles a day or more just by doing everyday chores. If a person is curious to see just how many steps they are walking in a day, while doing everyday chores, there are pedometer apps for smart phones, or many smart watches will track steps as well. If a person does not have a smart phone, a simple, inexpensive pedometer can be purchased from a retail store that clips onto a belt or pants pocket. Depending upon stride length, the average number of steps per mile when walking is around 2,000-2,500.

Farmers are a tenacious lot and possess a mental/physical toughness that is hard to replicate. The key to keeping the everyday momentum going and injuries at bay is to refuel the system with a nutrient packed product. So next time fatigue sets in, refuel with (chocolate) milk. Milk does a body good!

Brenda Miller is an educator with the University of Minnesota Extension serving Todd County. She may be reached at nels4220@umn.edu or 320-533-4655.

NICC ALUMNI OF YEAR

Steele County man earns top honor from alma mater

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Reid Balzer of Owatonna was recognized earlier this year as the Outstanding Agricultural Business Alumni from Northeast Iowa Community College in Calmar, Iowa.

Balzer, a graduate of Medford High School, graduated from NICC in 2012 after studying dairy science and agricultural business.

Balzer, whose family owns Balzer Dairy Farm in Steele County, said he chose NICC because it is a good dairy school and also affordable. "I was paying for school, and I wanted to get the most out of it."

It was there he learned to "be a responsible adult," he said, adding he "grew up fast."

Balzer said that while in college he considered his speech class to be his best. By the end of the semester, he said, he was able to give a speech before the entire school.

He also said that not only did he get a good education at NICC, but he also learned a lot about being an adult. "I wasn't much of a partier," said Balzer, who now works for Lely North America, an international business committed to providing innovative solutions for farmers.

But he did learn practical things, he said, such as paying rent and buying food.

He said while at school he didn't "try to stand out" and one of the professors tried to get him involved in dairy judging but he decided not to try that.

He did stay in contact with one of his professors after



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

Reid Balzer was named earlier this year as the Outstanding Agricultural Business Alumni from Northeast Iowa Community College in Colmar, Iowa.

graduation, he said, and he was in France on a business trip for his employer when the professor called to say he had received the award.

He said that most of the students at the school go into some area of beef or dairy farming. But, Balzer said, he had become interested in robotics while in high school and that interest continued when he was in college. While at school he met a student who was familiar with Lely North America, a company making robotics to work with the dairy industry. That connection led him to be connected to the company which ultimately led to a job offer. He has since advanced to a management role and in his current position he focuses on Lely's automated systems, including the Juno, Vector, and Collector solutions that support modern dairy operations.



STAFF PHOTO BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN

While most of the cows at the Wencil farm are Holsteins there are a few that are cross-bred with the Flekvieh, a breed from Germany and Austria.

Wencil family switches up dairy production

◀ **WENCIL** from 2
coaster.” By going organic, they said, prices have risen with demand and the roller coaster effect is less. “It’s a trade-off,” she said. “It’s more work but there is a more consistent price.”

“Our milk price is far more consistent than conventional dairy or crops have been,” Tom said.

The day at the farm begins early, Wencil said, as he is generally in the barn before 5:30 a.m. with his sons joining soon after. During the grazing season the cows have the option whether they want to come into the barn at night or remain in the pasture after the evening milking is completed.

The cows know when they need to be milked, Wencil said, and in the morning, they come into the barn on their own. He added the cows are given access to the fresh pasture after each milking and can return to the free stall

barn in case of excessive heat or stormy weather.

They milk in a Double 8 formation with eight cows on each side. As one side is milked, the other is prepared for milking. After the cow is prepped the milking machine is attached and shuts off automatically when finished.

The actual milking, he said, takes about three to five minutes per cow and the entire process takes three to three-and-a-half hours from startup to cleanup.

Milking is done twice a day.

The family sells their milk to Organic Valley which is a farm cooperative headquartered in LaFarge, Wis. and they are certified organic by Oregon Tilth.

There is a specific process to be certified as organic and meticulous records must be kept ensuring organic practices are adhered to, Wencil said.

USDA organic livestock

standards include initially undergoing certification from an organization such as Oregon Tilth, maintain 100% organic feed, prohibit use of antibiotics or growth hormones and ensure cows have daily outdoor access with at least 120 days on pasture per year.

Wencil said cows generally go to pasture in May and continue until the weather does not permit that, often into November.

The Wencil’s raise most of their own feed for winter.

Ensuring the feed, including the pasture, is also organic means that they maintain a buffer strip of 30 ft. between them and the conventional farms. That is also part of the records they must maintain to be certified.

The record-keeping requirements require verifying everything including origin of livestock, feed, young stock management, health care practices, breeding and the animals’ living conditions.

MEET THE DAIRY PRINCESSES

◀ **PRINCESSES** from 7
Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

Getting animals ready for the fair, field work if help is needed. I make my brothers do all the hard work.

Accomplishment most proud of:

Getting intermediate champion female with my cow, Saige.

Future goals:

I plan on going back to school to finish the vet tech program at RCTC. I plan on getting a job as a vet tech and possibly continue school to become a veterinarian.



Princess: Madi Murphy- 20
Parents: Kim and Jon Schmidt
Home: Owatonna

Why serve as dairy princess:

I want to support the dairy community and get kids interested in learning about the dairy community/industry.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

Spending time with other princesses and teaching kids all about dairy.

High School/college activities:

Working at daycare in Lincoln, Neb.

Describe your dairy farm:

We have a 500-cow dairy farm. Majority of our animals are registered Holsteins. We also have a small herd of 12 registered Jerseys. I am the owner of the Jersey herd. We currently milk around 260 cows twice a day. The farm consists of 250 acres where corn, alfalfa, winter rye, triticale and peas are grown and used to feed the cattle.

Your responsibilities on the dairy farm:

I helped milk cows from August 2021-July 2023. I work with the animals and clip/wash them to get them ready for the Steele County Free Fair.

Accomplishment most proud of:

Winning grand champion twice at the Steele County Free Fair.

Future goals:

Going to college and obtaining my degree in elementary education and finding a good job in my field of study.



Princess: Chloe Garten- 20
Parents: Joel Garten and Denise and Tim Nelson

Home: Owatonna
Why serve as dairy princess:

I would like to serve as a dairy princess because of me just being part of the dairy ambassadors and me just looking up to dairy princesses. I remember thinking I want to be one of those one day because they’re able to help teach little kids and adults learn more about the dairy industry.

What do you look forward to as dairy princess:

As a dairy princess, I look forward to teaching little kids more about the dairy industry and being able to tell them and show them that you don’t have to be on a farm or live on a farm to participate in the dairy ambassador programs.

High School/College activities:

I am a hockey manager and partake in AP classes.

Describe your dairy farm:

When I am on the farm, I help with cow chores and any other chores that need to be done.

Accomplishment most proud of:

One accomplishment I am most proud of is that I have been accepted into a college nursing program.

Future goals:

In five years, I plan to just freshly graduated and starting to figure where I want to go in life and where I want to work. And, in 10 years, I plan on being in the pediatrics field.

Schmity Holsteins maintains largest herd in Steele County

◀ **HOLSTEINS** from 4 back in 1884 and has been milking cows every day since then. The farm was honored as a Century Farm in 1996.

Schmidt built a new milking parlor just four years ago with a much larger milk tank. He doubled the capacity to 6,000 gallons. Instead of the milk truck coming every day, it now shows up every other day to ship the milk to Associated Milk Producers Inc., or AMPI, in Zumbrota.

Currently, Schmidt operates the largest milking herd in Steele County with 240 cows. Each cow produces about 92 pounds per day totaling 6.7 million pounds of milk annually.

Milking takes place twice a day beginning at 6 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. and lasts up to four hours each time. Schmity has a free-stall barn where 10 cows can be milked at a time.

Joining Schmidt in the dairy operation are his wife, Kim, and their daughter, Madi Murphy, who also happens to be

one of eight dairy princesses in Steele County. Jon's brother-in-law, Chris Slater, also helps on the farm, along with his two sons, Jacob and Steven. In addition, Jon's father, Myron Schmidt, also helps on the farm every day by feeding and tending to the calves.

Schmidt has always had a huge interest in genetics. He only uses the top bulls available for breeding. "We want the milk and the type. We are running really high components of fat and protein," he explained. "We have fed for it and bred for it for many years," he added.

To illustrate the success Schmity has experienced, Schmidt points out how his herd has received the Progressive Genetic Herd Award from the Holstein Association for the past 21 years. This award is given out to the top 1% in the nation based on herd genetics. Schmidt said he has achieved the top award by breeding the herd to the top genetic bulls in the breed.

Another big milestone is being recognized by Minnesota DHIA for high production. Schmity has been listed on the top 100 herds in Minnesota for the past 21 years. Currently,



the herd's rolling average is 30,076 pounds of milk—an average of 1,300 pounds of fat and 1,040 pounds of protein, according to Schmidt.

Schmidt's success comes with his strong educational background. He attended the University of Minnesota-St. Paul where he majored in dairy science. After college,

he moved away to Green Bay to work in the dairy industry.

But it was short lived. Within three months, Schmidt found himself back home operating the

family's dairy operation. "I went out into the industry and quickly found out I wanted to milk my own herd," he said.

Though there are many challenges of operating a dairy farm like the weather, commodity prices, not getting enough hay or cows dropping over dead, it doesn't discourage Schmidt from continuing on. One of the biggest reasons he loves what he does is because he gets to be his own boss and set his own schedule. "I don't know what else I would do," he says. "It's what I've always done. I've grown up with cows. It's a family thing. It has been our livelihood."

A major struggle facing Schmity Holsteins as well as most other dairy oper-

ations is the volatile milk prices, which currently are hovering around \$17 to \$18 per hundred weight. The highest Schmidt has seen came a few years ago at \$26. "The highs are short-lived, and the lows seem to stick around," he said, noting they experienced big swings during the COVID pandemic.

For Schmity's operation, helping to offset the lower milk prices right now is the beef prices. Bull calves are running around \$1,200 to \$1,500. "That's huge. It's saving us with the lower milk prices," Schmidt said. "Things would be a lot tougher if we weren't getting good beef prices."

He added, "You have to set yourself up to handle the low times."

In recent years, Schmidt has become more focused on community involvement. He has been the chairman of the Steele County American Dairy Association since 2017. He prides himself on the fact that Steele County has one of the strongest ADA boards in the state.

"We have always been a strong dairy community and have kept building on it," Schmidt said. He noted how many other counties are unable to generate the kind of money that Steele County does through its malt stands and other community events. To his knowledge, Steele is the only county in the state to offer two malt stands

during the county fair.

Schmidt also serves on the AMPI Board, and just recently was elected to the World Dairy Expo Board.

Earlier this month, Schmidt hosted the Breakfast on the Farm, a popular dairy event that attracted nearly 1,100 people to his farm for breakfast and to learn more about the dairy industry. The breakfast event has been going every year since 1998 except during COVID.

While the number of dairy farms has shrunk to 12 in Steele County, Schmidt doesn't foresee it getting any lower, at least in the near future. He said overall the dairy industry is solid right now, but he also realizes that it's highly unlikely to gain any additional dairy farms. "You wish you could get more into the industry," he said.

Overall, the dairy industry is expanding with larger dairy operations. And, while Schmidt is Steele County's largest, it's considered to be on the smaller side in an industry of dairy operations featuring thousands of cows. "I don't look at us milking thousands of cows," he said.

Schmidt said he is content maintaining where they're at. "It takes a lot of work and time to get where you want to be," he said. "We want to keep improving the cows from year to year."

SCHMITY HOLSTEINS BY THE NUMBERS

240	Milking cows, largest in Steele County
142	Years in the Schmidt family (five generations)
92	Pounds per day produced by each cow
6.7	Million pounds of milk produced annually at farm
6,000	Gallon milk tank emptied every other day
2	Milking sessions per day: 6 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.
1%	Herd is in top 1% in the nation for genetics

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CONGRATULATIONS DAIRY PRINCESSES!



This year's dairy princesses for Steele County include, from left: Jena Hanson, Ali Slater, Madison Homuth, Chloe Garten and Adeline Schroht. Three of the princesses are missing, but they are represented by bags being held: Anna Cox, Isabella Schultz and Madi Murphy.

We want to thank these young women for representing our industry throughout the year.

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