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SMALL FARM: Rewards and Struggles

Wade, Marcia, Becky, and Cliff with Destiny.

MY CO-OP

Text and photos by Al Cornell

The roads of Richland County were once lined with small family farms. They seem to have gone extinct; however, I followed the REC lines along a gravel road to its dead end and found one. The Yearous family milks up to 15 milking shorthorns. Besides those cows, young stock, and a bull, the family has one cat and a few free-ranging rabbits.

What could be more rewarding, more satisfying, than making a living on a small farm in the hill country? However, the appeal of an easier and less risky life has driven the country boys and girls to seek alternate vocations. But Wade and Marcia Yearous are still there—for now.

While nearly all have gone with the flow of go big or get out, the Yearouses have hung on through a demanding journey. Underpinning that endurance is the satisfaction of having established a quality herd of milking shorthorns.

The setting is a throwback to when every cow was known by name. And I must not forget Sam, the bull. The cows each enter the stall below their own name at 3 every morning and afternoon for milking. The decision to milk at 3 was a consequence of needing free time some evenings. Wade and a couple of young Amish men built the present barn in 2011. The farm has 182 acres, but Wade just utilizes about 20 for pasture and another 20 for fields. Part of the farm is rented out.

As we talked at the kitchen table, Becky, a daughter-in-law

from Viola, came in. She works at Bethel Home in Viroqua but is also the primary milkmaid. She has been especially needed for milking during the past year.

Talk centered on the gentle, healthy, and productive cows. Becky helps Wade purchase cattle from Quality Dairyland Auction in Black River Falls. While some of the present herd has been raised on the farm, others have come from Minnesota, New York, Illinois, Ohio, Kansas, and other locations in Wisconsin.

Milk leaving the farm is transported by a National Farmers Organization truck to the Carr Valley plant in Mauston. Wade emphasizes that the cattle are healthy with strong feet and very little mastitis. For the last three consecutive years, and



Wade is fond of his cows.

along the road, Zachary was quite upset. It seems he had enjoyed a discreet location for relieving his bladder, and now it had been destroyed.

When about 5 years old, Cliff had seen his dad extend a hand to assist his mother down a few steep steps when she was carrying a bucket of hog feed. One day he said, "I help you!" He extended his hand and quickly yanked as hard as he could. Marcia barely managed to not fall on her face. Cliff thought he'd done a great job of getting her down the steps in record time.

The setting is a throwback to when every cow was known by name.

probably counting, Wade and Marcia have taken the regional NFO Superior Quality Milk Producer Award. Those docile cows are the family pride and joy. Grandsons Josh and Jon have shown cows at the Viola Horse and Colt Show.

Soon the other member of the family who lives at home arrived from Kickapoo High School. Cliff is a normally jovial special-needs child. He loves music, dance, and being in Kickapoo's plays. He had forgotten to put on his orange shirt for Unity Day but now donned an orange cap. Marcia asked him where he got it and he responded, "From Mrs.

Walter." She replied, "You'll have to take it back." He responded that he was told he could keep it. I noticed that the cap insignia read "Purina Dog Chow," and I injected that Mrs. Walter's husband works for the Ruffed Grouse Society and she may have brought a few of those caps for those who didn't have an item of orange clothing.

Then Marcia shared a couple of family stories. When Zachary was about 10, he would disappear for a moment before coming up the driveway after being dropped off from the school bus. Then the day Wade picked the cornfield

Just before 3 p.m., the cows walked into the stalls below their names and were tethered for milking. Soon Becky had the two Surge milking machines hung from a strap over each cow's back in order to complete another day of milk 'em in the early morning, milk 'em in the afternoon.

Becky does most of the milking since Wade's cornpicker accident last November 28. Wade was operating the one-row picker on a nearby farm. Grandson Jake and a friend came to the field to ask him if they could use the chainsaw to cut a Christmas tree. Like too many farmers before him, Wade had

Becky and Wade bring the cows to the barn for milking.





1. Sam takes a good look at the stranger on the farm. 2. Cliff enjoys helping out on the farm. 3. Becky begins the afternoon milking. 4. Though a small herd, Yearous' milking shorthorns are repeat award winners. 5. A place where every cow has a nametag above her stall.

gotten his hand caught in the picker. He had been able to call Marcia and she was on her way when the boys got there. Wade told the boys to shut off the tractor and then asked for a knife. He cut off the pulverized fingers to free himself from the picker.

Marcia rushed him to the Viroqua hospital, and from there he was taken to La Crosse and then to Rochester. After repeated scrubbing of the stubbed hand, Dr. Elhassen sewed it into a pouch under the skin of his abdomen to facilitate healing. He was able to come home on December 23. Due to Becky's experience in nursing, she was called on to change the bandages twice a day. The grandkids were curious and came to see what had happened to Grandpa's hand.

An acquaintance who died had wanted his military-related prosthesis arm to go to someone who deserved it. This year on November 23, Wade had a consultation in preparation to have half of his forearm removed and prepped for the replacement. After his forearm is removed, it will take a few weeks for it to be ready for the prosthesis. After it is placed, Wade will spend a few days on a computer to develop brain-hand coordination.

There's more. The twister that visited

the Viola area last May 25 scattered wrinkled tin from one shed, damaged several roofs, and demolished a grain auger. Wade says, "I'm tired of farming and was planning to retire before any of this took place." He also says that he has discouraged his kids and grandkids from getting into farming.

The small farm, while offering the independence to run one's own operation, the value of country living, and a place for kids to develop important skills, has too much downside in our present culture to entice many takers. Godspeed to those who persist in keeping it going. 

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FIRST SNOW

It had felt like snow for several days. It was mid-November,

and each morning's walk to our country school seemed a bit chillier, and damper, too. The bare oaks alongside our country road stood silent against a slate gray sky. As we topped Millers' Hill, we heard the school bell ringing, a clear tone that echoed through the valley and rolled up the hills and along the country roads leading to the school. The big cast-iron bell hanging in the bell tower on top of the school told us it was 8:30 and reminded us to hurry along if we didn't want to be marked tardy.

We walked into the school a few minutes before nine, the official starting time, and were greeted by Maxine Thompson, our seventh-grade teacher. I glanced at the sky before going inside. The clouds appeared heavier and thicker, and a stiff breeze had come up from the southwest.

Miss Thompson had already started the fire in the big wood-burning stove that stood in the back of the school, and the inside of the building was warm and comfortable as we found our seats and took out our books for the day's lessons. Soon the room was quiet, just the way Miss Thompson liked it, the only sounds the tick-tock, tick-tock of the Regulator clock on the north wall, the occasional snapping and crackling of wood burning in the big stove, and the southwest wind rattling the windows.

I had difficulty concentrating on my lessons; all I could think about was the first snow of the season and how everything would change when it arrived. I thought about all the fun things associated with snow—sledding, skiing, snowball fights—and pushed from my mind snow shoveling, wet mittens, and snow-blocked roads.

I saw the first snowflake about midmorning, a half hour or so before recess. At least, I thought it was a snowflake; it was

hard to tell, as the wind kicked up bits of leaves and grass and swirled them around. Then I saw another and another, saw them sticking to the schoolhouse windows before melting and sliding down as raindrops might do, leaving little moisture trails.

At recess time we all burst outside, running like calves let out of the barn for the first time, turning our faces to the sky and feeling the snowflakes on our cheeks, trying to form snowballs—there wasn't enough snow yet—and running around like we were possessed by first snowfall demons. Twenty kids celebrated the first snowfall, first-graders to eighth-graders all rejoicing together. And then Miss Thompson came outside as well, wearing her thin cotton coat and a head scarf. She held out her hand, caught a snowflake, and smiled.

Back inside the schoolroom after recess, with rosy cheeks and smiles on our faces, we resumed our studies. At noon we would do it all over again, playing and laughing and celebrating the change in seasons. No matter what the calendar said, for most of us kids that first snow signaled the true beginning of winter. *(See The Quiet Season [Wisconsin Historical Society Press] for more about winter.)*



Go to www.Jerryapps.com for information about Jerry's books and TV shows.

Shannon Clark, Manager/CEO

1027 N. Jefferson St., P.O. Box 439, Richland Center, WI 53581

608-647-3173

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