

# R-Homestead Holsteins – 150 Years of Family Tradition

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On a sunny, warm day in early November, the smell of fall is in the air across Montgomery County, Illinois. The sounds of harvest equipment roaring across the rich topsoil are a common sight this time of year. Agriculture is a way of life for generations of families here, including one family that has persevered among a loss of dairy farms to become one of just four remaining in the entire county. Meet Dave Ruppert and family of R-Homestead Holsteins.

Dave serves as Secretary of the Prairie Farms Board and Director for District 5 – Central/Southeast Illinois, a position he has held for second longest among all board members at 20 years. His farm is located about 45 miles south of Springfield near Nokomis, Illinois, and has been in the family for a remarkable 150+ years. Dave and his wife Lenore, whom he has been married to for 57 years, currently operate the farm with their four children and eleven grandchildren. Their youngest daughter, Lora, and her husband, Marc Hilgendorf, became partners in 2007. The grandchildren now represent the sixth generation on the farm. Their love for cows, especially Holsteins, is something that Dave is immensely proud of as he thinks back to his humble beginnings as a dairy farmer.



*Dave and Lenore with daughter Lora and grandchildren.*

"I always wanted a Holstein back when I was in 4-H, but my grandpa didn't like Holsteins," says Dave as he reflected on how the herd was started. "He had Guernseys, and my dad had Milking Shorthorns, so when I got into 4-H in 1955, I wanted a Holstein, but we couldn't afford one. 1954 was a terrible drought year, and nobody had anything. I had to wait a year when a neighbor sold out and had one that was already registered. My dad bought a heifer for ninety dollars, and that's where we started. We've had a registered Holstein herd for over 50 years now."

R-Homestead Holsteins joined Prairie Farms in 1963. The Rupperts have a long history of business with Prairie Farms, going all the way back to the days of Holland Dairy. "We first started shipping to the creamery in Nokomis, then when it closed, we started shipping to Taylorville, which was a part of Holland Dairy at the time. When Holland closed the Taylorville creamery, we started shipping to Prairie Farms in Pana. That is when we officially joined,

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and have been members ever since. We know that it's the best dairy cooperative in America. They have treated us well."

Dairy farming has been a love affair within the Ruppert family for decades. Dave and Lenore moved back to the



*Ruppert grandchildren at the Illinois State Fair.*



farm and went into a partnership with his parents in 1974. Dave says they took over in 1990 and have lived a great life. He enjoys knowing the kids and grandchildren all have a love for cows. "We have three daughters and a son. The three girls all live nearby, including my youngest, Lora. My son lives near Bloomington, where he works for Growmark. He has a real love for cows, too, and keeps a few calves up there with his kids. My middle daughter has a place near Raymond with calves she keeps for her kids. My oldest daughter, Tonya lives where my wife grew up, not far down the road. I am blessed with grandchildren who all love cows and showing them."

Today, about 80 cows at R-Homestead are milked twice a day. The milk is picked up every other day and brought to the plant in Carlinville. The Rupperts recently switched haulers resulting in some of their milk also going to Olney. They own about 300 acres of land and use about 240 of that for operations. The other 60 or so are rented because Dave's son-in-law began working full time for a large grain farmer.

Early mornings are the norm for Dave and family as they get prepared for the first of two daily milkings at 4:30 a.m. R-Homestead is a family-run farm with everyone pitching in to do their part. "Mark usually puts the feed in early morning before he goes to work," says Dave. "Lora and I do the milking. She's doing more of it in the morning now that her oldest boy, Landon is getting old enough to help a little bit. Sometimes the others get up to help feed calves."

Dave has an interesting agricultural background to support his love for cows. He graduated from the University of Illinois with degrees in dairy science and education before going on to teach vocational agriculture at Hiland High

School for seven years. Dave excelled at teaching others about agriculture, but his heart was always back at the farm. "I always wanted to come back to the farm because

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the cows were my interest. I always said the best part of the day was 3:30 or 4 o'clock because I could get off the tractor and go milk cows. Cows have always been my love, and thankfully my family has inherited that."

Dave gives credit to the longevity and success of the farm to his wife Lenore. He says none of it would be possible without her at his side. "I should mention that nothing would be possible without my good wife, who has been my partner through it all. She is into it as much as I am and helps with everything. I've served on several boards over the years, and I could not have done any of that if she had not been willing to help back at the farm while I was away. The only time I heard her complain was many years ago when I mentioned that some of our neighbors were milking three times a day. She looked at me and said you can, but I'm not," chuckled Dave.

Dave has racked up an impressive list of service achievements and awards during his lifetime, including a 16-year tenure on the governor-appointed Illinois Board of Livestock Commission. Additionally, Dave served on the Lincolnland Holstein Club Board of Directors and as President of the Illinois State Holstein Association. Recently, he was the recipient of the Illinois Milk Producers Dairy Industry Service Award for 2022.

The annual award recognizes individuals who demonstrate leadership and exemplary service that benefits the Illinois dairy industry. "I'm just blessed that so many people trusted me over the years to serve and advise in these positions. It's truly been a great experience."

As Dave reflected on his achievements, he wanted to point out that his service on the Prairie Farms board has also been rewarding. "Being on the board at Prairie Farms has been very educational. I get to meet other farmers from several different states and see how different yet common we all are.



Dave and Lenore on the farm.

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This has been a very fulfilling experience and I would like to thank our past board president, Melvin Schweizer, for recommending me when he retired. It has been a good ride.”

Like many dairy families, the Rupperts face a decision about expansion for the next generations. They are content to maintain their current herd knowing the difficult headwinds they face if the family decides to expand. “First of all, we have a water problem in this area,” says Dave. “I’ve hauled water all my life for the cows because we live next to limestone quarries that are deeper than our well system. They literally drained the underground water away. A lot of farms in the area are no longer in existence because of this. The other thing is the price of land. It has gone up so much that we can’t afford to expand in that way either. Add to that the cost



*A look inside the barn with Lora and Logan.*

of inputs, and everything has gotten so expensive. We just keep going with what we have.”





The Rupperts have made improvements to their operations in recent years, including the construction of a new heifer barn and installation of a feeding system with a TMR mixer. The water woes almost put them out of business before a recent turn of events. “One interesting thing is that 30 years ago, my dad and I signed up to be customers of the rural water system. The water line to our farm was finally installed two years ago. That’s probably the only reason we are still able to milk here. If we had not gotten that, I think we would have eventually needed to close. People don’t understand when I lead prayer at the board meetings why I thank the lord for water. Well, that’s because where I live, you get up every morning and pray there is water coming out of the faucet. Most people don’t give it a second thought, but when you don’t have it, you remember.”

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Among the many dairy-related topics that Dave enjoys talking about is cow genetics. It’s one of his favorite parts of the business. “People ask if I am ever going to retire, and I say probably not because with cow genetics, I have to keep going,” explains Dave sarcastically. “The thing I

enjoy is trying to find the right bull to breed with our cows and waiting nine months to see if she is going to have a heifer calf, and if she does, how is that calf going to develop? Then, it’s two years before she has her calf and starts producing. So, you see that is three years there when I can’t wait to see what I’m going to get.”

Recent investments at R-Homestead include a new monitoring system with collars that allow the Rupperts to monitor temperature, rumen activity, and motion. It’s technology that Dave says will help replace some of the skills that took him decades to develop. “We are trying to get to a place where we find out more about our cows quicker, so if they do need treatment, we can do that right away. Over the years, I was the main one to spot problems, but not everyone can spot issues like Ketosis, which took me years to recognize. So, this system will help us notice things a lot quicker.”

After five decades of running R-Homestead Dairy with his family, Dave says that despite all the ups and downs of the business he would not change a thing and do it all over again. “I’ve been fortunate the good lord put me here when he did. He gave me the opportunity to have a wonderful family to help and also enjoy what I love while working together. That’s worth gold to me.”

