

Interview with Walter Wilson on dairy cattle - November 6, 1978 at his residence. Interviewer was Jerrold Gustafson.

JG: First of all, I'll ask you to tell me what the breeds of dairy cattle are that you're familiar with, maybe describe them a little bit - their characteristics and the difference between these types of dairy cattle and beef cattle.

WW: The black and white Holsteins are the most popular. Years ago we didn't think they were so popular because they didn't give very much cream - mostly milk. A lot of people say you could put a dime in the bottom of the bucket and when the bucket was full you could still see the dime in the bucket. They didn't do too well on some of the butterfat. But now they're at the place where they get a lot of butterfat.

JG: You prefer the breed that gives more?

WW: Yes, you were paid on a butterfat basis. The more butterfat you had the more money you'd get for your milk. You'd take - if you were paid on a 3.5 - 3 1/2 % butterfat basis. They analyze your milk every morning. Like you get \$10.00 a hundred for 3.5 milk and then you get, I think, 8¢ a point for 5 points so you'll get 40¢ bonus there. And that's where the Guernsey breed is very popular. They don't give the milk but they give more butterfat. They don't consume quite so much feed. The Holstein cow will consume a lot of feed. Then there's the Jersey breed - they make not near so much milk. Oh, I think they have Jersey cattle now that would probably produce 1200 pounds of milk in any lactation. It's nothing for a Jersey cow to have a 5 to 6% butterfat. She doesn't consume even as much feed as a Guernsey. A good Jersey's offspring is of no value. My wife has some relations who raise Jerseys in Minnesota and they can't even sell the male calves.

JG: Why is that?

WW: Well, there's just not anything there. The meat is yellow if you fatten it up. A mature Jersey cow won't weigh more than 800 pounds. Oh today they have the fancy breed, they'd probably weigh 11 or 1200 but the average cow is between that and a thousand. The calves won't be as big as a dog when they come so there's just no value there when you go to sell these old calves. Course the heifers, you use those for replacement. But the Guernsey is almost the same thing but there's a little more value there to their calves and I always thought when I was a kid growing up that that's what I would do - raise Guernsey cows. I would cross them with a Hereford bull. That way I'd have white-faced calves to fatten up and Guernsey's milk. But when I went in the dairy business, I bought these milk cows. There were times when I just had to keep an Angus bull for this purpose.

JG: That's the beef cattle.

WW: Um-hmm. These were the heifers I would breed with the Angus. They have a smaller calf and you don't have near the calving problem that you do with the Holstein. The Holstein will have a big calf. Most Holstein calves will average 100 pounds at birth and you have to have a pretty good-sized heifer if you want to breed heifers to a Holstein. There's the Ayrshire - they're

a good dairy herd - they're pretty good cows. They're more of a dual purpose I would say. By dual purpose, I mean their offspring can be fattened up for beef. When I was a kid we raised - well, we called them Durham, then later they were milking shorthorns. They were a dual purpose. The Red Polls is a dual purpose. The cows on a one-year lactation will give from 10 to 12,000 pounds of milk. It's a 4% butterfat milk usually and then the calves grow fat and they grow square.

JG: Square?

WW: Well, they're a good beefy type. You take a Holstein or these Jerseys or Guernseys, they'd grow what we'd call "pinny". They just feed and feed and they never get fat. They get big and that's it. A shorthorn, red-polled dual purpose, they'll get round and have much better steaks and things like that - more of the beef type.

JG: Is the Ayshire a popular dairy cattle? I've never heard of that before.

WW: Yes it's pretty more popular than the Holsteins, Guernsey, and Jersey. The Ayshire, like I said, is a dual purpose. The characteristic of the Ayshire, is its beautiful horns. They grow out and then they point up. They get big - they'll get to probably 1400 pounds.

JG: Is that a typical size?

WW: I would say 12 to 1400. The popular breed is Holstein breed. Today they've got cows giving as high as 25,000 pounds in one lactation of milk and the average Holstein today will run 14 to 1700 and that's about the best breed for dairies there is today.

JG: When you mentioned fattening up these dual purpose types - are you talking most about the males?

WW: If you didn't need the replacements. Hack a few years ago you had a little bit of everything. You raised your own meat and you had your own milk and you raised more. Today you specialize. Your dairy farmers won't have any hogs. I know a neighbor down here who milks a lot of cows - they have close to 200 head and they never butcher any. They don't even butcher their own meat. They buy their own meat. He's just in dairy only. So these dual purpose cattle have kinda faded out because they don't give the milk to keep up with the other. But a Holstein cow, it'd be nothing to feed her as high as 30 or 40 pounds of grain - high producing cow - 30 or 40 pounds a day. And she will eat a bale of hay per day to produce this milk.

JG: What kind of grain did you feed them?

WW: Used to feed ear corn but today we have so many picker-shelters that you feed 'em ground shelled corn and some oats; a few parts of corn and one or two parts of oats. Then it all depends on the type of hay you have. If you have an excellent quality hay it doesn't require as much protein and you gain that through soybean meal usually. Soybean meal is very high in protein. But if you're feeding a good quality hays that will contain from 17 to 20 protein and where you don't need near so much supplement.

JG: Do you feed them the 30 to 40 pounds of grain plus the bale of hay throughout the year constantly or do you vary it - cut down on grain or anything?

WW: It depends on when she lactates.

JG: There's a cycle, then, that they go through when producing milk?

WW: Yes. You milk about 7, 8 months a year and then there's an 8 week drying-off period. We'd like to have a cow freshen every year. Many of my cows when I would watch, they would freshen about every 11 months - breed back just a little bit earlier so I'd pick up an extra calf. Soon as you dry off you cut back on the grain because, you see, she's been producing milk. She won't produce a lot of milk at the tail end of her lactation but she will be producing some. But you keep right on feeding her all this grain and don't milk her, you're going to create another problem. Feeding a lot of grain to a lot of cows you create a mastitis problem anyway. The high producer and the more feed you feed, the larger danger you have of mastitis, and so forth too. When you dry this cow off, you shut her off of her grain. Feed her nothing but hay, kinda poor quality hay at that. Maybe if it's summertime you just let her gnaw on grass. Pasture. No hay. And you'll do this till about 6 weeks. May be about 3 weeks to a month before she freshens. You get her in and feed her just a little bit of grain - more oats than corn. Oats are a good bone builder for the calf. By the time she has freshened you have her on a good grain ration again to help build her immediate milk production and also to give her strength for her calf and so forth and when she freshens, why of course you put her right in and as soon as the swelling goes out of her udder, you begin to feed her according to her production.

JG: Is there any special kind of feed or care they require in winter? Do they require shelter in winter - do you let them roam outside at all or are they confined?

WW: It used to be years ago we kept them in stanchions. Most everybody had a stanchion barn. Today we have gone to a free-stall barn. By a free-stall barn, you put 'em in a milking parlor to milk 'em and then you turn 'em out and they go at their own pleasure and lay down or they go out to the silage bunk and eat silage or go to the hay bunk and eat hay and when they get tired and want to lay down, they get comfortable in these free-stalls. They just go in there and lay down. That's the modern way and the easiest way to take care of a bunch of cows today. They don't get the personal attention that they used to in the stanchion barn. That was one big disadvantage that I didn't like about it. I've used the free-stall but they don't get the individual attention that they do in the stanchion barn.

JG: What would they lack from not getting individual attention?

WW: Well, if a cow happened to get a quarter bumped or her teats stepped on or something like that, you'd doctor while she's in the milking parlor and then out she goes. And that night you'd doctor it again, where if she was in a stanchion barn, about every 2 or 3 hours you'd go in and give her attention. Today they have a barn where there are 2 or 3 stalls just for these cows that need extra attention. They're easier to care for - you don't have to haul the manure every day - things like that.

JG: What other kinds of care do they require? I think you said you don't curry their coats?

WW: No. Show animals you do. And if you have time you brush them down. You have to watch them for lice. Doggone sparrows flying around in those barns, y' know - these free-stall barns especially - they carry lice. Most dairy rations today have the proper amount of salt and minerals. I didn't want to salt my feed grinder because that creates a rusting problem - so I never did put any salt and mineral in my rations. I give free choice - they had minerals on one side of the feeder and salt on the other and they could mix their own. Some cows required more mineral at different times; others required more salt at different times. If I put a drip in the ration alone some cow would be getting more salt than she needed because she was going to eat the grain no matter what.

JG: Did you have a block then?

WW: I used the loose salt because I read one time in order for the cow - she wants to keep with the bunch - and some cows would have to lick as high as an hour a day on a block to get what she required. So I felt if I'd put it to her loose, she'd take a couple licks and get as much salt as she would in 20 minutes on a block. So I'd always use the loose.

JG: What do you mean that they wanted to stay with the bunch?

WW: The cows would be licking on a block and the rest of them would go to the pasture. Well, she isn't going to stay out there and lick by herself. She's gonna go to the pasture when they go, therefore she isn't going to get as much. And when they come back if they want salt - she happens to be a little timid or something like that - she isn't going to get it. Some cattle's more timid than others, so you gotta kinda watch for the timid ones. They have a new thing out today I'd like to comment on. I've never had one but one of the fellows that farms one of my farms - I was up to his house the other day - it's a tank like these holding bins for drying corn and those are an electric motor attached to the bottom of it. They have a chain around the cow's neck with a metal weight on the bottom of it and there's a magnet on the feed opening on the bottom of this tank. These cows would come up here and run their nose in this feed opening and the piece of steel from around their neck would touch that magnet and start that motor going and it'll feed that grain out. The principle of this, the high producing cows can't get enough grain while they're going through the milking barn. So this man puts these chains around the necks of the high producers. An ordinary cow with no chain around her neck can come up there and stand all day and won't get any grain. (Chuckle) That's right, and it'll work. But what happens these cows get so smart, the high producer will come up there and make contact, start this rain auguring into it and here will come a cow without a chain and give her a butt and knock her out of the way. (Ha-ha) and she'll go in there and eat the grain. She'll get to grain eating, why she'll back off and stand back and another one will come up (ha-ha). I saw that happen too.

JG: Would you say that cows are pretty intelligent then?

WW: Oh yes. I noticed a cow is a creature of habit. When I was in the dairy business I used the milking parlor and the free stalls but after about the first one or two cows that I bought, I found out which kind of cows to buy. Don't buy an aged cow out of a stanchion barn to come into a

free stall and milking parlor system and expect her to do you any good. She will go bad getting that lactation because they are just a creature of habit. You could buy a heifer due to freshen and put her in a set up like this and get along just fine. She hasn't gotten her habits yet of being milked and so forth but I have found you cannot take an aged cow and put her in a free stall milking parlor set up - take her out of the stanchion barn - it won't work. A neighbor up here sold a whole herd of stanchion cows to a man up in Michigan that had a free stall milking set up and inside of a year he came back on this farmer, telling him that he sold him a bad bunch of cows. That he had two-thirds of them sold right then in a year's time because they went bad. I've never known - you can't prove it - but I'll bet that a lot of that man's trouble came from was running them through---

JG: They get set in their ways and don't want to change?

WW: I think so. They're used to eating this bunch of grain in front of 'em, this bunch of silage in front of them, this bunch of hay in front of 'em and when it comes out to having to battle their way through in the feed lot, they just can't do it. Or they just won't do it one or the other. That isn't the case one hundred per cent of the time but I have found it to be that way a lot of the time.

JG: That kinda leads in to the question of their personality states. Do they have personalities that vary within the breed? Some timid and some more aggressive?

WW: Yes, I bought four heifers one time from a neighbor's heifer's calves and I believe it was brought in to the particular strain because all four of these heifers was very timid. In fact one of them was so timid that was her name - the Timid Cow. She would never step up for herself. She would always wait until the rest of them got through and if they would come in and bump her just a little bit, she'd back up. She wouldn't stand there at the bunk and push like they did, y' know - she'd back up. Then you have the bully that always pushes in. Every cow has a little different disposition just like dogs and things like that. Every dog has a little disposition. Some dogs bite and some dogs never bite. Some cows kick and some cows never kick - some are a little more nervous. I had one cow I never could settle down enough to milk.

JG: Too jumpy?

WW: Yes, too nervous. Kick your head off.

JG: Are you speaking from experience?

WW: (Chuckle) You're about right. When I was a kid at home, course we milked by hand and that was much dangerous than milking with the milking machine. At least you were standing up milking with the milking machine and you could get out of the way, but settin' there an milking by hand, that was awful. But anyway we tied a rope just in front of her udder up over her back - real tight - and that would deaden the nerve up there and they couldn't kick. They couldn't kick quite so hard but it was very hard on the milk glands but we didn't particularly care at the time, we were going after that cow. As a heifer we milked her that way for awhile. Finally we didn't need quite so much tension on the rope so Dad says one night, "Well, I'm going to milk her (whatever her name was, I don't remember) without the rope tonight." He just got to sit down and

she begin to let him have it. So he got the rope out and tightened it around real tight again and set right down and she never moved a foot. Well it got so after a period of time that all we'd have to do was just be to lay that rope up over her back - she'd never move a foot, but try to milk her without that rope lying on her back and she'd step around and maybe not kick but you couldn't milk her satisfactorily. Then we had cows we used to put hobbles on. I never did when I milked with the milking machine here. I didn't like to do it that way but when you have a problem cow and you're sitting right there by her back legs - it wasn't a good thing.

JG: You were talking before about the cow who wouldn't lick the salt block because she wanted to be with the others. Is it because they're a herd animal - do they like to stick together or are there exceptions - loners?

WW: Usually they like to stick together as a bunch. I think the horses might be a little more like that than the cows but I don't know if it's greediness in the cow; she's afraid if she doesn't get back to the feed bunk then she won't get her proper share or just what. Many times they're that way - they want to stay in a bunch.

JG: I wondered if there was any kind of interaction between them when they're out staying in the pasture. Do they play or move around?

WW: Not in particular. They more or less get right down to business and begin to eat. When they lay down there might be one or two that will be eating grass around - or 3 or 4 or whatever but they will be eating grass a long way away. There was one thing - my pasture back there is very wooded and I would count the cows - we had cows freshening most of the time and I would count the cows on the way in and if I happened to be short of one, then it was a problem. Because a cow that had freshened, particularly back there in the wooded area, she will get usually just as far away from the rest of them as she can. And she can hide that newborn calf where you could practically step on that calf before you'd find it. Many time I'd come to the house not being able to find it and I would have to wait and watch her. A lot of times if I would follow her back the next morning for her to go to that calf, she wouldn't go while I was startin'.

JG: That's really strange.

WW: Oh, they could hide those little baby calves and they'd stay there.

JG: Overnight - even apart from the mother?

WW: Oh yes and they'll stay right there. You know you'd think you would frighten them but they'll stay right there and you can almost bet on it.

JG: They don't need any assistance from humans when they calve then? They can do that on their own?

WW: Yeah, usually they can. A good healthy cow, if everything is all right, can calve all by herself. And Mother Nature steps in; the good Lord, and the calf rustles around a little bit, gets up and one of the first things it does is begin to root around and try to find its dinner. Which I

think is many times just about a miracle every time, I think it's just about a miracle every time a breathing creature is born anyway. How you can take a few cells and make a breathing creature in a length of time is a miracle. And to see these little calves, little colts, little pigs, or whatever they right be; some of them round, some of them have split hoofs, pigs have a litter, cows have just one. The good Lord thought of most everything.

JG: What are some common diseases and sicknesses - what you have to look out for?

WW: The main disease that you have in dairy cattle is pneumonia and then after they get to be lactating cows you have a mastitis problem. Mastitis is when they catch cold in their udder. Anything strange - you overfeed 'em a little bit of grain, change the ration too rapidly on them or something like that will throw 'em into a stress. Mastitis is hardening of the quarter and if it doesn't have attention it goes to another quarter and in time it takes the whole udder and if it gets to the bloodstream, it'll kill the cow. It's a hardening of this quarter and then you have deformed milk, stringy milk and then a clabbered milk. You have antibiotics to combat this but it's very expensive. It's about the most expensive thing to the dairy industry there is. These antibiotics that you combat this with, you have to hold the milk off the market for 72 hours usually. Therefore if you doctor the quarter, you just have to hold the whole quarter off but usually you doctor the whole cow, therefore you hold all the milk off of the market and if she's producing normally 75 to 80 pounds, when this mastitis hits it automatically knocks her to probably 40 pounds. By the time you get her built back up to 75 or 80 pounds again, you're talking about a month to six weeks and you've really lost. That's one of the most expensive things that a dairy farmer has today. Then pneumonia is a big thing for cattle. We used to call it "chicken fever" but you can get it in your own herds who have never been off of the farm. It's the cold changes of weather. Yesterday it was 75 - today maybe we hit 55, it's just as hard on cattle as it is on humans.

JG: Do they get like sniffles?

WW: Um-hmm and they go off their feed, shiver. You got antibiotics to combat this with but there again they have to be held off production and it's an expense. And then you have, especially in the free stall milking parlor situations where a cow has to more or less root for herself, you have the different - they get trapped in the free stalls or they get bumped in there standing at the feed bunk or something like that. That might could be like it's a big disadvantage to have milking parlors and free stalls and things because of the cow getting bumped and so forth, but I can remember when we had stanchion barns it was nothing for a cow to lay down with a big udder and the one standing next to her to step on a teat or something like that. I never yet did lost a teat milking through the milking parlor and the free stalls. We had less udder problems through the new method than we did with the old. And then they could pick up hardware, step on boards and things like that if you don't keep them picked up but we have modern medicine today. Before we moved down here I had a registered shorthorn bull that got sick. It would have to have been back in the mid 50's - 53 perhaps - he took sick and I had a veterinary come from LaPorte and he says this bull's got hardware. Well here he was quite an expensive bull - young, still growing, and boy, I said, "What can I do?" He said - "You can do one of two things. You could sell him immediately - he's still in pretty good shape. The meat will be good but if you keep him around, he'll go off his feed and get sicker and die."

JG: You're saying he had eaten some hardware, right?

WW: Well, yes. He had this hardware and that was the diagnosis the veterinarian had given him. He says I could sell him or he says - I'll operate. I'll go in there and see if I can find that in his stomach. So I asked how much it would cost. Back then it would cost \$35.00 which was a lot of money. But he was a good bull and I said, well, go ahead. So we made out that the next morning we would operate. So when he came the next morning to give him a shot my father came. He gave him a shot to more or less put him to sleep. He couldn't give him too much because if the bull laid down, it would put more pressure on his stomach and then he couldn't get his hand in there. So he had to give him just enough to put him to sleep but not to knock him down. He did - he started teetering back and forth - one of us on one side and one on the other so he couldn't fall down. Then just in front of his hip bone he shaved a round place about ten inches in diameter. Between his hip bone and his rib cage, really, is where it was. He shaved that place and disinfected it and everything and then he put a bunch of maybe Novocain, for all I know - he deadened it. He made an incision and then he took - it looked a lot like an embroidery hoop with a piece of plastic. Instead of taking your pillowcase and putting it inside your embroidery hoop, there's this piece of plastic. This incision he made, he put the embroidery hoop right in the incision. Then he cut the piece of plastic and shoved his hand through the embroidery hoop and went up. He said chances are that that piece of wire is right behind his heart. And he went into his stomach with his hand and found the piece of wire. It was a bent piece of wire about two inches long; he brought it out and felt around in there for some more in the same spot but he couldn't find any. Took the embroidery hoop out, sewed the animal back up. He required a lot of attention because we had to watch his water intake. We had to give him enough water to make his kidneys function properly but yet we couldn't give him too much. We couldn't give him too much hay because this particular stomach was the one that digested all of the hay. If I remember correctly we couldn't give him too much grain either. It was just a complicated affair. He carried a scar but he became a ton bull. It's very common today to have hardware in these expensive cows. Dairy cattle has gone very high now. An average heifer to freshen will sell from eight hundred to a thousand dollars today - right now. There's a lot of them with hardware that they operate on today. Then they're doing caesareans on a lot of cows that can't have their calves. It's becoming more common.

JG: Is that because they're breeding bigger calves?

WW: Many times this is it. A lot of times you don't save the calf because the farmer has waited for a natural birth and he sees all evidence that it should have been a natural birth but it isn't so he calls the veterinary. If a cow labors just about so long, I would say average if she'll labor five hours, chances are your calf is gone after that. Really I don't believe a cow - heifer - I think would labor probably five to eight hours and a cow would be a little less than that yet. And then, y' know, the calf would be gone. Chances are before the farmer calls the veterinarians he's left his cow labor for that long, by the time the veterinarian gets there and gets the job done, more times than not you don't save the calf. At least you save this thousand dollar cow and she will give you the milk through the year's time to where you hadn't lost out entirely, like you'd have with the beef herd.

JG: Do cattle founder like horses?

WW: No, they will just gorge themselves to where it travels to their heart and die. But they never founder to my knowing. I suppose it's different in their digestive systems - they've got all those chemicals to digest their food and I suppose that's where that would come in.

JG: What are the advantages of milking machines?

WW: It's faster. There's no two people milk alike. My dad was always a faster milker than I. I always milked my certain cows and he always milked his certain cows. So when I was in school, basketball practice and so forth, I would get home late so therefore I would do some feeding chores and he would take care of the milk. He always got more milk. The milking machines, night and morning it gives you the same pull. You have the same pulsation. You're, supposed to have 60 draws per minute. That's how fast you're supposed to milk a cow. Some guys are in a hurry and they'll just sit there and just pump to beat the band and others will go slower, but with the milking machine you've got the same draw all the time.

JG: Is that better for the cow?

WW: I think so. I visited an Amish home this last fall and there was four of 'em milking. One was on one side of the cow and one on the other just milking to beat the bard. Down the line set another pair of kids on one cow just milking to beat all. I says, "How's come you're doing it that way? Why don't you take one cow and milk four cows at a time that way?" Well, their dad had told them not to do it that way because if two of them milked one cow they'll get the milk out of her faster, therefore it won't be as hard on the cow and they'll get more milk. (Chuckle) So I don't know.

JG: I have no more questions. Do you have anything you'd like to add?

WW: I can't think of anything. I used to have fun showing cattle. When I had the milking shorthorn I was in 4-H and I would show cattle. We had this one particular heifer that I just could not break. Oh I had the awfulest time. Finally Dad came out to help me and we couldn't do it so he said we'll get the tractor. We got the tractor and we put a rope around her neck, took her out into the pasture and started to go. She threw herself. We got her on her side. He said don't stop - just drive right on - on the grass, y' know, it wouldn't hurt her - like a sponge. So I knew she wouldn't be hurt but I thought we would ruin her. But I drove her for a ways and he says well, that's enough now, let her get up. So I stopped and I made her get up and I put on a ways farther and she was just pulling back just as hard as I was trying to pull forward and she threw herself. By that time we'd stop as soon as she threw herself. And made her get up and we'd go on a little farther. Before the evening was over we had her so she would walk. So the next evening I got her out and he got behind her with a little stick and every time she'd stop, why he'd spank her. And I was able to hold her so she couldn't get the best of me. We worked her that way and later on it got so I could lead her myself and when I put her in the 4-H show, why she came in second. And I was selected to be the showmanship of that class. She was the one I showed there. She really came out of it fine. Made a nice little cow. When she freshened her first time she got pneumonia and died. I had a nice calf out of her. That was my 4-H experience. And that's about all.