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Feature Story

Modern dairy barn
rises from the ashes

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The 80-cow rotary milking system is housed in an impressive rotunda at the front of the Pennwood Dairy barn.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Penwood Dairy bigger and better following disastrous 2019 barn fire



Staff takes care of milking chores in the 80-cow rotary system, milking over 800 cows in three hours, at Pennwood Dairy.

WES KEATING THE CARILLON

by WES KEATING

The resilience of the farmer in the face of adversity is evident in the day-to-day operations of any agricultural enterprise, which has more than its shares of ups and downs. And for the Penner family, the decision to keep going after a disastrous dairy barn fire, was never in doubt.

Gilmer Penner and his sons, Lyenol, Emery and Ellory, were already planning an expansion of the Pennwood Dairy operation when an electrical fault or spontaneous combustion claimed their barn and 800 registered Holsteins, February 12, 2019.

Our family is the footing and foundation of the farm, and that cannot be burned. Their spirit cannot be destroyed by fire.

– Gilmer Penner



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SUBMITTED PHOTO

MLA Kelvin Goertzen congratulates Ellory and Emery Penner on their amazing new facility during an Open House at Pennwood Dairy in June.



Dean Penner joins his dad, Ellory, Uncle Lyenol and Grandpa Gilmer for a photo with the vintage 1989 truck, which is still in perfect running condition, at Pennwood Dairy.

WES KEATING/THE CARILLON

During a tour of the brand new Pennwood facility, northeast of Steinbach, Gilmer Penner spoke with pride of the family spirit which saw this splendid new barn rise from the ashes.

"Our family is the footing and foundation of the farm, and that cannot be burned. Their spirit cannot be destroyed by fire."

The expansion in the works was already on the drawing board before the fire and permits to double the size of the Pennwood facility were in place. While the insurance company were having the site cleaned up, the people at Penfor and Penner Farm Services got to work redrawing those plans.

The Pennwood Dairy Rotary project brought in multiple professionals, including three structural engineers, and other professionals to make recommendations for the various systems the building required. Plumbing and electrical; milk management and storage, herd management, chemical flow, manure management, feed systems, compressed air systems, and boiler systems, all were part of the very involved planning process.

Jenifer Waskul, the designer at Penfor, worked closely with Penfor project manager Rudy Dyck, Penner Farm Services project manager Dennis Thiessen, and site supervisor Andrew Wiebe.

Waskul's design included details from each engineer, while also considering the requirements of the equipment for HVAC, plumbing, electrical and ventilation systems. During the design process, multiple systems were considered, taking into account animal welfare, herd management and efficiency, Waskul said.

She spent many hours with the Penners in the boardroom at Penfor, working on the design, debating details and dreaming up ways to make things work.

"We took the interior design seriously, considering human traffic, comfort, and amenities. An operation this big requires a fair-sized staff. I worked on several options for locker rooms before we all settled on one."

The most exciting part of the project for the Penfor designer was the opportunity to combine the design of farming systems with considerable architectural design details.

Creating a curtain wall system around the rotary created a necessity to think outside the box, to develop a structure that not only looks amazing, but is functional as well.

The Penners are currently milking over 800 Holsteins in a carousel milking setup, which is itself an engineering marvel and fascinating to watch in action. The cows walk up to the gate and onto the milking platform. Staff take care of udder cleaning chores and attaching milkers from a walkway below, as the cow moves on in the circle. When it reaches the starting/finishing point of the circle, the cow calmly backs off the carousel and returns to the free stall barn area.

The new barn has more than 305,000 square feet in all, covering almost seven acres, under one roof. Half of the huge barn is completely finished with all necessary equipment installed. The other half is a shell at this point, with a view of a future expansion of the herd.

Gilmer said the barn they built in 2017 was completely destroyed in less than an hour.

"In 45 minutes, there was nothing left, and 800 cows were gone."

The new barn has all the "bells and whistles", including the rotary milking system which takes 80 cows around every 11 minutes, and a fire suppression system, which can deliver 1,000 gallons of water a minute anywhere in the facility, should there be a problem.

While 90 percent of the materials used in the new barn are non-flammable, Gilmer explains that because it is considered a commercial building under the building code, the expensive fire suppression system is mandatory.

Milk is picked up twice a day from two 8,000-litre bulk tanks, as Pennwood fills its 32,000-litre quota.

And while the brand new facility is bigger and more modern than the one it replaced, the Penner Brothers partnership continues to hum along, in the same way it has since Lyenol, Emery and Ellory joined their father in a partnership, when Pennwood Dairy was incorporated in 1995.

When the boys are asked to explain their individual roles in making the partnership flourish, their answer is an echo of Lyenol's comment.

"We do as little as we have to."

On a serious note, Ellory explains that while the three brothers all have their areas of expertise and departments, so to speak, they all pitch in to help with field work and cropping, and wherever else they are needed.

Emery takes care of land work and cropping, and may be the most mechanically inclined and is the staff mechanic. He also handles the books, dealing with payroll and finance.

Ellory has the feeding department and also is involved with fieldwork, trucking and maintenance to some degree. He makes sure everything is kept running, which is quite a challenge, when a huge herd of registered Holsteins is fed every day and part of the trucking fleet includes a vintage 1989 Freightliner.

Lyenol is the herdsman and takes care of breeding and milking, and does land work as well.

And Gilmer is as retired as most farmers ever get, but still gets into some lively discussions with his sons over day-to-day operations, and certainly had his say when they were planning the new barn.

The 899 milking cows at Pennwood are all registered Holsteins, as were all the animals lost in the fire. The Penners have been milking only registered Holsteins since 1968.

The replacements, after the fire, were mostly brought in from Ontario and Quebec with a few purchased locally, Gilmer said.

Throughout the latest building project, Gilmer Penner attended most meetings and still takes an active role at the farm.

"Operating the forage harvester is the most fun thing to do on the farm. I'd rather do that than take holidays. But we do winter in Phoenix."

When Gilmer is asked if it is time for him to start slowing down, he says to ask the boys. Their reply is more diplomatic than informative.

"Some things yes, some things no and some things he should."



Gilmer Penner in the fire suppression equipment room at the new 305,000-square-foot Pennwood Dairy barn.

WES KEATING/THE CARILLON

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Beekeeper says a few stings accepted as part of the job

Leaning his elbows on a hive, Tim Bartel is surrounded by a fourth generation of family beekeepers setting up hives in the Kleefeld area early in June. With Bartel are William Rogalsky, Ryan Fehr, Samuel Bartel and Ivan Bartel.

by WES KEATING

A few bee stings along the way have never bothered four generations of a Kleefeld family, which has been producing honey since the 1950s.

Tim Bartel, a third generation apiarist, says bee stings still hurt, but they don't swell up the way they used to. He says he learned at a young age that all work has its hurts and it doesn't make a difference if you are a carpenter, an office worker, or a writer.

"You can hit your thumb with a hammer, suffer a paper cut, carpal tunnel syndrome or a writer's cramp. For me, it always was a few bee stings."

The old adage of "No Pain, No Gain", can certainly hold true when working with bees, but unless they are agitated, the honey producers are benign and hard-working.

Today, the Bartel family operation involves Tim and his brother Chris,

and a number of their children, the fourth generation of beekeepers. Since the very beginning, it has been a matter of on-the-job training for the Bartels. Tim says everybody in his family worked on the farm growing up, except one sibling, who could not tolerate bee stings.

The first Bartel beekeepers were Peter and Margaret. He was pastor of the Kleefeld EMC. The second generation, Norman and Rosella Bartel moved to the present location in 1973, when Tim was in Grade Three.

"For me, there was no real starting point for my beekeeping. I just grew up in it."

The Bartels now have 1,000 hives in honey production and in a good year produce between 100,000 and 200,000 pounds of honey. But last year was not a good year and this year the Bartels are in a rebuilding phase, Tim says.

Honey production was down last year, and spotty, with some areas where the hives were located doing

very well and others, not so much. A hit and miss year, all around.

Over the years, Bartel has seen changes in the industry. Crops change and production numbers change as well. When they started, their bees were in rapeseed, which bloomed as long as canola does today. The flowering period is still 10 to 14 days, but canola has a lot more flowers than rapeseed did. Then, 15 bushels per acre was considered a good yield, but today, that number is more like 30.

Bartel says building up the strength of bees, early in the season, before moving hives out is achieved by feeding syrup with 15 percent pollen in it. This increases the strength of bees and increases production, giving bees an early boost.

Retirement is not a thought for Tim, who says beekeeping is a lifestyle not a job. His father passed away at the age of 85 last August and was always around at work until a week before his death.

"Dad built all our machines and I kept breaking them. Fortunately, Ryan got to work with his grandpa and can fill in that fixing role now."

But while Tim says he is not heading into retirement just yet, he admits he has been slowing down and now gets to do the jobs he finds the most fun. The actual handling of the bees is mostly left to the next generation.

Son-in-law William Rogalsky, nephews Ryan Fehr and Ivan Bartel, and the Bartels' son Samuel, handle the hives and the outside operations, while three daughters, Kendra, Riana and Caycie, take care of the honey house and extracting, with an assist from Jodi, when needed.

Caycie says she now manages the extracting crew and handles the necessary paper work, like Canadian Food Inspection reports along with her sister Kendra (currently on maternity leave), while Riana operates the extracting equipment. Their mother does not spend much time

in the honey house any more, but Caycie and her sister are happy Jodi is right there in case she is needed.

Winter is really a slow time for bees, but they never become completely dormant. Tim says they keep moving in the hives in a co-operative effort to stay warm. The centre of the core of the hive can reach 30 degrees. In January, the cluster continues to move, with the bees on the outside moving inside to keep warm while the inner cluster of bees move out to the cooler area to make room.

"Keeps everybody happy."

And the happiness of the hive is important for both the bee and the beekeeper. When bees become agitated, they sting and that still hurts, Tim says.

The Bartels don't go south in winter, but instead, have turned the backyard into a mini summer resort, complete with swimming pool, hot tub, water slide and even a Tiki Bar with thatched roof, adding a touch of Hawaii.

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Tim and Jodi Bartel can keep an eye on the activity in the pool, hot tub, and water slide from the shade of the thatched roof Tiki Bar, which adds a touch of Hawaii to the backyard of their Kleefeld farm.



There was no pot of gold, or even a golden honey pot, at the end of the rainbow created by the spray of Tim Bartel's fire hose, but it was a welcome way for youngsters to beat the heat at the 2022 Kleefeld Honey Festival.



Jodi joins daughter Caycie at the extractor in the honey house at the Kleefeld area beekeeping operation.

WES KEATING THE CARILLON

There is always a crowd there in summer and that suits Tim and Jodi just fine. They are currently raising what they refer to as a “second batch” of children, now that their own are all grown-ups.

“We knew when we started our

own family that being parents was our role in life.”

But while Tim is in no hurry to retire from his life as a beekeeper, he has stepped aside after 27 years as a member of the Kleefeld fire department. He will miss the opportunity

to spray the kids during the annual Kleefeld Honey Festival and get his picture in the paper again.

He chuckles, recalling that was the only time he did get a photo in the newspaper, where he could be recognized. Usually, when fighting fires,

another member of the Kleefeld department, who shall remain nameless, would be singled out for that kind of publicity, Tim said.

“One time, my hands were in the picture, but that was only because I was wearing his gloves at the time.”

Now that he has retired from the fire department, it's Caycie's husband, William Rogalsky, who gets his picture in the paper fighting fires, Bartel chuckles.



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Catherine Kroeker Klassen and James Kroeker join their parents, Warren and Mary Kroeker at a 2006 cairn commemorating the 80th anniversary of the family farm near Linden.



Warren and Mary Kroeker visit their son and daughter at the site of the newest Oakdale Farms egg-laying facility near Linden.

Landmark siblings putting all their eggs in one basket

by WES KEATING

Countless youngsters who grow up on a family farm in southern Manitoba take a part-time job off the farm to go along with their farming activities as an adult. It is rare to find examples where the opposite is true, and a career away from the farm is swapped for a return to farming full-time and the continuation of the family farm for another generation.

That is the case for Catherine Kroeker Klassen and her brother James, who both took their time deciding to become full-time farmers and had well established careers off the farm when they took on part-time duties on the family farm at Linden, with a view of becoming full-time egg producers.

Catherine Kroeker Klassen says she grew up on the family farm at Linden, but left right after finishing high school. She went to Bible school and later took medical secretary training.

Catherine was at the Health Sciences Centre, and when their children were little her dad, Warren Kroeker, asked her to take over the books on the farm.

Catherine says she had the administrative skills needed, and really appreciated that her

mom was near to enjoy the grandchildren while their mom helped out with farm business.

"I continued to work at HSC until 2006, when James and I had a conversation about taking over the farm."

James was also pursuing another career at the time, while also helping out on his parents' farm. He was with a Winnipeg-based company which designed and built wine cellars for residences as well as hotels and restaurants across Canada and in the United States.

When the siblings approached their father, Warren was a little leery that this would pan out, but his son and daughter persevered and they have had a partnership ever since.

"We enjoy the farm and all aspects of it."

Being in charge and making decisions is different than just working on the farm, Catherine says. Building up the farm involved holding the overhead down while expanding. It took James and her time to wrap their heads around that aspect.

Making decisions of how to produce the best eggs, what grade of birds to buy, what crops to plant and when to spray, was quite a leap from just working for the farm and having someone else in charge of management.



James Kroeker checks the computer controls at the Oakdale Farms new enriched housing facility.

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Accent on Agriculture

Jim Rae

A boost for the railway

In 1924, the forerunner of the Hudson Bay Route Association was formed. The organizers had one simple objective: they wanted the federal government to get involved in completing construction of a rail line to, and a grain terminal in, the northern Manitoba town of Churchill. It has taken the supporters nearly one hundred years to get governments involved in a major way.

In early August the federal and provincial governments each put in \$73.8 million to maintain and upgrade the rail line from The Pas to Churchill. It's the second major investment by the federal government but the first by the Manitoba government. Earlier the Feds spent \$160 million to buy the service and repair the rail line. At the time, the provincial government refused to be part of the takeover, claiming that railways and port facilities were a federal responsibility.

The former owner was OmniTrax, a Denver based company with no experience in railroading in Canada's North, which has lots of peat bogs. The new owner is a consortium of 41 First Nations and rail line communities. The new group is called Arctic Gateway Group. A board member, who is also the chief of Fox Lake Cree Nation, said members of that community are already at work replacing culverts and thousands of rail ties on the line. The chief said the com-

mitment from the two governments sets them up to move beyond emergency repairs toward maximizing the full potential of the rail line as a trade corridor.

During the time that OmniTrax owned and ran the railroad and the port facilities in Churchill, the state of repair became worse. The American company knew a lot about running a railroad, but nothing about how to run it in Northern Canada. At the end of their time as owner/operators, there was significant spring flooding and significant damage to the track. The company refused to repair anything. In essence it walked away from both the railway and the port facilities, forfeiting ownership.

The dynamics surrounding the rail line to Churchill and Hudson's Bay have changed dramatically. The provincial and federal governments have made substantial investments in what is being called infrastructure. The rationale is that governments build and maintain roads for transporting goods and services in Southern Canada; however there is no road to Churchill to carry the same goods - the railroad serves that purpose.

Ownership is now local and committed. The employee base is also local and committed. This latest round of financing should make the railway and port sound financial businesses.

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The watering system in the control room sure has changed a lot since Warren Kroeker became an egg farmer back in the 1960's.

“Through the years, James and I have figured it out. We each have our strengths and weaknesses, and have learned how to make it work.”

It's not always easy, Catherine admits, but she and James have a good working relationship, are good friends and close siblings.

James lives on the farmyard where they grew up and Catherine lives across the road and their parents live nearby, just across Provincial Road 210 to the south.

The barn they had before was in production until construction of the new Oakdale North enriched housing barn was finished. Then it was depopulated, as conventional housing is no longer the way to go. In fact, Catherine points out, by 2036 there will be no conventional housing for laying hens left in Canada.

When the opportunity arose, in 2016, they took over the present barn with its 6,300 bird capacity and tripled its size, switching to enhanced housing for just over 18,000 birds. Catherine said the barn was built by her daughter and son-in-law in 2015, who later decided farming was not for them.

The barn expansion was completed just in time for the next flock of laying hens to arrive July 22.

While the barn has all the amenities that go along with enriched housing, one of the more interesting changes is the two-tiered system of cages. Usually, enriched housing barns are built in three tiers and are much longer. The new Oakdale barn has six tiers, with a walkway above the lower three.

“We took off the back of the barn, added on enriched housing and additional manure storage.”

Both James and Catherine are happy with the 17,000-bird quota they have now, and while the new barn has room for more birds, they had no plans to immediately buy more quota.

“You need really deep pockets and we are content with what we have, and just built a little extra space.”

James certainly agrees with that decision, saying their intention is to keep it as a family farm. He doesn't always like the outlook of agricultural business, which is taking on a corporate look. Catherine says it is part of their philosophy. Bigger is okay, but keep it in the family.

Today, keeping it all in the family, their one full-time employee is a brother-in-law and the rest of the work is mostly done by their kids or a neighbor or two hired during the cropping season.

And it was the keeping it in the family aspect that also played a role in the decision to go with enriched housing rather than a free-run facility.

The free-run system is more hands-on and is a different way of working with laying hens. What did not fit with the Linden producers was the labour aspect.

“We have 1,400 acres to take care of, and both of us have off-farm interests we would like to continue to pursue. We would like to see it stay at this size.”

Their next project will be to renovate their current pullet barn. They raise 25,000 pullets in two batches per year, buying chicks from one of two Manitoba hatcheries, Steinbach Hatchery or the hatchery in Brandon.



Catherine Kroeker Klassen with the automated egg-packing system at their new barn, which went into production the last week of July.

In a way, the third generation at the Lindon farm started out in much the same way as the fourth.

Warren Kroeker had been working off the farm and when he was in his 20's he approached his father with the intention of becoming a farmer.

John T. and Adeline Kroeker had only one son and Warren suggested to his father that he lay off the hired man and he would take that job for the summer.

“I dove into farming and never looked back. It's in my blood.”

To learn more about farming, Kroeker enrolled at the University of Manitoba's and earned a Diploma in Agriculture. At the time he came out of university, egg production was

becoming mechanized.

He approached the feed mills for financing, went out and bought a bunch of used cages, hired a man for the summer to straighten them out, and started egg production with a small flock in an old dairy barn.

“I was in the egg business.”

But for Kroeker, farming was not to always be a full-time job. In the early 1990's he said became bored with farming, took a course and then sold realty for Bob Schinkel for the next 20 years. During that time he was wearing two hats, farming and sales.

Finally it got to be too much and Kroeker asked his kids, who had good jobs, to help him manage the farm.

From then on, as they say, the rest is history.

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Prevost Perennials promises stress-free zone for gardeners

While the Manitoba season is not really long enough, John and Margie enjoy the challenge of adding new varieties of grapes to their vineyard.

by WES KEATING

Potential gardeners who shop for bedding plants, perennials, shrubs or trees at the Prevost garden centre, tucked away on a couple of acres at the east end of the Sandilands Forest Reserve, will soon find they are indeed in a stress-free zone.

That's what the sign says, and John and Margie Prevost have spent more than 25 years creating this unique park-like setting, with its vineyards, variety of fully grown trees, a pond with its soothing water-wheel feature, and of course, their fully stocked greenhouse of perennials and bedding plants.

Prevost Perennials is more than just a successful commercial enterprise. John and Margie were both born and raised locally and have deep roots in the region. They believe that local support is needed if small business is to survive. That is why they became involved in the Piney Regional Chamber of Commerce and why their garden centre focusses on the customer's experience more than the sale of plants.

Their two-acre yard was not much more than an open field when they moved there almost 40 years ago. Developing their own yard, John and Margie have tried different things to see what will grow best in this climate.

John says they don't consider themselves professional gardeners by any means, but used a trial and error method of deciding what to sell when they opened Prevost Perennials. Along the way, they have made valuable connections with other greenhouses and have expanded from just perennial plants to bed-

ding plants, shrubs and trees.

"We like trying to stretch the limits of what we can grow locally. But we like to make sure the plants we sell can survive here, before we sell anything to a customer to take home".

The Prevosts are in the second season of partnering with the University of Brandon and T&T Seeds in an experiment to grow sweet potatoes in peat moss.

Last year, the trial run produced a pretty good crop, and they believe they would have done a lot better this year if the local deer population had not appreciated their efforts quite so much. Many of the plants were nibbled off as soon as they came up.

The results of their other experiments has produced a beautiful acreage to give potential customers a preview of what the plants, trees or shrubs they buy will look like when they are fully grown.

A visit to Prevost Perennials may often include a stroll around the property to see their little vineyard or the pond out back.

Although the business has really increased in the last few years, Margie says they don't really want it to grow to the point where they can't provide that special kind of personal service and experience, which is so much part of their garden centre.

Margie says it is very rewarding when someone comes and says they don't know anything about gardening, but then comes back again for more plants, saying they were able to grow "this and that".

John and Margie are very happy to be able to be there for the local market, saving local gardeners a long trip to the nearest large urban center.

"We have a corner of southeastern Manitoba market, Moose Lake, Buf-



A visit to John and Margie Prevost's greenhouse should also include a tour of their two acres of plants, shrubs and trees.

falo Point, Sprague, Vassar and Middlebro. It's basically the RM of Piney region."

At one time, sales to cross-border shoppers was part of the business, but rules and regulations and special certification needed for customers to take plants back to the United States proved to be too much of a hassle.

"Rather than have customers facing problems at the border, ruining their experience of shopping at Prevost Perennials, we decided to keep our plants on this side of the border."

The Prevosts want people to feel the peacefulness they themselves experience every day and when customers leave, they should be looking forward to coming back.

A highlight of any tour of this park-like setting, are the huge black walnut trees, which the Prevosts grew from seeds collected from a local source, during Fourth of July celebrations some 25 years ago.

Visitors and potential customers will also see an incredible collection of red maples and red oaks, white pines, assorted apple, pear and cherry trees, and all kinds of perennial flowers and scattered vegetable gardens. Not to mention the vineyard, with its 17 varieties of grapes, the Prevosts are "growing for fun."

A unique feature of the greenhouse is a full-sized Amur Maple tree in the middle of it. This is one tree, customers don't have to go any farther than the greenhouse to see.

Often people will come and wander about the yard for an hour looking at the trees, plants and flowers, and leave without buying anything. That suits the Prevosts just fine. When the gardening bug hits, those potential customers will be back.

When COVID hit, everyone became a gardener. Margie, who worked many years as an Educational Assistant, retired in 2021 to devote full time to the greenhouse business.

Now, she is encouraged when students, who she once taught, try their hand at gardening, and then return to learn more and expand their gardening experiences.

John says he always has enjoyed learning something new and growing

everything gardening related he could get his hands on, while watching the business grow over the years.

In fact, the business was growing faster than John and Margie would like and customers included businesses like the conservatory at Assiniboine Park. They started saying "No" to some commercial customers, to keep the business more personal, he said.

"It's more about the pleasure of sharing than expanding the business. We wanted to keep the business personal rather than concentrating on volume."

That sharing goes well beyond the

boundaries of the two-acre garden centre and the Prevosts say they feel very privileged and blessed to have what they have and appreciate the support of the local communities. They believe it's important to give back, whether it's supporting local fundraisers or being involved with larger projects to assist refugees.

This fall, John and Margie are planning a trip to Greece, where a nephew is a missionary working with Syrian refugees at a refugee camp on the Greek Island of Lesbos. The Prevosts are hoping to share their gardening skills there and hopefully set up a community garden.



In the middle of the greenhouse, next to a lamp post with pots of Begonias, the Prevosts have grown a large Amur Maple tree.



John Prevost displays a cluster of grapes, one of 17 varieties, grown at Prevost Perennials.