



The *New* American Farmer

Jim Mitchell

Hockessin, Delaware

Summary of Operation

- 30-cow dairy herd rotationally grazed on 22 acres
- 50 acres of hay, silage and pasture
- On-site creamery producing 25,000 gallons of ice cream annually

Problem Addressed

Farming amid dense development. It was years before Jim Mitchell ever went up in an airplane, but his first ride was revealing in more ways than one. When he was 39, a friend took him in a small plane over his Woodside Farm. The view shocked him. “We know all of the houses are there, but until you look down on the rooftops and see how many there are...it’s amazing,” Mitchell says. “We’re an island in the middle of suburbia.”

Not only does his location isolate Mitchell from other farms and farm services, but it also limits his size. His 75-acre farm is split by two main roads, making it impossible to graze his cows on the full acreage. With a commitment to management-intensive grazing, Mitchell maintains 30 cows annually.

Background

Mitchell is the seventh generation of his family to farm in Hockessin, in northern Delaware a few miles from the Pennsylvania state line. His ancestors bought the farmland in 1796. Today, the farm is smack in the middle of New Castle County, a fast-growing area near Wilmington and Philadelphia.

Mitchell’s father ran the dairy farm full time until 1961. He got an off-farm job and sold the animals, but continued to dabble in agricultural enterprises like pumpkins, beef, chrysanthemums and hay.

As a child, Mitchell participated in the farm’s ventures. When he was grown, he opened a lawn maintenance business, which he ran for 20 years. Then he decided to resurrect a full-time farm business, opening his own dairy on his family’s farm in 1994. He bought a small herd of Jersey calves and, with his wife, Janet, a full-time veterinarian, moved into a house they built on the farm. Mitchell’s parents still live there, too, in a house dating to 1804.

Many producers might profess that farming is “in their blood,” but when Mitchell makes that statement, centuries of tradition back him up.

“Farming is kind of a lifestyle, you have a certain amount of freedom,” says Mitchell, describing himself as a person who relishes running his own business. “I love to farm.”

Focal Point of Operation – Rotational grazing and ice cream

Mitchell converted his suburban location into a gold mine. Today, he milks his herd of Jerseys and processes the milk into ice cream sold at his wildly popular on-site creamery.

Mitchell runs his 30 cows through 22, 1-acre paddocks. On the other side of the road, he raises hay and silage to supplement the cows' diet and feed them in the off-season. Surrounding development dictated this setup, as Mitchell can not move his herd across two busy roads.

Mitchell rotates the cows daily on pastures seeded in orchardgrass, clover and ryegrass. The grazing season usually lasts from April through October. Through the winter, the cows eat from hay rings on the pasture and frequent a "loafing" area — a converted greenhouse-type structure — to get out of the elements. The loafing area has a gravel floor and a bedded pack of hay or straw to collect manure, which Mitchell later composts.

To adapt to his farm size limitations, Mitchell designed a seasonal milking system where he "dries off" the herd each winter. He formed a partnership with a Frederick, Md., dairy farmer to raise his heifers on the other farmer's more abundant pasture. Every January, Mitchell drives a truckload of yearling heifers two hours to Frederick, returning with the previous year's heifer herd, bred and ready to calve in a few weeks.

"He's well stocked with pasture and we're short on pasture, so it works out well for both of us," Mitchell says. Also a seasonal milker, the Frederick farmer runs Mitchell's heifers with his own, charging him per head, per day.

The fluid milk goes one of two places — 80 percent to a local cooperative, the rest to Mitchell's Woodside Farm Creamery, a venture begun in 1998 that now keeps everything else afloat.

Mitchell learned to make ice cream at a

Penn State University short course — "I even have a diploma, though some people think it's silly," he says — and split an old turkey processing house on the farm to house a commercial kitchen and milking parlor. Equipped with an ice cream machine and commercial freezers, the kitchen employs two full-time workers kept busy creating 75 or so flavors all summer long.

Before launching, Mitchell worked with state and county regulators to obtain licensing. "You have to do what they want," he says pragmatically, "submitting plans to the health department specifying your floor, walls, drainage, etc."

The ice cream store is open from April 1 to the end of October. In the winter, Mitchell wholesales ice cream and promotes holiday ice cream pies. Not all of the ice cream sales occur on site. Mitchell peddles about 20 percent of his ice cream to wholesale customers — restaurants and scoop shops — and about 5 percent to special events like festivals. The outside sales send him on the road to develop accounts and make deliveries.

Economics and Profitability

In 2004, Woodside Farm Creamery produced 25,000 gallons of ice cream. It's a lot of ice cream, and so is the gross revenue from \$9 a gallon wholesale and \$21 a gallon retail.

"It's a specialized product," says Mitchell. Moreover, "people aren't coming just for the ice cream, they're coming for the farm." After choosing among the dozens of flavors — from ever-popular vanilla and chocolate



Edwin Rensberg

Jim Mitchell added a profitable ice cream parlor to his Delaware dairy farm.

to more exotic pumpkin pecan and the award-winning peanut butter & jelly — customers enjoy a shaded picnic area, and the kids can see the heifers, Mitchell's sister's flock of sheep and tractors.

Mitchell hires as many as 25 in the busy summer season, mostly area youths who compete for the coveted job of scooping.

Mitchell invested \$80,000 to retrofit the building, buy equipment and convert an old wagon shed into a sales area. He continues to make improvements. The first year, he needed to expand his parking area to accommodate close to 60 cars, and it's still full on a typical summer evening.

The frozen dairy product is the icing for Woodside Farm. Without adding value to

his milk, the dairy business wouldn't have lasted, Mitchell says.

"To be honest, I thought we could make a living just grazing and milking, but we're so limited on space and the size of the herd, it wasn't working," he says. "I was ready to sell the cows, but thought I would try ice cream.

"We're profitable, but we weren't always. It's the ice cream that makes us so."

Environmental Benefits

Keeping his herd outdoors year-round has improved his herd's health, Mitchell says. He calls a veterinarian only for vaccinations and pregnancy checks, proud that the animal doctors rarely visit. Mitchell only administers antibiotics to treat the rare infection.

On pasture, the herd spreads its own manure during daily rotations. When manure collects in the cow loafing area, Mitchell composts it on half an acre. In 2004, he began working to improve his composting system to reduce runoff. With the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), he is building a composting shed, grading the land and installing catch basins.

Previously in row crops, the fields that support the 20 paddocks now boast a perennial crop of orchardgrass, clover and ryegrass. Scientists agree that a permanent ground cover reduces erosion, improves water infiltration and reduces the need for agri-chemicals.

Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Mitchell employs more than two dozen from his community — two full-timers in the creamery and up to 25 teenagers part time in the summer in the ice cream parlor. Coveted parlor jobs create some competition among area teens; of 30 applicants for the 2004 season, just five were hired.



Edwin Remsburg

Mitchell covers the overall business management, the field work, most of the feeding and what he calls the "road running" — developing and maintaining ice cream accounts.

Mitchell's family stays involved in different aspects of the farm. His father does the twice-a-day milking. With his dad in his 70's, Mitchell has started to worry about his time working the herd. "Mom suggested he slow down and I said I'd be happy for him to, if we could get him out of the barn," he says.

His father can take off time freely, however, as one of the full-time creamery employees also can milk the cows. Janet Mitchell oversees the ice cream stand, setting employee schedules and advertising.

Despite his suburban location, Mitchell maintains good relations with his neighbors. "People have told us they're happy we're here," he says. Perhaps the opportunity to bring their kids to sit on the fence and gaze at farm animals while licking ice cream compensates for farm odors and noise, as Mitchell attests he has never had a direct complaint.

Transition Advice

Dairy producers considering grazing should

know that it reduces costs over confinement, especially in the summer (for northern climates), Mitchell says. In the winter, he hauls feed to his herd, although the cows remain outside on pasture.

Seasonal calving is a great option for dairy producers, as it condenses key, time-consuming tasks — breeding, calving, weaning — to once a year. Mitchell further simplified by installing a camera in the barn that is wired into a cable system in his house. During calving season, Mitchell checks on the herd from his house TV at night.

"Breeding is one time a year, the calves are weaned together... There's a start and a finish to everything, and that's what I like about it," he says.

The Future

Mitchell plans to shrink his paddocks more to move the cows more often. He also hopes to rotate his hay feeding to prevent odors for his neighbors, as the hay and silage can get smelly when wet.

Finally, he aims to improve manure composting, with help from NRCS. Once he refines his system, he might consider selling the compost to area gardeners.

"It's an ongoing process," he says.

■ Valerie Berton

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