



## The *New* American Farmer

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### Don & Anita Nelson, Neldell Farm /Thunder Valley Inn, Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin

#### Summary of Operation

- 160-cow dairy farm on 1,350 acres (900 owned, 450 rented)
- Corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa
- Three organic vegetable gardens
- Bed-and-breakfast operation linked to the farm

#### Problem Addressed

**Public education.** A former schoolteacher, Anita Nelson realized that many children do not know where their food comes from. “City kids used to go to the farm and make that connection,” she says. “But grandma and grandpa aren’t on the farm anymore, and we are losing so many family farmers.”

Nelson’s desire to expose city children to the origins of their food prompted her to pursue a dream. “We’re in a tourist area where hundreds and hundreds of families come to Wisconsin Dells to enjoy the beautiful river and all of the attractions,” she says. “I thought some of these families might like to learn about the land that grows their food. I’m a believer that we must educate our neighbors, both rural and urban, about how their food is grown, by whom and for what purpose.”

#### Background

Both Don and Anita Nelson were raised on dairy farms outside of Wisconsin Dells. Don took over the family farm, first purchased by his father in 1920, when he was 18.

Anita opened Thunder Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast in 1988 when her two daughters, Kari and Sigrid, were still in high school. “We’re one of the few bed and breakfasts that not only accepts children and families, but encourages them to come,” Nelson says. “We have goats, chickens, ducks, rabbits, kittens and other small livestock. The children have so much fun feeding and playing with the animals.”

Thunder Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast sits on 25 acres about three miles from the dairy farm and is a thriving side operation managed by Anita Nelson. They acquired the property, formerly a horse ranch and riding stable, shortly before opening the inn.

#### Focal Point of Operation — Agritourism

The Nelsons’ dairy operation extends over about five miles and incorporates six small farms. They have 160 mature cows, and milk about 130 to 140 each day. They raise about 165 heifers. The animals are housed in a combination of a stanchion barn and a free-stall barn. Cows are all milked in the stanchion barn in shifts. When outdoors, cattle are confined to a small field with enough area for them to lie down at night and frequent a “day pasture” that offers them exercise.

The couple built a new milking parlor complete with a handicapped-accessible viewing room. From there, they encourage guests to watch their twice-a-day milkings.

The Nelsons raise their own grain for feed. Their standard rotation is corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa. In some winters, they let the alfalfa grow as a cover crop, then plow and plant a cash crop into it in the spring. They haul manure from the barns and spread it twice a year on the crop fields, supplementing very occasionally with commercial fertilizer when soil tests dictate.

The Nelsons have tried to minimize pesticide use, depending instead on their rotations to break up insect cycles. They never spray according to a manufacturer's schedule. "We don't indiscriminately spray by the calendar," Nelson says. "We try to avoid pesticides as much as possible and only spray if we see an unmanageable problem."

They raise salad vegetables — lettuces, tomatoes, cucumbers — and sweet corn organically in any of three garden plots, one of which is located at their Thunder Valley Inn Bed and Breakfast. A friend manages the garden for them part time, in exchange for a share of the produce. Most of the rest goes to feed inn guests.

The bed and breakfast offers guests a combination of Scandinavian hospitality, entertainment and education about the rural heritage of the United States, food production and the stewardship of land and animals. The inn features a six-bedroom, 150-year-old farm house; a small cottage; and a cedar building. The cottage — originally a milk house, then a woodshed before being turned into guest quarters — and the cedar building — formerly a bunk house for the horse ranch — are only open during the summer. They converted a machine shed into the inn's restaurant. At full occupancy, the inn can accommodate from 25 to 30 guests, with children encouraged.

"We hope to help people understand, just a bit, how important the land is for food, not



*The Nelsons are banking on the success of their agriculturally oriented bed and breakfast.*

only for the people, but for the animals and how we have to care for it," Nelson says. "We try to get people to realize that we have a limited amount of land and we have to nurture it so it can be used in the future. I hope our guests then realize a little bit more how valuable agriculture is."

Visitors are given the option of helping workers perform farm chores, such as gathering eggs from their flock of 50 layers or feeding their four goats. Both activities are very popular with children. To further enrich their stay, the Nelsons maintain a small "zoo" of animals, including 100 chickens (50 layers and 50 broilers), goats, ducks and rabbits.

Breakfast is served each morning to guests, with evening dinners open to the public. A stay at the inn features chautauqua "threshing suppers," a unique combination of produce from the vegetable gardens and a program of song and storytelling. Local food includes corn, tomatoes, lettuces, beans, cucumbers and many other vegetables from

the Nelsons' garden, fresh strawberries and raspberries from a neighbor and wild blackberries from the woods. The dinners are designed to inform the guests about their rural heritage and the importance of nurturing the land and animals.

Dinners are followed by musical entertainment with a Norwegian flavor. A regular entertainer tells stories and plays the accordion. "Then we talk a little bit about what is happening in rural America — how we are losing so many families from the farm," Nelson adds.

During the day, some of their visitors go to the dairy farm, where they can watch as Don Nelson and his sons milk the cows, feed the calves, and do field work, such as baling hay.

#### **Economics and Profitability**

The farming operation supports the Nelsons and two of their adult sons, Peter and Nels, who work with them. Like any relatively new venture, the bed and breakfast

is taking time to climb solidly into the black.

“We are gaining in worth and are beginning to show a profit,” Nelson says. “However, much of our income goes back into improvements and since we are mainly a summer business, we hope to extend our season more.”

The dairy farm has been the primary source of income for the Nelsons and has actually helped to subsidize Thunder Valley Inn. “It takes a long time to get any business going,” Nelson says. “With our inn, we have had a lot of renovating to get it where it is today. It’s like a farm, because everything goes back into the business.”

Their location near Wisconsin Dells has helped them draw customers, Nelson says. The city, a bustling tourist town on the Wisconsin River, attracts visitors from all over the Midwest. In fact, the city’s population swells from 3,000 to at least two times that number during the busy tourist season. To capitalize on their location, the Nelsons launched a website to publicize the bed and breakfast and linked to the town’s list of accommodations.

#### Environmental Benefits

The Nelsons are planning to increase grazing for their dairy farming operation. They grow the vegetables at the inn garden organically and have minimized pesticide spraying on their crops. They accomplish this partly by rotating their crops with consideration given to what was previously grown on a field — which lessens incidences of pest outbreaks and disease.

If the field was planted in alfalfa, the Nelsons will spread a light coat of manure without extra chemical fertilizer, only adding a small amount when planting the next crop. They analyze the soil where they grow corn and soybeans to determine how much manure and fertilizer to use.

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#### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

The Nelsons hire several part-time employees, including a retired school teacher who helps with bookkeeping, their two daughters and a son-in-law. For 35 years, they have hired students from foreign countries to spend summers working on the dairy farm and at the inn. The Nelsons have found they’ve also benefited from hosting foreign exchange students, who they say have brought a broader view and a richness to their lives.

A longtime member and supporter of the National Farmers Union, Nelson enjoyed working in the organization’s summer youth camps as a music teacher. She especially likes how the organization brings members together to learn more about their farming experiences.

The Nelsons have offered their children the richness of their Scandinavian culture and the lifestyle of a family farm, resulting in the children’s continued involvement at the farm even as they have become adults.

They derive great satisfaction from sharing their lives with visitors and teaching about rural heritage and agriculture. Their hope is that visitors will leave Thunder Valley with a new appreciation for the environment and the people who produce their food.

#### Transition Advice

The Nelsons believe that operating a small bed and breakfast with an agricultural theme can be a viable option for others, if they initially have another source of income. Anyone interested in starting up this type of business must also be willing to dedicate themselves totally to its lifestyle and operation. “I am absorbed here completely,” Nelson says. “Thunder Valley is a labor-intensive kind of business.”

She added that it would have been easier for them if they had combined the inn with a smaller dairy operation. “We have two sons that are also on the farm and it’s a pretty full-time job for them as well as my husband, just to keep the farm going,” she says, leaving little time for their participation in the inn operations.

#### The Future

Nelson would like to put together an educational tour package that would include more about farm life, possibly including her Norwegian daughter-in-law as a guide. Nelson also hopes to organize educational farm tours to further her aim of connecting consumers to food production.

■ *Mary Friesen*

#### For more information:

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