

Soaring land costs cloud dairy's future

Story & Photos
By KEN LEVY
Freelance Writer

Facing a fresh start and new opportunities, Dave and Sue Williams packed up everything they owned — including more than 150 head of cattle — and moved more than 2,000 miles to a dairy in Homedale, Idaho.

The couple thought they'd found their dream when they bought the dairy about nine years ago — a place to prosper and build a future for their two young sons while raising primarily Jersey cows.

Sue and Dave grew up on dairy farms in central New York State. Sue raised Holsteins in Homer while Dave was a Jersey cowman in Preble. They married in 1987, and "the Holsteins were like my dowry," Sue joked.

But when Dave's father passed away in 1995, the family faced few options.

"We owned the cows but not the property," said Sue. "At that time we couldn't afford to buy a farm in New York. We had our cows and we had to go somewhere. It was cheaper to come here."

Sue said the couple was looking for a cheese market, and at that time Idaho was the place to bring Jerseys, since they have higher butterfat and protein.

"The cheese plants like that because it takes less Jersey milk to make a pound of cheese," she said.

The Williams trucked 168 animals — cows, heifers and calves — plus their belongings the 2,600 miles to Homedale, where they had purchased a 15-acre dairy. They eventually added another 5 acres.

"We had to fly out to get to the

dairy before the cows got there to be ready to milk them," she said. The entire move took about two months, including finding the property and signing the paperwork.

"We basically had to start from scratch twice," said Sue. "When we got married, we took over the farm from his dad, then when we came here we had to sell all the machinery to pay for our move." The Williams are milking 300 total and have another 300 young stock, calves through bred heifers.

Now, fresh off celebrating their 18th wedding anniversary, the couple sees an uncertain future as neighboring property prices soar out of their price range.

"We moved with the idea of giving our boys an opportunity to farm," said Dave. The Williams boys, Steve, now 15 and Mark, 12, are "both really hard workers," said Sue. "They know how to work and how to live. That's all they've ever done — work beside us since day one."

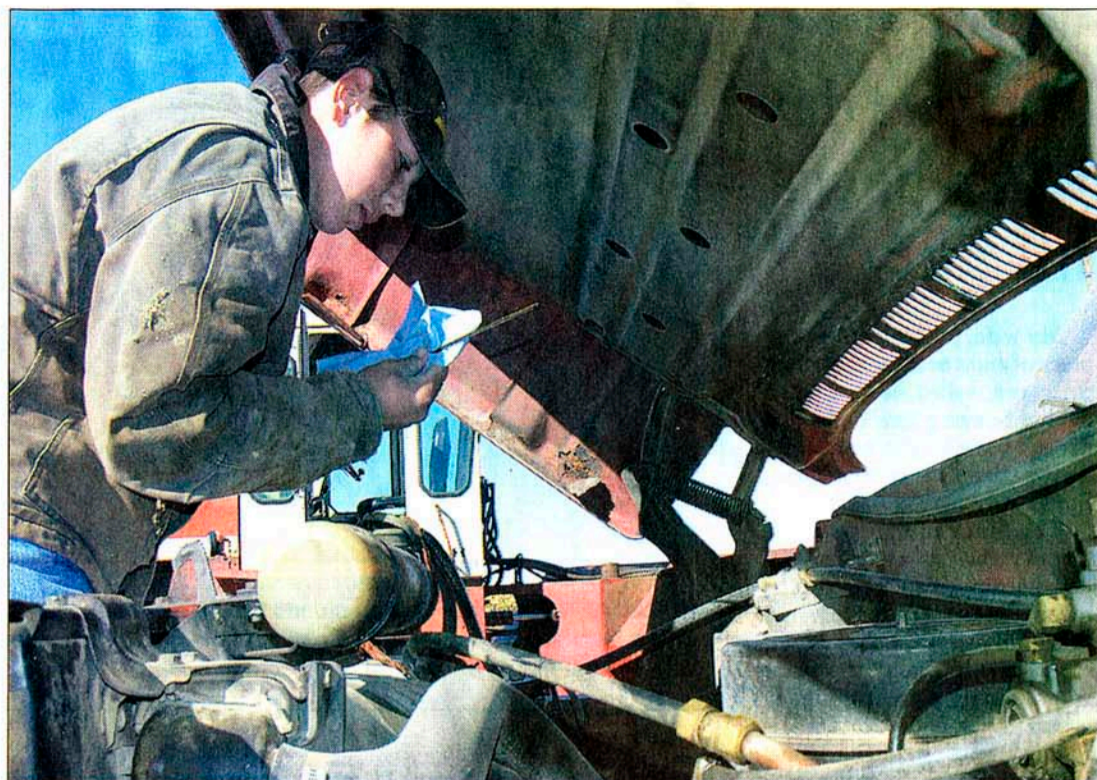
"We had a room in the barn, like a nursery, with TV and VCR and Barney on tape," said Dave of the boys' early years.

When the family moved to Idaho, "we thought we were moving into a farming community, and that's what it was. The idea was to buy enough ground to sustain our existence and our boys. Land prices were affordable, and the idea of farming was on everybody's minds."

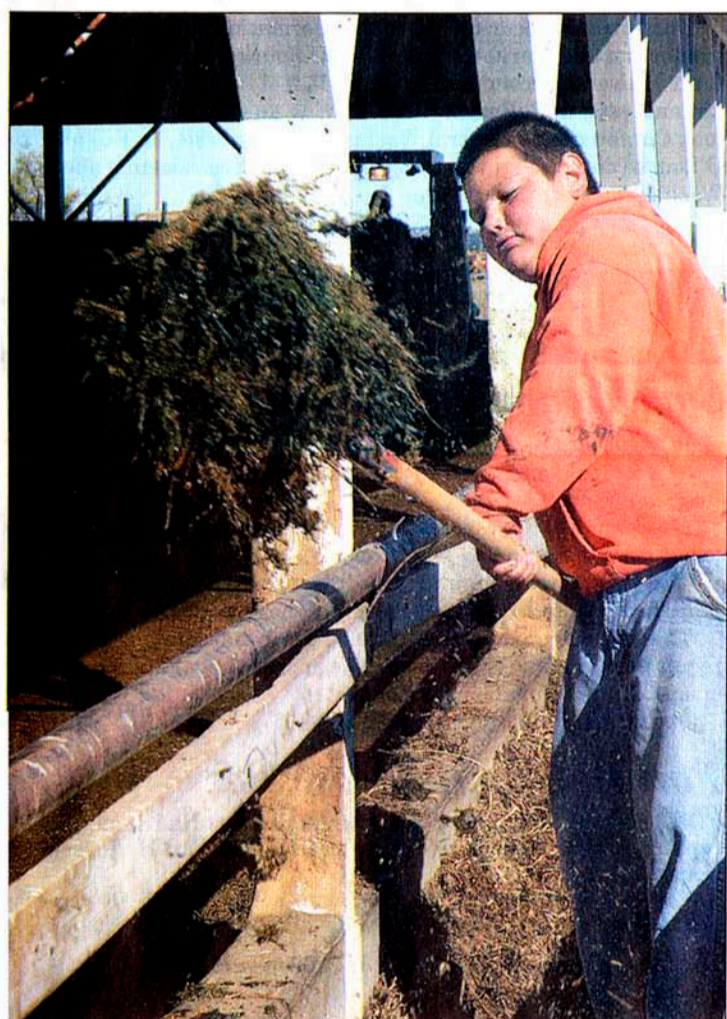
Over the last couple of years, however, "the only thing on everybody's minds is how much they can get per acre and how quick they can get a developer out here to buy their property," Dave said.

When the family arrived in Homedale in 1996, property could be purchased for \$1,700 to \$2,200 an acre, he said.

"In any growing business you're looking five to 10 years down the road, and you'd like to establish more of a land base and buffer zone around you," said Dave. "Farm ground always changes hands and you like it to remain farm ground. For the prices being asked today, the handwriting is on the wall: it's not going to be farm ground any more. We thought a couple of years ago that \$3,000 an acre wouldn't pencil out. It's about double what a person could afford to try to pay



Steve Williams, 15, of Homedale, Idaho, checks the fluids in a work truck at his family's Jersey dairy Oct. 9.



Mark Williams, 12, of Homedale, Idaho takes on calf-barn cleanup work at the family dairy.

back as far as getting crops off and making it profitable."

Right now, he said, "there's a For Sale sign on a property across the road from us, and that person wants \$10,000 an acre."

Dave said that, while the Williams "absolutely" want to stay and milk cows in Idaho, "there's just no way in the world we'd be able to pay for it."

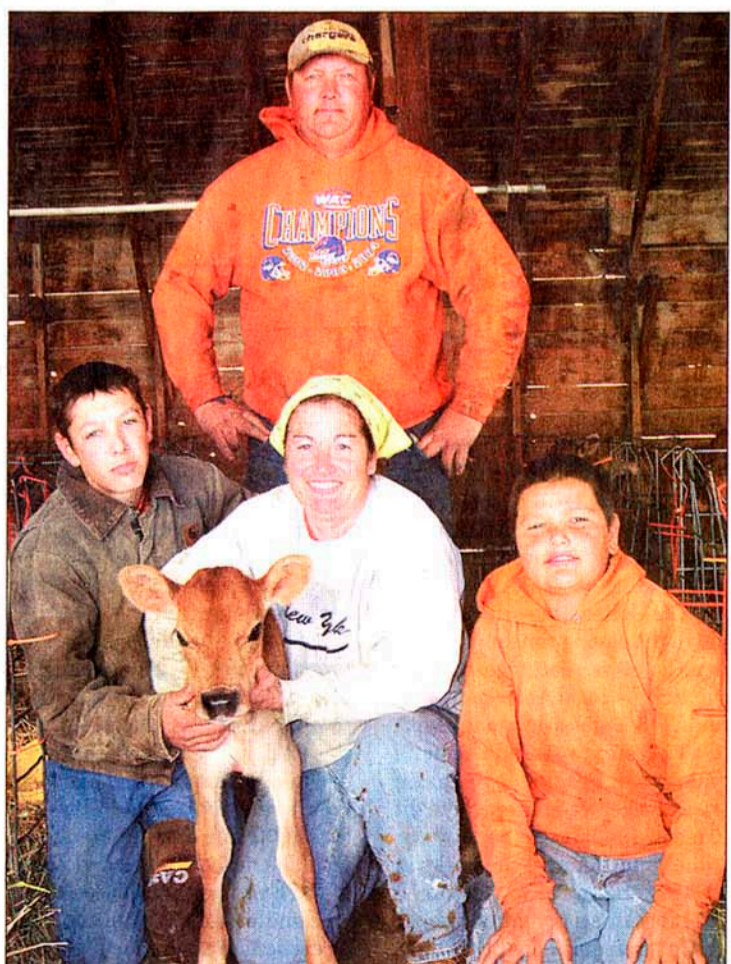
"And we figure land right across from you is only going to come up for sale once in a lifetime," said Sue.

Growing up in New York, Dave said, meant they had to farm the ground they had, with all its inherent problems.

"There were side hills, wet spots, 2-acre and 3-acre fields with rocks and hedgerows that probably produced about 20 percent of what the fields here can produce," said Dave. "There are people in New York who would give their left arm for Idaho's kind of land, that kind of productivity. Now, a lot of it is covered in blacktop, and it's some of the best ground. To see what you're throwing away hurts. Once it's gone, it's gone."



Sue Williams checks milking equipment at her dairy. Sue and husband Dave milk about 300 cows, mostly Jerseys, at their 20-acre dairy.



The Williams family concentrates on milking and raising Jersey cows at their dairy for cheese production. Dave and Sue Williams have been training their sons Steve and Mark in the operation. Clockwise from left, Steve, Dave, Mark and Sue show off a month-old Jersey.