

For 169 Years, Got Milk!

Tioga County Farmer & Politician Erick Coolidge and
His Family Keep Dairy Farming Alive

By Brendan O'Meara

The coffee goes on at 3:45 in the morning, every morning, rain, sleet, snow, or clear. It's always dark.

For breakfast it's eggs and toast, maybe Frosted Flakes.

The winter battered Le-Ma-Re Farms down in Coolidge Hollow, a name that gives way to images of mysterious, foggy mornings along Route 287. When the snow melted, only then was winter's pounding revealed.

Just another season down on a dairy farm founded in 1846, the same year President James Polk declared war on Mexico and seventeen years before the Gettysburg Address. Nearly every day since, someone has milked a cow on this plot of land.

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Mitch Wojnarowicz



Bridget Reed Photography

Looking to the future: Erick, Dixie, and Derick Coolidge (above, left to right); Derick Coolidge (above), with wife Brianne and children (left to right) Brooke, Rylee, and Colton, represents the fifth generation to work his family's land in Coolidge Hollow.



Le-Ma-Re Farm: "As long as I can get up and go to work in the morning I'm a pretty wealthy man," said dairy farmer Lynn Coolidge, and his descendants concur.

Mitch Wojnarowicz

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Spring arrived late this year, and the farm wasn't up to the Coolidge's standards. When Erick Coolidge, his wife Dixie, and son Derick look out over the fields in the Hollow, they see the immense amount of work ahead of them. That's the nature of agriculture and one of the many reasons they, and others, love it so much.

The winter aftermath, like a rock band trashing a hotel room, mattered little, because it would be pristine in time, ready for nature's next wave. Aesthetics are a human construct, and the 240 head of cattle cared little for it. Their kind have stood here honorably waiting for feed, waiting to be milked at the hand of a dairy farmer, for 169 years—and hopefully will be for 100 more to come.

That's always the hope: that the farm will pass down and not lay forever fallow. Driving past a long-dormant farm, a farm with no heir, Erick

says, "These are farms no longer in production. That's discouraging. The next generation is not there."

Maybe not *there*, but it is *here*, as in a fifth generation of dairyman down in Coolidge Hollow. Erick and Dixie's son Derick spends most of his time on the farm "working too hard," says Erick, reflecting upon the work Derick does to make the farm succeed.

Erick, sixty-one, followed in his father's line of work and Derick, thirty-two, has followed suit.

"As long as that's what he wants to do," Erick says. "I want it for him and his family. When we did it, it was OK because it's what we wanted to do. If that's what they want to do let's embrace it and afford them that opportunity."

Lynn, Erick's father, always told Erick, "As long as I can get up and go to work in the morning I'm a pretty wealthy man."

Erick carries that with him. So,

too, does Dixie. A successful day for her elicits that very quote from Lynn.

It keeps Erick grounded when the cows need milking, or when he needs to step over to the courthouse where he has served as county commissioner since 1995, twenty years and (hopefully) counting.

Erick's fondest memories come from working with his father on the farm. His mother, May, wouldn't let Erick walk by without a hug or a kiss. Erick spent long nights with his father and earlier mornings at the farm, named Le-Ma-Re Farm since the late 1960s: L for Lynn, e for Erick, Ma for May, Re for Erick's sister Reba, Le-Ma-Re.

"There were a couple of times we made some maple syrup," Erick says. "In the sugar bush with my dad we boiled sap all night. From where we were we could look down on the farm. That next morning we had eggs and walked down from the sugar bush to

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do chores. Stayed up all night, a fond memory."

Years later, in 1983, Lynn suffered a serious heart attack that shelved him for June, July, and August. As if that couldn't get any worse, just when he was getting back on his feet, in November of that year, the barn burned down when Le-Ma-Re Farm was just three months away from being debt free.

As Erick remembers it, the rain came pouring down, but the fire grew stronger in spite of it. All the cows were hustled out of the barn. One calf ran back in and couldn't be rescued.

Phones rang and cattle trucks pulled up to the farm ready to ferry them to vacant barns. The cows cared little for the flames. They still needed to be milked.

"That's typical of the industry," Dixie says. "It required neighbors. When something happens to someone, somehow people show up."

When the rain stopped and the fire burned out Willis Martin Sr. salvaged the steel.

After he put the final load on his truck, Martin said, "This will be it. I think we've got you turned around."

Erick helped him down off the truck and asked, "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," Martin replied. "Just pass it on."

Nobody in the Coolidge family forgets that kindness and the kindness shared among the entire agricultural community.

Lynn would never be quite the same. The heart attack was one thing, the barn something altogether worse.

"What am I losing?" Erick rhetorically asked. "My father's lifetime went up in smoke. He was going to buy a new pickup. He'd never had one. The one we had you could see the road go underneath it. We thought maybe it was time to get a new pickup."

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But instead they built a new barn. "The only question was 'Do you want a parlor or free stall?'" Erick recalls. "He said, 'Well, Erick, if you want to work in a cold, wet environment you build a parlor. If you want to be next to your cow and understand her health, [build] a tie stall barn.' So we built a 100-stall barn and thought we could bring it under one roof."

And that's what they use to this day.

Derick Coolidge was barely two years old when the barn burned down. These days, alongside his mother and some hired help, he manages Le-Ma-Re Farm and keeps the machine well-oiled while Erick spends most of his days in the Tioga County courthouse as the county commissioner.

What has befallen so many dormant farms across the county and the country is that the next generation isn't there to pick up the mantle. That, or it's simply too expensive to farm and not worth

the toll it takes on the body.

"I just enjoy it," Derick says, who has three young children. "I'm fifth generation. I'd be glad to hand it down to a sixth generation. We're lacking for agriculture. People don't respect it."

People have been too far removed from their food and, in this case, their milk for far too long. There are people all over doing it on a local scale.

"The only reason people farm is they enjoy it," Derick says. "There's pride for it. It's what we do and have always done."

Derick studied diesel technology at Alfred State with the idea of bringing back that knowledge to the farm. He knew from a young age that staying on the farm was what he wanted to do.

"He split three tractors and probably saved the farm \$30,000 the first year out of school by doing the work in there," Erick says. "What made me happy was when he put them back together they worked! I tease him about that."

"Derick saves the farm a lot of money, especially with tractors," Dixie says. "The cost to split a tractor is about \$5,000."

Dixie grew up on a farm as well. The ag business is in her bones, and when she gets that rare opportunity to look over the vast beauty of the farm and Coolidge Hollow, she says, "I love this place. Sometimes we're so busy we don't take time to look around."

And knowing the farm is in good hands for the next thirty or forty years is a welcome thought down in the Hollow.

"It will definitely be his some day," Dixie says. "I'm very proud, and I'm also proud I get to work side-by-side with my son."

"My mom is the backbone to this operation," Derick says. "She keeps us all in check. I have great respect for her and all women in ag from those on the farm to the ones home putting up long days and crazy schedules."

The future, for the time, feels secure.



Doing what comes naturally: Dixie Coolidge tends to her Holsteins.

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Across Route 287, up a long, windy, and narrow road, lies a moonscape and at its center, surrounded by four concrete dividers, sits Shell's branding: a giant faucet-like well, capped off, dormant.

According to a *Washington Post* article, signing the lease with the oil company netted about \$17,000 to the Coolidges, far less than what others in the county received for similar drilling rights. And the worst part: after permitting the company to drill on several acres of farmable soil, the company tapped the keg and left with the pump.

"We thought signing the lease

would be a benefit for our farm, if nothing more than a fertilizer payment or gasoline for our tractors," says Erick.

"Between the road and the well pad," Dixie says, "we lost sixteen to eighteen acres of farm land. The road is a mile long back there and it broke up the fields. When they called us to put a stake out on the lot we said, 'Where is that?' They came and drilled a hole and left to lock up the lease."

Erick sometimes drives his four-wheeler up to this well pad. One time he saw a small herd of deer and cut the engine. A turkey snuck out of the woods.

He comes up here to relax and to reflect. It's quiet and removed from the

hustle of politics as he is running for re-election. He'll drive up and cut the engine and take in the beauty of the landscape. He carries Le-Ma-Re Farm with him everywhere.

"This is where I come sometimes," Erick says. "I don't see them. They don't see me. It takes a little bit of a clearing of head, conversations are more constructive. Just appreciate the solitude. I'll walk out around the hill, see a deer, what a privilege that is."

The well pad could be bountiful, then again it could be nothing more than a useless spigot, unwilling to let flow the hydrocarbons cloistered within the shale.

"We got something, but really the

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A dairy heritage: Erick Coolidge and his son Derick are the fourth and fifth generations to work the land at Le-Ma-Be Farm.

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return on that is when you start production," Erick says. "It would've been an infusion of revenue. Derick—again I'm governed by my family's thoughts, the way they feel about things—he said, 'We didn't get up in the morning to see how much money the well made, did we?' 'Nope.' 'Okay.' That's kind of how that's gone. We didn't get too overwhelmed by it. There are some who did better. That was a decision we made."

While driving out to his house, Erick pointed out toward the Grand Canyon. Out there among the hills was the greenish stick of a well, a Kubrickian monolith.

For the time, standing on his own well pad, he can sleep well knowing his 120 head of milkable cows are producing and that the farm is in the most capable hands of his wife and son.

That much is certain. His family is lucky that way. "Agriculture and those businesses associated with it have realized benefits as a result of the presence of the oil and gas industry in our county," Erick points out. But farms go under in spite of that, without a new generation to carry them onward.

What keeps them all grounded are the chores that need doing and the cows in need of milking.

It's 3:45 in the morning, and the coffee's hot.



Award-winning writer *Brendan O'Meara* is the author of *Six Weeks* in Saratoga: How Three-Year-Old Filly Rachel Alexandra Beat the Boys and Became Horse of the Year.