

McCarty Dairy - 1

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

To some, Tom McCarty's decision to move his family's century-old dairy from Pennsylvania to the plains of Kansas may have seemed like quite a leap of faith. For McCarty, not so much. Today we'll learn about this remarkable family which made the move halfway across the continent to rural Kansas. Thanks to author Pat Melgares of K-State Research and Extension. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Tom McCarty and his four sons – Clay, Mike, David, and Ken – are owners of McCarty Family Farms LLC in northwest Kansas. Their family has deep roots in dairying back east.

Tom McCarty's great grandfather started the family business in northeast Pennsylvania 105 years ago, milking seven cows. Tom's grandfather had 20 milking cows, and Tom's father doubled the business to 40 milking cows.

"In 1970, my wife and I built a new facility, and got up to 80 cows. "[Soon after] we doubled it to about 150," Tom said. All four sons were active in the dairy growing up. As young adults, they were interested in being partners, but the Pennsylvania dairy was not big enough to support five families.

"To make a long story short, there was absolutely no future [in Pennsylvania] long term to be in the dairy business," Tom said. The McCartys faced a difficult decision. They needed room to grow – and they found it in rural Kansas.

"Our options were few and far between to stay in the ag side of things, to continue to grow and stay in the dairy industry," said David McCarty. "You move to western Kansas, there's feed, and there's nothing holding you back as far as growing...so that was the biggest draw."

As the McCartys were considering the future, the western Kansas Rural Economic Development Alliance, known as WKREDA, was seeking to attract and expand dairying in western Kansas. After an extensive process, the McCartys relocated from Pennsylvania to Kansas in 2000 and established the McCarty Dairy near the rural community of Rexford, population 156 people. Now, that's rural.

The McCartys were milking 800 cows at Rexford. Two of the sons went to K-State for animal science degrees. Soon the McCartys had more opportunity and need for growth.

"Economics changed, the dairy industry changed, the lending industry changed, and we were forced into milking more cows in a less expensive way," said Ken McCarty. "So we added some open lots, pushed up to about 1200 head of milking cows, and a little bit later added more open lots and pushed upwards of about 1600 head of milking cows."

By 2009, McCarty Family Farms added a heifer yard with 3500 animal units, and had nearly 6,000 head of livestock at the Rexford location alone. The next round of expansion would lead them to establish another dairy nearby.

"We went and asked them to consider expanding to Bird City," said Cathy Domsch, the executive director of Bird City Century II Development Foundation. "The opportunity I saw was getting kids in our schools; that was my number-one goal in getting a dairy," she said.

“We didn’t realize that was an impact that we’d have when we moved out here,” Ken McCarty said. “Where we grew up, the economy was very diverse and ag was just a small piece of the pie back there. Here, it’s more of an ag-based economy, and ag-based communities. We didn’t understand the impact that 20, 30, 40 kids would have on a local school district.”

Domsch said that an added 30 students to her town’s schools translates to more than \$200,000 in state funding. Likewise, in Colby and the surrounding school district, enrollment has increased by at least 32 students.

To some, Tom McCarty’s decision to move his family’s century-old dairy from Pennsylvania to Kansas may have seemed like quite a leap of faith, but it made sense for the McCarty family. We salute the McCartys and those who brought them to western Kansas for making a difference with agricultural entrepreneurship. They helped make the successful transition from Pennsylvania to the plains.

And there’s more. The McCartys would go on to become a major source for yogurt. We’ll learn about that next week.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.