

Straight to YOUR Bottom Line 7/1/14

BY... Steve Martin

Title: 23 Years of Dairy, Texas Style!

In the summer of 1991, a young nutritionist from Auburn, Alabama arrived in Stephenville, Texas. Though the dairy industry had not been my upbringing, I loved everything about Texas and everything about cattle. The opportunities for a young nutritionist were greater in dairy than beef. As a young Texas Aggie educated nutritionist, a dairy focused job in Texas was perfect.

This was in the middle of boom-time for the central Texas dairy industry. The industry was starting to change. This little college town in the center of Texas already had a dairy presence for a couple of generations. Among the list of dairy towns in Texas including Sulphur Springs, Winnsboro, Windthorst, Cleburne and Gainesville, the Stephenville area was the popular choice of the incoming dairy pilgrims. For a variety of reasons, dairy producers were relocating from places like Arizona, Holland, and California. The Texas dairy industry would be changed forever. Not better or worse, just changed.

Why Stephenville? It was probably a variety of reasons, and each individual relocation may have had a different story. It may have been the furthest west one could milk cows in Texas but still have an east Texas based pricing structure. Milk pricing was different back then. Though I had no idea at the time what any of these terms meant, I heard things like "over-order premiums" and higher "Class I Utilization". These had positive impacts on prices paid for milk in the area.

But what about the weather? Many had moved from the west and had some expectation of a relatively dry climate. I suppose the answer to this question depends on the decade. The rains come and go but the humidity seems to stay. I think many coming from the West did not expect the challenge that humidity presents to dairy cows.

The industry was different then. In the early 1990's there was a balanced mix of traditional Texas dairy producers and the more modern, implanted dairy from somewhere far away. This was a time of rapid change in all aspects of dairy technology. It was easy to see a 50 year span in feeding, housing or milking technology in neighboring facilities. The native dairies tended to have tall feed bins pumping grain into milking parlors. Outside was the locally grown Bermuda Grass bales in free-choice hay rings. Many of the producers coming from Arizona or California were pouring long feed lanes and installing locking stanchions. Many had a combination of the two.

Feeding styles were changing. A dairy might have free choice hay in a pen with pellets in the barn. As well, they might start feeding what we then called an outside-mix that allowed for a few more nutrients to be consumed. Many 5 gallon buckets of such a mix were fed every day in troughs. This was a challenge when the rains came! Over the years the trend continued and these 5 gallon buckets turned into mixer wagons and the troughs in the mud turned into concrete feed lanes. The result was a better way to deliver balanced rations to make milk and keep cows healthy.

The Total Mixed Ration that is the norm in today's dairy industry was more of an evolution in central Texas in the early 1990's. As nutritionists, we were pleased as this was a much better way to deliver balanced diets to cows. It also gave the opportunity to include key ingredients like whole cottonseed and wet brewers grains into rations. We knew that the slug feeding of grain in the parlor was not the best way to feed cows. Moving some of this grain to outside-mixes and then into complete TMRs allowed the consumption of grain and roughage in the same bite. Progress was being made.

The forage situation in central Texas for a dairy in the 1990's was a challenge. There was some amount of local Coastal Bermuda Grass grown but the quality was only average for milk cow forage. So, as the cow numbers grew, the alfalfa trucks started rolling into town. In those days, it was not unusual to have a lactating ration with 23 pounds of alfalfa hay. With much of this hay coming from as far away as Colorado and Kansas, the cost structure for this quality forage was a challenge. In response, the effort was made to grow some local forages. Over time, many of the caliche hills actually started growing some feed along with a few choice river bottoms. Wheat silage and some sorghum silages began to put a dent in some of those high alfalfa feed rates. In addition, the true art of green chopping was perfected. Even with these efforts, alfalfa was still king!

The first big change in this alfalfa-based dairy area was the development of significant corn silage production a few miles south towards the Brazos River Valley. Though trucking corn silage 70 miles from the farm to the dairy seemed a stretch, hauling alfalfa hay 700 miles was probably an even bigger stretch. Corn had been grown in and around Hillsborough and Waco, Texas for years. This acreage had traditionally been harvested as dry-shelled corn. It held the place as some of the earliest new crop corn each season. With a significant influx of dairy cows a few miles to the north, perhaps taking this crop as silage for dairy feed made more sense for the farmer and the dairyman. As a result, some of the biggest corn silage piles in the world were built each July and the trucks started rolling north. It was a challenge to think of hauling 65% water 70 miles. But it made economic sense based on milk value and forage options for the central Texas dairy producer. The cows were well served by a diet not so high in alfalfa hay. Finally, these new feed lanes poured a few years earlier were filled with a beautiful TMR with both corn silage and alfalfa hay. This was the way to feed dairy cows!

Over the years there have been numerous events, changes, and improvements in the Texas dairy industry. Some of these have mirrored changes in the national industry, and others have been more unique to dairying in the Lone Star state. I think of the impact that the approval of BST had on the industry. As much as the impact of the actual technology of BST, the army of professionals commissioned to improve cow comfort may have had a bigger impact. It was with the use of BST that we learned much about cow comfort, housing and cow cooling. The evolution of the mixer wagon was also a key process spanning several years and improving the way we fed cows.

I also think about Waco, and airplanes counting cows, about the creation of TAD, the \$2 bill campaign in Stephenville, the co-op splits and the new milk marketing agreements. As I reflect now many years later, the cows are still making milk in central Texas. There are some fewer cows and a lot fewer dairies. However, this dairy market is a key part of supplying fluid milk for close urban areas. It is a mature dairy area and is filled with fine dairy families who have chosen to not make the leap to the next big dairy expansion area. Kudos to these families. There are easier places to milk cows than central Texas. The continued success is a testimony to hard work and good business sense.

It has been a rich history, and I feel blessed to have been a small part of it. I owe a great deal to these folks who milked cows in central Texas. It is these people who first taught me the ins and outs of this business. With this, I am writing my last monthly column in the Texas Dairy Review. We are not exactly sure, but think that this column began somewhere around 1994 and was then titled "got nutrition?". I remember hand delivering 3.5" floppy disks of the article to Sherry's house back in those days. It has been a pleasure to write and I hope it has added some value to the reader. Now it is time to move on to another writing opportunity. With that, I pass the reigns over to Jay Thurman who will bring a new style and fresh ideas to the column. He is a native Texan who is adding much value to the effort of milking

cows in Texas and the Western US. Gaining information and ideas from his perspective will help you send dollars “straight to YOUR bottom line!”