A Dairy Tale

For Robert Duncan, milk is a natural—it runs in the family

By Amy Halloran **Photos By Leif Zurmuhlen**

Robert Duncan remembers the day his father sold the cows: April 1, 1972. Robert was 11 years old.

“I knew it was coming, and I was against it. I tried to talk to my father about keeping the animals. My mother was tired. The milk market stunk. There were six kids, and he had all this equity here. He was 45 years old,” Robert says, resting at a picnic table in the same backyard after a long day of work. Behind him is the house where he grew up. Around him is the farm and its barns and fields, and a sign for the car-storage business his dad started after he set up a tent and auctioned off the last 38 cows.

Duncan is a dairy name in Brunswick. One branch of the family runs Duncan’s Dairy Bar on Hoosick Road. Another runs Sycaway Creamery. The great-grandfather, also Robert Duncan, who links them all, set up his children in business after a long career selling milk from the back of a wagon, with a dipper and a milk can, down in Troy beginning in 1906. Earl M. Duncan, Robert’s son, was among the next generation of Duncan dairymen, growing his business to be the sole dairy for Central Markets, the supermarket that became Price Chopper.

Duncan’s father raised purebred Holsteins and delivered milk home to home, on routes that stretched into Averill Park and down to Watervliet. In addition to milking his own herd, which numbered up to 40, Duncan’s father bottled and pasteurized milk from other farmers down the road at Earl M. Duncan’s bottling facility and delivered it to his customers.

A month ago, Duncan began milking at the farm again, pasteurizing and bottling in a small, new facility he built at the front end of his cow barn. The milk is available for sale onsite, and at a few locations: Sunoco stations on Wolf Road and Hoosick, Henry’s Meat Market in Waterford, Route 66 Meats in Wynantskill, and Jiffy Marts in Schodack and Averill Park. Saturdays he sells at the Brunswick Farmers Market, and soon he’ll be delivering his milk to other outlets—a new farmers market run by students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, La Posta’s in Speigletown and at Fresh Direct in Latham.

This last market invites an immediate expansion. In building his business, Duncan started small, with just four Holsteins. This week he’ll be adding two more animals and another two the following week. Daily yields are now 32 to 35 gallons, and he’s selling out all he makes now, which reaches the customer in glass bottles, half-gallons, quarts, and pints, in whole milk or chocolate. Whatever the color, the milk is cream topped, and kids fight for the privilege of drinking the cream plug that rises to the top of the jar.

Saturdays at the farmers market, Duncan stocks his stall well and his helper Megan says it sells out fast, especially the chocolate. Sometimes she’ll have to call to the farm for him to bring more.

“I love it because it tastes different, a lot better. I’m not into the natural stuff, but I don’t trust the hormones,” says one woman, handing over two bottles, one half-gallon, one pint.

“The same?” Megan asks, and the woman says yes. The woman leaves with a large bottle of white milk and a small bottle of chocolate.

Another customer gets just a half-gallon of white, and says he comes to the market to support the farmers. “If I don’t get it here, I buy organic at the market. They don’t have coffee milk though. I’m from New Hampshire,” he explains. He also laments the lack of skim, as do many customers.

This fall, Duncan will add a separator to his processing equipment and be able to sell the skim milk so many people are requesting, as well as half-and-half and heavy cream. Over the winter, he plans to add American cheese to his list of products, which already includes produce like corn and tomatoes. In the spring he sells flowers, bedding plants and starts from his three greenhouses.

While he's always wanted to be a dairy farmer, he has done a lot of other jobs along the way. After his father sold the cows, he helped at cousin's dairies, feeding, making sure there was hay. As a young man, he continued to find opportunities to farm, once working for 500 days straight at a cousin's farm where a Wal-mart is now.

"I remember being in the back of a tractor throwing the patties of hay out to the cows," Duncan says. He thinks of the farm every time he sees the store.

In his early 20s he gave up on the dream of dairying and moved to off-farm jobs such as construction and working with food. He started a catering company with his first wife, and worked for Price Chopper in their food-service departments when he moved back to the family farm in 2000. Throughout his many careers, Duncan made lists of what it would cost to start a farm, and never wanted to undertake the mountain of debt to buy equipment, animals and land.

The change came a few years ago, when his father died from cancer. The death was swift, coming 17 days after diagnosis.

"To watch a disease destroy a man made me want to do something natural for people," he says. "Cancer is manmade. I'm convinced. We're all too busy trying to perfect nature. God had it down from the start. We think we're smarter, but we're not."

He and his father discussed dairy right up to the end. His father told him he would have never sold the cows if he knew his son would carry on with his boyhood desire to continue the family tradition.

Duncan studied the market, looking at what other dairy farms were doing. He knew he didn't want to wholesale.

Many dairy farms sell their milk to cooperatives. Bulk tanks come to farms, take milk, and bring it to facilities for processing.

"The milk pricing system is a very complicated set of formulas that go into the way milk is priced," says David Balbian, dairy specialist for Cornell Cooperative Extension. "The price of milk has become much more volatile in the last 20 or 30 years. Farmers could depend on what the price could be, but now it goes up and down and it swings to a great extent. 2006 was a bad year. 2007 was a great year, but all the money people made in 2007, they used to pay the bills they fell behind on in 2006."

Balbian works with dairy farmers in six Central New York counties, including Fulton, Montogomery, Herkimer, Otsego, Chenango and Schoharie.

The instability of milk prices was a hot topic at a workshop in Wisconsin in June, one of five agriculture antitrust hearings held by the Department of Justice this year. Hundreds of dairy farmers and farm advocates came to Wisconsin to talk about their experiences and lobby for change.

U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack noted that in the past decade, the number of dairy farms has dropped from 110,000 to 65,000. A further peak at USDA numbers reveals more startling figures: In 1970, right before Robert Duncan's father sold his cows, there were 648,000 dairy farms in the country.

The transcript from the June hearing is available online and reads like the raw material for a novel by the next Upton Sinclair. The personal stories are riveting, and the plain facts delivered within these often emotional narrations are shocking.

John Peck of Family Farm Defenders said that there are more prisoners than farmers in the country. He teaches economics at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and has a hard time explaining to his students why there's "no connection between what farmers get at the farm gate and what consumers pay at the store."

The milk pricing system, another person said at the hearings, is so complicated that only five people understand it and four of them are dead. The Chicago Mercantile Exchange has a lot to do with that pricing, which is tied to cheddar cheese, rather than directly linked to fluid milk.

In April 2009, milk prices plunged so far that production cost per hundredweight—the unit of measure that's used in milk sales—was $24.08, but farmers were paid only $10.78. While the government offered a small payment to help make up the difference, it didn't begin to close the gap. Just how many farms go bankrupt from the poor return is unclear, but New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand is holding a listening session with constituent dairy farmers, and Washington is paying attention to the problem.

To get some historical perspective, statistics from the Department of Agriculture and Markets in New York State illustrate the changing landscape of dairy. In 1950, 60,000 farms had 1.3 million cows. By 1975, 17,000 farms had just under a million cows. In 2000, there were 686,000 cows and 17, 482 farmers. The volume of milk production, however, reveals another story. Half as many cows are yielding not just as much milk but more, about another 50 percent.

"When I was growing up, if you had 100 cows you had the biggest farm around. Now that's average," says Cornell Cooperative Extension's Balbain. "There's been huge increases in efficiency and productivity. Production per cow compared to 50 years ago is probably about double. That's come about with the use of research and technology." The technology he refers to are in all areas of the industry, from the processing end to understanding cow's metabolism, and better management of field crops for feed.

Just because fewer cows are giving more milk doesn't explain why dairy country is turning into housing. MacChesney Avenue Extension, where Duncan lives with his family and farms, is half farmland and half apartment complexes. Many fields are posted with signs for further developments. While some of his relatives are still in the dairy business, plenty of farmers are out; he was able to furnish his business with equipment that cost 20 to 30 cents on the dollar. The tools of his trade came from dairies that didn't survive.

The clean room at the front of a refurbished barn is not crowded. There's a small tank where milk is heated to 150 degrees Fahrenheit and held for 30 minutes. The low-heat pasteurization preserves more enzymes than flash pasteurization, which heats to a higher temperature for a shorter period of time. A few other small dairies in the area, such as Battenkill and Meadowbrook, and beyond, Ronnybrook, which largely supplies a downstate market, also pasteurize at low heat.

After his father died, Robert observed what those dairies were doing. He knew he didn't want to wholesale and be a slave to the vagaries of milk pricing. He saw that retail was the answer to staying solvent in dairy and started off building a nursery and vegetable business as he studied the milk industry. It took about a year to develop the dairy, working closely with the Department of Agriculture and Markets to meet state standards for running a plant.

Duncan is seeking to re-create and improve the dairy that he knew as a kid. A big difference is the community involvement he seeks to develop.

"This isn't about me," he says. "I want to get kids out of the city. They think milk comes from a store."

Visitors to the farm can see the facility and the animals. Sundays especially, families come out and get their milk for the week. He plans to invite school groups, have them sample the milk, and hopefully, get their parents to the farm, too. He sees this as good marketing, and good education.

"I want to catch them at an early age. Show the importance of what we eat, how we grow food," he says.

The "we" is an integral part of Duncan's Dairy Farm. He rented land up and down his road, paid the farmer for the use of his equipment, and seeded 62 acres of alfalfa and 22 acres of corn. This will be food for the winter and next year. His cousin Jackie works for him, along with other farmhands.

Still, what he's doing is seen as dangerous in the farming community. People tell his wife to tell him he's nuts in the head. Their lack of faith doesn't bother him. He's gone into debt for this operation, and he's researched the business. He's confident that following his dream is the right thing to do and is happy to be setting up his kids in business, much as his great-grandfather did.

"I've got a payment every month, but I've got milk flowing into the bottle," he says, smiling. A light rain is trying to beat the heat off the muggy late afternoon. Dinner is next, and the day will end, another day to begin much as today did, much as days began for Robert Duncan's ancestors, with the cows on his mind.

ONLINE Metroland
THE ALTERNATIVE NEWSWEEKLY OF NEW YORK'S CAPITAL REGION.

August 26, 2010