



#### Jerome and Mark Wagner

Wagner Dairy solved their problems with the high somatic cell count rates in their herd.



Number of cows:	<b>1,400</b>
Amount of land:	<b>3,500 acres</b>
Employee:	<b>16</b>
Cell rate:	<b>200,000</b>

Against all odds, Wagner Dairy continues on through many hurdles facing them

# Overcoming adversity

Mark Wagner smiles wide overlooking his 1,400 Holstein cow dairy in Wisconsin. After facing ongoing somatic cell count issues over the last two decades, putting his dairy on the brick of uncertainty, Wagner Dairy has carried on.

text **Karen Bohnert**

**W**agner Dairy is optimistic about their future, especially considering that their dairy has faced much uncertainty over the course of 20 years and yet, they have persevered. These hurdles includes an ongoing failing milking parlor system that has caused the herds' SCC to rise out of control in the 80's and led to the

turnover of many cows. "Our cull rate was as high as 48% due to our problems in the milking parlor," says Mark. Mark represents the third generation of dairying on Wagner Dairy, located in Middleton, Wisconsin. His grandfather, Bill, started the farm during the 20's with six draft horses and a couple of milk cows. His father, Jerome, took over

the farm in the 1950's, starting with a small dairy herd, climbing to 75 milk cows throughout the 50's and 60's and in the late 70's, Wagners milked 140 cows in a 72-cow tie-stall barn. It was in 1979, that they built their first parlor—a herringbone parlor which was the first flush system in the northern part of the U.S., and many



Wagner Dairy farm 3,500 acres, helping feed their 1,400 cows

people question how the cold Wisconsin winters could handle this kind of system. "It worked well," says Mark. "It cooled the barn down in the summer and in the winter; the flush water was 55 degrees and heated the barn."

### Three million dollar in debt

During the 80's, a time of high interest rate to build the parlor, the Wagner family was experiencing equipment problems from flooding receiver jars to air operated pulsators not working. Despite all of this, the herd was doing well with a herd average of 18,000 pounds of milk, with being fed no TMR. Wagner Dairy was turning over cows quickly because of what they believed was milk equipment-related, high cell count problems, and quickly found themselves three million dollars in debt. With dooming interest rates, they were encouraged to file bankruptcy. Thankfully for Wagner Dairy they found a loan shark who advanced them money to add 350 cows back into the dairy and kept their dairy from going bankrupt.

Through looking at every possible problem, from cow management to employee management, Wagners finally decided to hire a trouble shooter specialist to figure out why their herd's cell count had skyrocketed. After much investigation from outside companies, Wagners Dairy concluded the problem was "flooding receiving jars and pulsators not functioning properly."

To fix their problems, Wagners put new pulsators in, replumbed the parlor and the milking system was functional again. Their herd continued to succeed for nearly 10 years with cow averaging 80 plus pounds per day and a somatic cell count hovering around 150,000.

And, in 1993 after becoming debt free, the decision was made to expand the herd to 850 cows, adding on with another free stall barn and installing a different parlor in.

Quickly, after this expansion, their somatic cell skyrocketed to 350,000 and dairy specialists came to Wagner Dairy barn to give them advice on how to solve the problem. "We were directed on changing everything—from putting mattresses in, to changing the bedding



*Wagner's credit  
CoPulsation to the  
big drop in their SCC*

material, to remodeling stalls," says Mark. "We even put over \$100,000 to look for possible stray voltage problems, which came up negative."

### Success with sex semen

Despite all the problems Wagner Dairy was facing, they were determined to get to the bottom of the problem and save the dairy. "Giving up was never an option for me," says Mark. "It was important for us to get to the bottom of the problem, because we knew once we did figure out the problem, that our dairy would succeed."

Despite problems in the herd, Wagner Dairy decided to expand again in 2000, to 1,400 milking cows by adding on another free stall barn.

Mark had heard other producers talk about their success with CoPulsation pulsators and in August 2009, Mark purchased them and installed them himself. They were overwhelmed as they instantly saw their cell count drop from 750,000 to 180,000.

Mark also credits sex semen to helping keep him afloat. "We had great success with sex semen, getting a high percentage rate of heifers, that helped

us get cow numbers up, when our cull rate was so high," says Mark. "We were culling 45-48% and losing \$40,000 per month in milk premiums because we were over the cell count rate," says Mark.

Today, Wagner Dairy looks to the past as a reminder that if their dairy can continue through all that they have been through, surely they can carry on through whatever lies ahead. Wagner Dairy is now enjoying the rock solid communication that they have and enjoying the first year of having extra cash in their pockets, something they haven't had for nearly 20 years.

The family-owned and operated dairy farms 3,500 acres, of which 90 percent goes back to the dairy operation. They employ 16 employees and are currently milking 1,400 cows twice a day with somatic cell count of 200,000 and a cull rate that they are happy with of 35%.

"I guess you could say that dairy farmers are a different breed of people," says Mark. "We have established our roots here and losing the farm was not an option, so we continued to dig in and get through whatever problem faced us." |