



Ten for Ten

Minnesota Couple Overjoyed to See Children Choose a Farming Life

By Kara Storey

Ray and Bridget Pieper remember quite clearly the day they began farming. It was Dec. 29, 1973--the day they were married.

The couple, who live near New Prague, Minnesota, raised 10 children on their dairy farm, instilling in them an appreciation of hard work and a love for the outdoors.

Today their children, who range in age from 26 to 46, all work in agriculture. Five of them, including all four of their sons, have come back home to farm with Ray and Bridget. The other five either own their own farms, farm with their in-laws, or work for another agriculture-based organization.

"I never expected them to farm, but they're all involved in farming in some way," said Bridget, 68. "I am thrilled to death, but I just never imagined it."

Humble beginnings

Ray, 72, never imagined he'd be a farmer, either. Although he had grown up on a dairy farm, he

planned to pursue other avenues of employment following college. It was Bridget who changed his mind.

"I probably wouldn't be farming, except my girlfriend at the time insisted that that's what we had to do," he said, laughing.

Bridget, who grew up near the Twin Cities, spent many of her childhood weekends at her grandparents' farm. She fell in love with farming during those weekends, adding that she loved all that farming entailed: driving tractor, the animals, even the chores.

"I always wanted to live on a dairy farm, so I did," she said.

The couple began with 37 cows, 93 acres and severely worn-out machinery. However, as child after child approached them about returning home to farm, they expanded their operation and upgraded their equipment. They now milk 500 cows and own and rent a total of 1,500 acres. They also grow soybeans, corn and alfalfa.

One of the reasons their farm

has been able to grow, the Piepers said, is thanks to the wide range of talents their kids possess. The family has done nearly all building construction themselves, which has substantially cut down on costs throughout the years, Ray said.

Returning to roots

The Piepers recognize how unusual it is for all of their kids to have chosen to work in agriculture. While many might suspect that the couple has a secret trick for getting such results, Bridget is at a loss for what inspired them. One son said he likes the challenge that farming presents. A daughter said she wanted to farm because she loves being with her family.

Regardless, thanks to their upbringing, none of the kids had an idyllic view of farming. All of them understood that farming is hard work, Bridget said.

"As kids, they all had their jobs outside, such as feeding the cows, putting straw under the cows,

scraping the walkway and feeding calves,” she said.

She also remembers a time when the five oldest kids were young. Bridget would have to help Ray bale hay and so she’d get creative with childcare.

“I’d gather all kinds of snacks and toys to bring out and the kids would stay in the car in the field and watch us bale,” she said.

Family time

The couple also said that their kids genuinely enjoy time spent working together. A family story that is constantly retold involves trying to get a tractor unstuck from the mud. All of the kids had a grand old time banding together to pull it out.

In fact, the most anticipated event of the year is a family day held every summer on the farm, with food, games and lots of fun.

“The grandchildren really look forward to that,” Bridget said. “They’re always asking, ‘How many more days?’”

Ray said that family harmony has made all the difference in their farm’s success.

“If we can get along, we can be competitive with anybody,” he said. “And the only way that we’re going to stay that way is with God to help us.”

The couple’s commitment to their Catholic faith has helped them through all the ups and downs that farming brings. Attending 9 a.m. Sunday Mass was a staple for the large family.

“I’d have the kids all ready to go and Ray would come in the house from doing chores and hurry and wash up and change,” Bridget said. “We’d still make it on time no matter what.”

Next generation

The Piepers said that their grandchildren, though young, are starting to get involved on the farm. One of their sons and his family do chores together on the farm one night a week. Ray even joked that his second- and third-grade grandsons can drive their new skid loader better than him.

“I have to take the old skid loader that doesn’t have all of the new technology because I don’t know which buttons to push to make it work,” he said.

When it comes to giving other parents advice about how to make the farming lifestyle appealing to their children, Bridget said the most important thing is to talk positively about farming and not think of it as a last resort.

“We both are college graduates, but that didn’t make any difference to us,” she said “It’s not that we couldn’t have chosen other jobs. We just like farming.”

