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Farming through the Generations

Hope Hager

As I was sitting on my couch on my fourteenth birthday, I looked over at my grandfather, and just thought. I thought about how farming has changed since he was a little boy. That was the question that I will explore.

My grandfather, Julian Hager (“Papa”), grew up on a farm. While growing up he had only horses for power, no electricity at all, not even in the neighborhood. They didn’t even have a car. He went to the Gilboa Central School and all the kids in his class were farmers. His father, Maurice Hager, was the town tax collector on the side of the farm to keep the farm going. His mother, Katherine Hager, was a stay-at-home mom. Milk was sold by the milk can at that time. One can has the weight of about 15 pounds and holds 85 pounds of milk. I see these old milk cans around our farm today. I have picked them up empty—my how heavy they are—and I can only imagine the weight they had when they were full. Those milk cans would be taken to the Blenheim creamery. Maurice milked the cows enough to get two cans of milk a day; that is about 170 pounds. They had only about 9–12 cows, and a few calves. They had a big garden to make their own meals, and canned vegetables. They raised their own beef, pork, and chickens. They would use the eggs from the chickens. They would only go to the store for flour and sugar and things like that.

At about 12 or 13 years of age, Papa and his brother, parents, and my great grandmother’s father moved to a farm in the town of Middleburg. It was a much larger farm. They bought the farm from an older guy who just needed to retire. They milked more cows on this farm. They got electricity and their first tractor in about 1946. Papa and his brother, George, were old enough to take over the farm work. Their father took an off-farm job in Schenectady. The boys took full responsibility for the farm while their dad worked in the city.

In 1949 Papa took another job and left the farm. He worked out of the farming business until 1951. He rented a farm in Charlotteville and lived with his uncle until he got married in 1952, to Iris Paddock. Then in 1954 Papa got drafted into the army. He had to sell his cows and went to Kentucky with the army. When he got out of the army, he worked several different jobs. He had wanted to get back into farming but the time was never right. He came across the farm that is down the road from where I live, and bought it in 1958, with 19 cows. They moved in with their daughter Holly and two-week-old son Harry in 1958. They bought the house with a barn right next to it. Papa bought the house with a private mortgage from the previous owner. In 1961 my dad, Henry Hager, was born. Papa needed to work at the feed mill to help support the farm until the herd grew enough to live off the farm.

After my dad was 9 years old the family moved up the road to a bigger farm. That is the farm that I have grown up on. When Papa moved up to this farm they had increased from 50 to 85 cows. They had to build a new barn. The farm gradually got bigger.

My dad, and his brother and sister grew up on the farm here on top of County Route 33 in West Harpersfield. When my dad moved here in 1970, he and his siblings had minor responsibilities. Papa had designed the farm to be as self-sufficient as possible. He had a self-feeding corn silage area, self-feeding hay rack, and self-feeding grain bins in the milking parlor. His labor needs were concentrated to crop season and daily milking and barn cleaning chores. Papa was only required to have occasional help with chores until his sons returned to the farm.

In 1991 the farm changed from a sole proprietor of my Papa's to a general partnership that included my dad and my uncle. They started to change into new technologies to allow the families to stay here on the farm and not need income from other places. When you look at how my grandpa fed cows when he started, he used baled hay, some cornmeal, and some corn silage, by free choice for the cow, to today with feeding cows as a science. The correct formula is calculated every day to give the cow the needed ingredients to be a healthy and productive animal on our farm. We hire a nutritionist to balance our ration, or to get the most milk out of our cows. We no longer used baled hay, but we use corn silage and haylage, and we add certain ingredients to the diets of certain groups of cows. This is all fed from a TMR (Total Mixed Ration) mixer. You could say it looks like a big blender on wheels. We load the ingredients with a payloader. We no longer carry baled hay to the cows. Very little hand work is used to feed the cows today.

My dad is the cow man: he works with the milking, breeding, and health of the cows. When Papa was running the farm, he was working with only one semen company: today my dad works with at least five different companies. My uncle is the field and crop man. They split the work between themselves so that things don't get overwhelming. If you think of it, even though they work with two different parts of the farm, they can't work without each other. They need each other to split the responsibilities that one man used to do on a small scale. They complement each other well.

I came along in 1993. Even since I was a little girl the farm has gotten even more sophisticated with new technology. My dad and uncle added to the barn the year I was born. In about 1999, they no longer needed the silo. They had come up with a new system that keeps all the silage in bunks. Recently they added a new milking parlor. The old milking parlor had room only to milk 12 cows. The new one can milk 24 at a time. The milking machines were also updated. We went from a basic milking machine to a newer one that has automatic take off which is better for the cows so you don't overmilk them. The floors have rubber mats instead of concrete so that it is easier on the cows feet. The gate that pushes the cows into the milking parlor was updated to an automatic stop so that you don't overcrowd the cows. This whole new system helps milking go faster and easier on the person who is milking. Another recent addition to the farm was a dry cow barn. That gives the cows more room.

If you compare what we can do with our farm now and what my grandfather could do, they are worlds apart. The overall size of the farm has sky rocketed from the first original farm that my grandfather had. This farm has gone through two generations already and now it is my generation. The farm has taken on new technology and has grown significantly. Though my Papa came from a class where everyone was on a dairy farm, I am a rarity in this once-predominate agricultural community. Though my classmates don't understand or live in my environment, I see that they will be the ones to develop the new technologies for farming. I can only imagine what my generation will add to this already changing and growing industry.

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