

Dairy's Universal Truth by Shelli Manning

In a poem titled 'Human Family', the late Dr. Maya Angelou said of the human race, "*I note the obvious differences between each sort and type, but we are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.*"

Aside from this likeness of 'human family', we live in a world filled with unique places; each with its own unique culture and unique challenges. What seems common in one place may be unheard of in another. We are the same, but different. So what could Turkey, Australia, Indonesia and the American states, Wisconsin and Mississippi, have in common? Distant corners of the globe with distinct mindsets about production agriculture, yet each have each played host to dairyman Jim Van Patter and are home to farms which have benefited from Jim's dairy management skills.



Like many dairymen, Jim's upbringing and career have been solely agriculturally focused. A fourth generation dairyman, he grew up on a 70 cow dairy in Glen Flora, Wisconsin. In 1993, after 8 years in the AI business, he returned to his dairyman roots, working for local operations before being asked to embark on an international journey. It seems the skills he developed working for operations like Nehls Brothers Farms in Juneau, Wisconsin were needed at a progressive dairy in Turkey called Efeler Farms.

In April, 2012, Efeler Farms was the largest dairy operation in Europe with a herd size of 3,500. Large yes, but not efficient, so they weren't seeing the results they expected. When Jim arrived in Turkey, he found challenges stemming from circumstances that differed greatly from his American experience.

Turkey has a population of roughly seventy-five million people. The Turkish government subsidizes the insuring of production animals, it in turn imposes a lot of regulation on farms. Despite the size and progressive nature of this European country, they are years behind countries like the United States in terms of medications, protocols and cleanliness. Unique challenges for a dairyman, no doubt, but Jim was able to make improvements with basic changes nonetheless.

The first and most significant issue Jim addresses on every farm is cow comfort. At Efeler Farms, the cows were bedded on mattresses, Jim changed that to composted solids. The way they were handling fresh cows wasn't optimum and despite the fact they have access to world quality alfalfa, they were cutting it too late. He began working with the crop guys and local farmers on improving processes. He also implemented better breeding programs. He found the labor force was solid, the employees were eager to learn, they were simply lacking in know-how.

Despite the unique cultural challenges he encountered, it was Jim's tried and true methods of 'taking care of the cow' that, after eight months in Turkey, helped to successfully increase the farm's milk production. That meant it was time to go home. He didn't stay home very long, however. Thanks to a referral by the nutritionist at Moxey Farms, Jim's next stop would be Australia.

While he got called to go to Australia very soon after he returned from Turkey, because of their tight restrictions on work visas, it took three months to get approved to go. When he finally got there in March, 2013 he would once again find unique challenges, different to what he'd experienced in either Turkey or the US.

Moxey Farms was the largest farm in the southern hemisphere with a herd size near 4,000. They were one of three American-style dairies in the country. Jim found Australia to be more similar to the US in terms of antibiotics, but they were still dealing with issues like pink eye and flies. They had a different type of labor force than he'd experienced in Turkey, as milkers were well paid, but they were often untrained and in transit. Since the country offers a one year extension on visas in exchange of three months of work, often students backpacking through the country would find themselves employed on farms such as Moxey. The experienced workers at Moxey Farm were naturally more knowledgeable, but also more set in their ways. Despite these challenges, while he was hired to get the parlor moving better - which he did - he also tackled basic issues such as teaching the staff not to let feed sit out of the cows' reach.



What was originally supposed to be a 6 month stint in Australia kept him away from home for nearly a year and a half, but by August of 2014 he'd once again accomplished what he was hired to do and then some.

After Australia, it was off to a farm in Mississippi, then consulting remotely on a farm being built in Indonesia and now, Dairy Manager at C Dairy, LLC. Time and time again, Jim is called upon for his know-how and consistent success. Each farm is different, but the result they're seeking is always the same: to improve their operation. Jim is happy to help, he's proud to share his skill and help others in the worldwide dairy industry.

Will Jim travel to consult again? He says 'never say never', but he's happy in his current role at C Dairy and plans on staying at home in Wisconsin. His wife is happy he's staying put, too. After eight years of being together, this has been their first year of living in the same house!

No matter what part of the world he's working in and how different the local customs may be, he's learned the biggest factor in overcoming on-farm challenges is the same: addressing cow comfort. With the right team in place and making sure the cows are well taken care of, most any issue can be handled. "Cows are cows, no matter where you go," says Jim.

In a time when the world's cultures can seem more at odds than ever before, it's helpful to have a reminder that some truths really are universal, that we are indeed, alike. Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than on the farm.

About the Author:

ANIMART's staff writer, Shelli Manning, works to share the human interest side of individuals in production agriculture and communicate their passions which contribute to our unique American Story. She is the published author of *Little Fish*, as well as a motivational speaker on women's issues and an advocate for the reduction of domestic violence.

