## **Clover Hill Dairy: A Generational Enterprise**

he farm which today is known as Clover Hill Dairy near the small community of Campbellsport, WI, began as a family-owned enterprise in the early 1900's when Ervin Bonlender and his wife, Margaret, purchased the farm from Margaret's parents. The couple then sold the farm to their son, Joe Bonlender Sr., and his wife, Louise, in 1967. They grew the business and continued the family's sterling reputation for producing highquality dairy products.

Joe and Louise's children, Joe Jr. and Gary, grew up working on the farm and eventually formed a partnership with their parents, changing the name of the operation to today's Clover Hill Dairy. Joe Jr. and Gary added the farm's first milking parlor, enabling them to milk 140 cows three times a day. This partnership continued until Joe Jr. and his wife, Chris, bought the dairy and the land it sits on in 1998. The entire operation had, by this time, grown to milking 500 cows three times a day and working 550 acres of land.

Clover Hill Dairy kept growing and added a new milking parlor, additional freestall barns, and many more cows by the early 2000's. Joe Jr. and Chris' children, Sara and Brett, became involved in the family business as well. They continued to add freestall barns and cows over the years. Then, in 2010, Sara and Brett became official business partners.

Today, the siblings represent the fifth-generation of this progressive, familyowned business and keep themselves busy by milking 2,300 cross-bred cows (averaging 4.4% butterfat and 3.5% protein using a recently built, robotic

rotary-milking parlor). They farm 3,300 acres, half of which is owned and the other half rented. Brett earned an Agribusiness and Technology degree from Fox Valley Technical College but claims, "My real schooling began on the job."

On the 3,300 acres the Bonlenders farm, they grow 1,700 acres of corn, 1,200 acres of forages, 200 acres of barley, and 200 acres of miscellaneous double-crop forages on soils which are predominantly silty loam, but vary greatly due to their uneven terrain. "Our biggest management difficulty is our topography. Our land is very hilly," Brett says.

"We raise corn for grain and silage, and barley, rye, and a grass/haylage/red clover mix for forage," he adds. "Our rotation consists mainly of 3 years of corn and then 4 years of hay. Some fields stay in continuous corn." When it comes to alfalfa, the Bonlenders generally plant new stands in the spring, starting with a manure application the previous fall or before seeding. This is followed by a pass of a field cultivator and vertical tillage.

"We plant alfalfa at 12 lbs/ac, grass mixes at 4 lbs/ac, and clovers at 3 lbs/ac," shares Brett. "Our grass mix consists of two types of fescue and festolium. We also do a manure and gypsum application at some point during the growing season on every forage field, and after every crop there is a foliar application." Brett relies on trusted consultants for all his agronomy needs. All the hay the Bonlenders harvest is ensiled in bunkers.

Brett says they take four cuttings of alfalfa a year and try to take their fourth cutting as late as they can in September to reduce the amount of grass regrowth in their stands. Everything is cut with two Kuhn triple mowers, followed by merging with two Oxbo mergers. "We chop with a John Deere 9800i, put everything in bunkers, and use dry Silo King inoculants. We produce 6,000 tons DM/year and our grass/alfalfa/clover average is ~6 tons DM/ ac/year." Everything the Bonlenders produce is used by their own dairy operation.

The Bonlenders generally leave alfalfa in production for four years, but there are exceptions to that rule if the stand is exceptionally healthy and productive.





In addition to milking 2,300 cows, the siblings raise their own replacements and finish 700 beef cattle a year at a separate location. "All the feed for our animals is grown right here," Brett says.

They also own and operate a methane digester and sell methane to a facility producing compressed natural gas. They are keenly aware of protecting the environment. "We employ an Environmental Management System (EMS) for numerous reasons. One is to help us comply with regulatory demands. Another is to ensure we are protecting and improving the health and safety practices for our employees and the public. By having consistent systems, we do this in a cost-effective way," says Brett. "As you can imagine, a farm with 2,000+ cows produces an abundant supply of manure."

The best management advice Brett has for forage farmers is to "Be sure to add sulfur to your fertilizer program. Foliar applications have also been a big plus to our operation."

Brett says being an MFA member is also a big help to their operation. "MFA is important because it helps keep me up-to-date on the newest practices and trends in our field." No pun intended.

