

## Meeting Goals at Pearlmont Farm

On November 6, 2003, a heifer named “Calamity” stepped into the sale ring at the All American Jersey Sale. When she left the ring, the auctioneer’s gavel fell at \$18,000 and Pearlmont Hallmark Calamity-ET became the event’s high-selling female.

It is a career achievement for any Jersey breeder to consign a top seller to this elite sale, which has seen pass through its ring numerous show champions, a world production leader and one of the breed’s most prolific bull mothers.

For William and Gwen Pearl, “Calamity’s” breeder and consignor, the achievement is the crown jewel of the breeding program at Pearlmont Farm and an indication that the couple is breeding the kind of Jerseys that are always in demand - those with superior sires, solid performance and deep pedigrees.

### A Family Farm

The notion of sending a top seller to the All American Jersey Sale wasn’t even a goal when the Pearls took over the family farm in 1994.

“Our goal was to build a genetically superior herd,” said William.

For the past decade, William has been breeding on and perfecting the maternal lines that were established by his father and grandfather. William’s grandfather, Glen, purchased the farm, in Barnet, Vt., in 1947. The first Pearlmont Jerseys were those he milked in a mixed herd of grade Guernseys and Jerseys.

The first Registered Jerseys came to Pearlmont Farm when William’s father, Merwyn, took over the farm in the mid-1950s. Three registered heifers were

purchased in 1956 from neighboring Jersey breeder, Margaret Sargent, East Ryegate. By 1965, the herd was fully Jersey and fully registered.

Today, the 450-acre farm is family-managed and operated. William makes breeding decisions and handles milking,



Pearlmont Hallmark Calamity-ET was the high-selling female of the 2003 All American Jersey Sale. For Pearlmont Farm, her consignment was the highlight of their breeding program and the fulfillment of a goal the Pearls made a decade earlier.

feeding, herd health, crops and barn chores. Gwen does the books and helps with crops and chores. They get help from their youngest son, Dan, and one part-time employee. Eldest son, Chris, often lends a hand as well. He has kept ties to the dairy industry and is training to become an assistant plant manager of Cabot Creamery, in Montpelier.

The Pearlmont Jersey herd is enrolled on REAP and comprised of 70 milking cows and 70 replacement heifers. Cows are milked twice a day and housed in a tie-stall barn. No rBST is used. Pearlmont Jersey milk is sold to Agri-Mark, producer of Cabot and McCadam-brand cheeses.

Pearlmont Farm is ranked 35th in the nation for Jersey Performance Index (JPI), with an average JPI of +74, and six Pearlmont-bred cows are ranked on the Elite Cow List. The 2004 American Jersey Cattle Association (AJCA) lactation average on 55 lactations stands at 17,804 lbs. milk, 828 lbs. fat and 623 lbs. protein. Fourteen Excellent and 55 Very Good cows reside at Pearlmont Farm.

### Solid Breeding Always in Demand

For William, the first order of business was to use more top Jersey bulls and a greater number of young sires for genetic advancement.

William started using service sires like Highland Duncan Lester, Mason Boomer Sooner Berretta and WF/L&M Duncan Barber-ET.

Today, he selects his initial group of sires based on JPI, then further selects for type. He is currently using BW Country-ET, O.F. Barber Rocket, Wetumpka Lemvig Nathan-ET, Windy Willow Montana Jace and Woodstock LLV Lieutenant-ET. The Pearls are members of New England Jersey Sires and use young sires about 35% of the time.

This mix of top bulls and deep maternal lines brings demand not just for heifers like “Calamity,” but the rest of the herd as well.

The Pearl family has merchandised cattle to Jersey breeders in 31 states and Canada. Jerseys with the Pearlmont prefix often top key regional sales like the New England Spring and Vermont State Sales.

At the New England Spring Sale, Pearlmont Farm sold the top seller in 2004



and 2005. They consigned the second-high seller in 2002 and the third-high seller in 2002 and 2003. At the Vermont State Sale, they consigned a top-10 high seller each of the past seven years, including the top seller three of those years. In 2002, the Pearls consigned four of the top seven sellers.

For their breeding efforts, William and Gwen were awarded the Vermont Outstanding Senior Breeder in 2000. The couple, along with his father and mother, were given the New England Master Breeder Award in 2002.

### Management Details

While breeding is important, it is herd management that enhances leading genetics. Because of this, the Pearls pay mind to even the smallest management details.

“We haven’t had a displaced abomasum in eight years,” remarked William. “Our involuntary culling rate is 15% and our voluntary culling rate is 22%. The age at first calving is 23 months, the calving interval is 12.3 months and the services per conception is two. Our somatic cell count is around 80,000.”

Gwen commented, “The veterinarians like to kid around with us when they leave here. They’ll usually say something like, ‘see you next year.’”

Outside these monthly vet visits for pregnancy checks and vaccinations, Pearlmont Farm rarely sees the veterinarian.

Gwen attributes much of the herd’s health to the hay-based ration. “When we first started, we cut way back on the grain,” she recalled. “Production went down and herd health came up.” In time, production came back too.

The ration is also used out of necessity. Vermont’s steep hills, poor soil and short growing season make it difficult to raise many crops, especially corn. Most of the farm’s 140 tillable acres are set aside to produce grass baleage and some alfalfa bales. Despite the obstacles, the Pearls are

aggressive about cropping and get four cuttings each year. They start cutting in mid-May and cut every 35 days thereafter.

Milking cows are fed in the barn with a round bale feeder that continually moves the bale around the barn. Cows grab a mouthful of hay as the feeder passes in front of them. The feeder is effective as there is little waste and the product is always fresh. The ration is supplemented with grain purchased from a local feed



William and Gwen Pearl. William is the third-generation Pearl to dairy at the Barnet, Vt., farm.

mill. The herd is turned out at night and rotationally grazed on 40 acres. Pole fencing is used so that cows are given a new, fresh paddock each night.

Herd health is boosted by the vaccination program set up by their veterinarians. Dry cows get an injection of selenium and a vaccination of ScourGuard three weeks before calving. Heifers get the same treatment two months out and again three weeks prior to calving.

William believes that healthy calves get their start from healthy cows. “We haven’t lost a calf in six years,” commented William. “And since heifers are worth so

much, we’d like to keep it that way.”

Baby calves are fed three times within the first 24 hours of birth. They are housed in hutches for the first month and then moved to the barn, where they are cared for in a dozen tie stalls. Calves are weaned at two months-of-age. They are then raised in groups in a greenhouse barn and dry lot until calving.

### The Bottom Line

Over the past decade, the Pearl’s intent to make a profit with Registered Jerseys has remained the same. But their approach in making it happen has changed.

“At first we wanted lots of production,” said Gwen. “We now know that more milk does not mean more money.”

“Longevity is the key to making more,” she continued.

Half of the Pearl’s milking herd is over five years-of-age and three cows are over 10. The oldest cow in the barn, Pearlmont Lester Betty Lily, will be 11 years old in September. The Excellent-92% matriarch is a steady performer. In eight lactations, she made 152,845 lbs. milk, 7,345 lbs. fat and 5,643 lbs. protein. The average m.e. on these records is 18,790—894—687. She has three milking daughters: one is Excellent with more than 17,400 lbs. milk and two are Very Good with more than 18,700 lbs. milk.

Two of “Lily’s” granddaughters by Schultz Brook Hallmark were the top sellers of the New England Spring Sale in 2004 and 2005.

William concluded, “Longevity helps me sell more heifers.”

For William and Gwen, the first 10 years were devoted to developing a genetically-superior herd and managing it for profitability. So what about the next 10 years? A true Jersey breeder, William commented, “To breed the perfect cow.”



Pearlmount Hallmark L Classy-ET is a full sister to “Calamity” and one of Pearlmont’s up-and-coming young cows. She calved in March at 1-9.