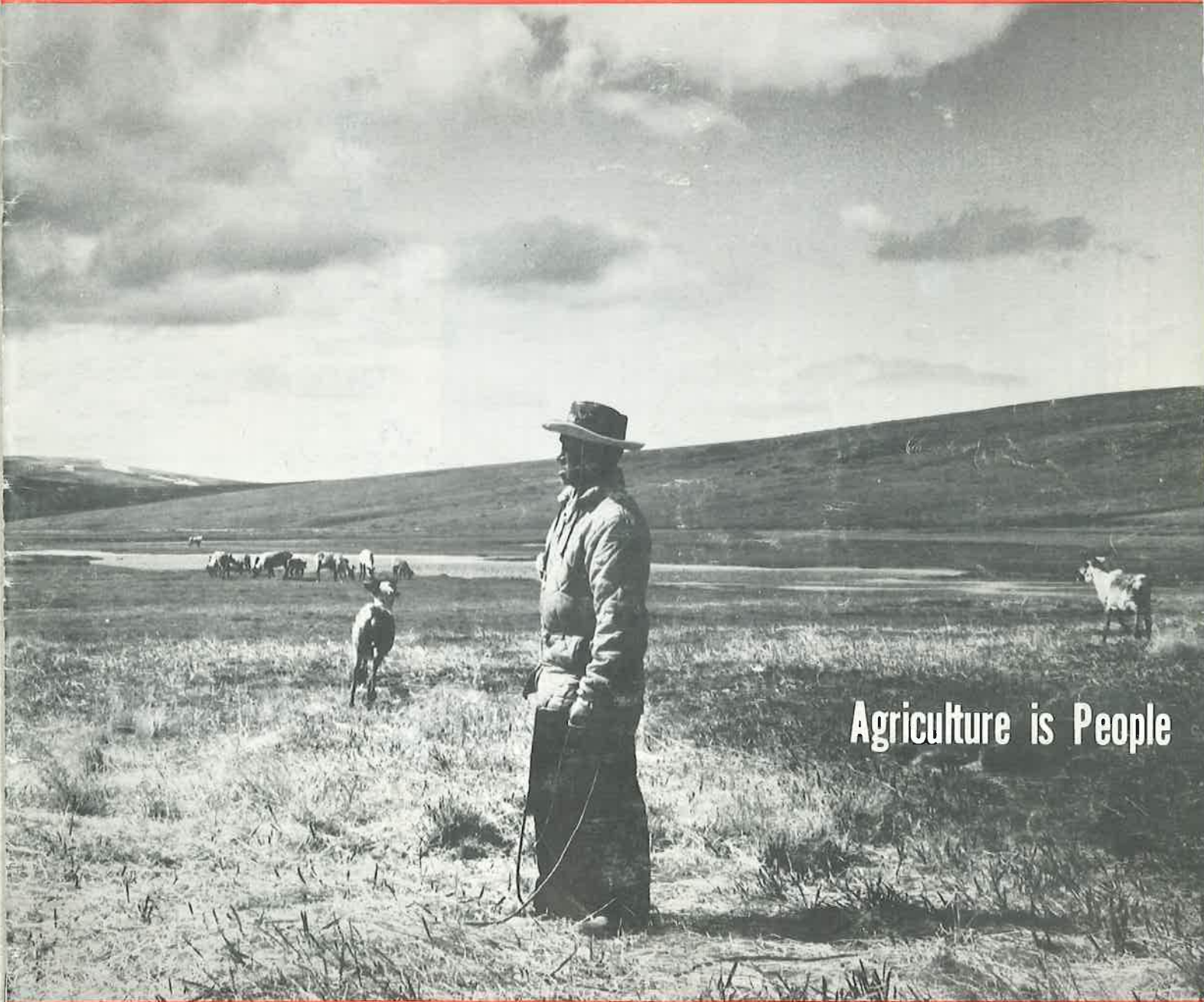


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Holsteins make up bulk of Fairview herd

Profile of a Matanuska dairy farm

While Myrtle Gislason, nee Montpetit, was growing up on her parents' diversified farm in North Dakota, one chore she heartily disliked was helping to milk 15 head of cows. The thought of never having to milk another cow filled her with elation when she was 17 and her family moved to the Pacific Northwest away from farming.

Today, Myrtle has been a dairywoman in Alaska for going on a quarter-century. Furthermore, when her hired milker is gone, she can often be found capably milking 90 or more dairy cows.

The herd she helps to tend is at Fairview Dairies, located off Alaska Route 3, twelve miles west of Palmer. It is not owned by Myrtle alone but is a joint operation with Bob and Merlie McCombs. This interesting and unusual arrangement is a partnership, involving the pooling of business resources, including the animals, buildings, equipment and operational expenses.

While the Gislason and McCombs homes are located close together, the

two farms are considered separate. As Bob and Merlie point out:

"We want to keep our places separate. We can tell you we have 200 acres of land and Myrtle can tell you she has 225."

The partnership was formed in 1960, the year after Myrtle's husband was killed in a farm accident. To help with the manual work, Myrtle hires the milker which is a full time job. But she and Merlie McCombs are active participants in many phases of work around the farm, from harvesting to milking. Both also contribute time in office tasks as well, Myrtle keeping books for the partnership and Merlie maintaining records on the cows themselves.

Myrtle and her husband actually started the dairy operation. They came to Alaska in 1946 from Seattle and he worked for a year and a half for the Alaska Railroad. In 1948 they bought the farm and for the next two years struggled with trying to grow vegetables, an attempt she remembers now with considerable aversion:

"With vegetables we had a crop one day and the next day we didn't know whether we did or not. Like lettuce, you could have a field of lettuce one day and the next it was all slimy and you'd lose the whole thing. And we worked just like dogs on that too, but you weren't sure of anything."

The second fall they changed over and Myrtle says now:

"I was never so glad to see cows. Milking cows is a big gamble too, but at least you're getting that check every two weeks, and that makes a difference. I never minded going into the dairy business."

The first five of their commercial herd were sent up by boat from Seattle by a man who supposedly knew about dairy cattle. Myrtle claims they turned out to be "just every kind of a color of cow", and her husband was unhappy they were not all Holsteins. Nevertheless, with these five and a milking machine, Fairview Dairy was launched.

A few years after the Gislasons got into the dairy business — 1951 to be



Partners Myrtle Gislason and Bob McCombs (top photo) check over herd records. At bottom are Myrtle Gislason, left, and Mertie McCombs of Fairview Dairies.



Of the 80 dairy farms operating when the Gislasons started, only 26 remain; all of these, with the exception of one at Shaw Creek in the Fairbanks area, are located in the Matanuska Valley. Small farms of 10 and 15 cows have given way to larger operations (though the cow population too has declined from 3,000 to a current 1,800 head) and more modern and efficient operational practices.

While many phases of agriculture in Alaska are hampered by the isolated location and harsh weather, in several Under this program, semen from a huge selection of bulls across the nation

important aspects the dairy people here are almost as well off as their counterparts elsewhere. These days, for instance, due to the AI (artificial insemination) program, it is unnecessary for Fairview and other dairies to have the expense of buying or keeping bulls. Simply by picking up the telephone, Bob McCombs can secure the services of the finest bulls in the United States, resulting in a high grade of selection and replenishment for the partnership herd.

Under this program, semen from a huge selection of bulls across the nation

exact — their long-time friends, Bob and Mertie McCombs, and daughters Luann and Linda, arrived in Anchorage. Mertie was originally from Idaho, Bob from Walla Walla, Washington, and like Myrtle, he had also spent his early life on a diversified farm. The McCombs' lived in Anchorage until 1956 but that year they bought the 200-acre, 11-cow dairy farm adjoining the Gislasons.

By the time of Joe Gislason's death in 1959, the two dairies were thriving, each milking about 30 cows. Myrtle's son, Gary, had no inclination to become a dairyman (today he is a professor teaching math at the University of Alaska; daughter Joyce, employed by Matanuska Electric, lives at home with her mother). For both Myrtle and the McCombs, pooling resources meant many advantages.

"It cut the overhead quite a lot," Bob notes now with his characteristic economy of words. "See, they had about the same amount of cows and we had about the same amount of cows, machinery and so forth." The land also was nearly equal.

Today, Fairview milks around 92 cows (they have a total of about 165 head, including calves). Most of these are Holsteins, with a few head of Brown Swiss, Guernseys and Jerseys thrown in. The business has a milking barn and attached milking room, a silo, farm equipment to grow and harvest its own feed, and a new 200 x 44-foot loose-housing barn, with room for 114 stalls. The barn went into operation in October of last year, with extras, such as a barn-cleaner, it represents at least a \$70,000 investment. The silo represents roughly \$25,000, the milking equipment between \$10,000 and \$15,000, and an 800-gallon stainless steel bulk tank that would cost today about \$9,000.

All this modern equipment and the increased herd is a far cry from that early farm and five head of dairy cows the Gislasons started out with.

"In those days," Myrtle recalls, "we said if we could milk 15 cows year around we could make a good living — if we could have 15 milking all the time — we could have a nice living. And we would have been satisfied with that. You see how things have changed? We never intended anything like this."

Such changes, of course, are reflected in the entire dairy industry in Alaska.

is frozen in individual ampules to 320 degrees below zero, shipped by air in liquid nitrogen to Alaska to the breeders' association, and stored at that temperature until it is needed. Dairy people then choose from a catalog a bull with characteristics to complement their cow, and thus can expect a calf of superior virtues. As one expert describes this system: "These people are as exposed to the forefront of the dairy industry as if they were in Wisconsin."

Another important way in which the dairy industry in Alaska has kept pace with the times is in marketing, an area in which all other agricultural people across the north are seriously impeded. The reindeer herdsman on the Seward Peninsula, the vegetable grower on the Kenai Peninsula, and the hog raiser of the Fairbanks region might look with something akin to envy as a huge milk tanker drains off the contents of the Fairview bulk milk tank and leaves. At that point the milk is out of the hands of the Fairview partners. They have no distribution worries; if the milk spills on the way to Anchorage, it is not their loss. And every two weeks their check is sent to them.

Even the harsh weather of the north has been conquered to some degree. Nowadays, when winter temperatures hover at 35 below for days on end, or

when one of the bitter, hurricane-force "Matanuska" gales rakes the valley, the Fairview herd is at least approximately as comfortable in their "controlled environment" barn as cows in Iowa or Washington State.

Fairview can even take advantage of an advanced technological development to help keep track of milk production: Every month the milk from each cow is measured and a special sheet with this information sent to Washington State University at Pullman. There a computer assesses it and tells what each cow is doing, and even estimates what she will do the following months. Such a record is absolutely vital when large numbers of cows are involved in each milking; otherwise a cow might come through the line, give no milk at all and no one would be the wiser.

Still, technology and modern conveniences notwithstanding, all is not totally rosy on Alaska's dairy scene, as the Fairview partners explain. Myrtle is all for milking fewer cows and better cows; but "it's just hard to keep good cows — very hard in this country." She feels the controlled environment is not without flaws, that confining a cow in relatively close quarters results in increased mastitis, for one thing. According to Bob, a cow's working life here is

from five to seven years, after which she is culled out, generally because of "either mastitis or they get arthritis."

Beyond these things, feed itself is expensive and hard to come by. Throughout the brief growing season there is a never-ending struggle to fill the 30 x 60 silo with brome grass, oats, peas and barley raised on the farm. The women, as well as Bob, often help with the harvest, and one or two hired hands are needed too. It is cheaper to ship in grain than it is hay so they try to produce as much forage for silage and roughage as possible and ship in only concentrates (straw for bedding has been eliminated, replaced in their new barn with rubber mats). They feed the cows 1,200 pounds of grain per day (the amount varies according to the amount of milk, in ratio of one pound of grain to each 2 to 3 pounds of milk) which costs them \$96 per ton.

Besides the feed problem, another difficulty is farm labor itself — someone who can do the job and will stay. The present Fairview milker, who has a wife and two children, has been there 14 months and his employers wish he would stay.

A location-related problem for Fairview Dairies is in disposing of surplus animals, cows that need to be culled, and bull calves. With shipped-in veal selling in Anchorage for up to \$3.50 per pound, depending on the cut, Myrtle and the McCombs' have still been forced to simply knock some of their unwanted calves in the head. Until very recently, there has been no qualified slaughter facility to take them to, no one to market the meat if they had been slaughtered, and the operation cannot afford the expense of feeding the calves to proper slaughter age, in any event.

Money from cull beef, of course, is the least of the worries at Fairview. Myrtle points out that they are actually getting less money from the milk now than they did 14 years ago.

Even so, retail prices have increased and now it costs 50 cents a quart. Since it costs the dairy more for what they produce and use, one alternative seems to be to have more cows and do a better job with them.

"You get more cows — more land," Bob observes laconically.

Fairview Dairies' silo represents \$25,000 investment

