

# From the ashes

## Carnor Farms rebuilds, expands after fire



A battery-operated Juno feed pusher follows a pre-programmed route around Carnor Farms' barn, ensuring feed is always available to cows. (Staff photo by Diane Johnston)

DIANE JOHNSTON

Speaker Reporter

EARLTON – As a youngster, Chris Regele remembers visiting a farm show in southern Ontario with his father and spying what was then an unknown – a robotic milker.

Their response?

"That'll never happen," said Chris.

"And here we are," said his wife Anna in a recent interview.

"Here" is a meeting room overlooking the Regeles' custom-designed barn housing a milking herd of 50 Jerseys... and a robotic milking system.

Carnor Farms made the technological leap a little less than a year ago.

And while the couple had been discussing the move, their hands were forced by the events of a single day.

**"GONE"**

Chris, 26, and Anna Regele, 29, purchased the farm on the Armstrong-Evanturel boundary road in 2010.

On August 11, 2014, after a long day of baling and chores, Anna said she was preparing a late supper when she looked out the window "and saw things glowing."

She called 911 but there was little firefighters could do but keep flames from spreading to an outbuilding and gas tanks.

"It was gone," she said.

They lost not only the barn and milking equipment but also about 40 head of cattle, including calves, heifers and five cows.

At that point, did they consider exiting the dairy industry?

"Not at all," said Anna, who worked as a physed teacher for a year prior to purchasing the farm.

Chris, a trained carpenter, said he couldn't picture raising their five children anywhere else.

He said he could have got a job in mining, but would then have been away from home for extended periods of time.

A couple of days after the fire, Anna said a farmer who had also lived through a fire dropped by.

"He said, 'This is your opportunity. If you want out, you can get out.'"

"That never even crossed our mind," she said.

**FAMILY TIES**

Milking cows is in the couple's DNA.

Chris is the son of Charles and Carol Anne Regele, and Anna is the daughter of Robin and Sharon Flewwelling - all dairy producers who live within a few kilometres of each other.

Still, it was a mixed marriage of sorts – the Regeles milk Holsteins, and the Flewwellings, Jerseys.

Prior to the fire, Chris and Anna had a milking herd of about 45 cows in a free-style barn that had been converted from tie stalls. The milking parlour, built around 2004, was the newest section of the barn.

About one-quarter of the herd were Jerseys. Some were a wedding gift from her parents.

They'd planned on expanding "slowly but surely," Anna said.

The fire changed all that.

Early August 12, she said eight farmers and a donated truck showed up in pouring rain to help them move the cows that had been grazing outside to her parents' barn.

After two weeks, "we made the decision that it was just too much, and we ended up selling the herd," she said.

Dairy Farmers of Ontario, which oversees milk marketing in the province, has policies in place when catastrophe strikes.

Producers can retain their milk production quota for one year as they rebuild.

**RESEARCH**

The Regeles then hit the road.

Anna guessed they made more than 15 trips to southern Ontario and even into the U.S., visiting farm shows and touring barns.

"Talking to farmers, to me, is the best way to find out information," said Chris.

"You talk to the salesmen all you want, but if you're going to talk to the farmer, they're going to tell you the truth."

Their new barn is modelled on one in Verner that's actually a tie-stall operation.

It gave them the footprint, "and we puzzle-pieced everything else together," Anna said.

They incorporated ideas from each operation they saw, Chris said.

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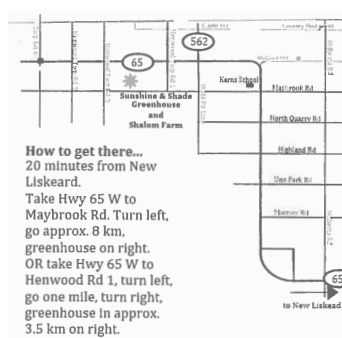


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The barn itself was designed in Germany, and all the materials arrived in shipping containers.

The couple marvelled at the speed of construction – two men erected the 190-by-110-foot barn in only six days.

The building was completed by mid-June, and work moved inside.

“We knew exactly what stalls we wanted, we knew what robot we wanted,” Chris said.

Insurance covered most of the cost of the new \$1.4 million barn, which came in under budget.

Chris doubted that would have been the case had he not served as general contractor.

But after working on a tight timeline with a host of suppliers and contractors, “I don’t want to do this for many years again,” he said.

Their target to restart milking was September 1.

## CATTLE SEARCH

But by the beginning of August, they still had no cattle.

Anna had been pushing for Jerseys.

They’re a little cheaper to purchase than Holsteins and, because they’re smaller, they cost less to feed. While a Jersey produces less milk than a Holstein, its butterfat content is higher, she said.

Given their farm’s base of 400 acres and their plans to expand milk production, “we need to have the cow that’s more economical,” she said.

In his own research, Chris said he found a number of studies pointing to the feed efficiency of Jerseys – an important consideration as feed costs rise.

But Jerseys proved “very hard to find,” Anna said.

“So I told a guy that knew a guy that knew a guy,” Chris said.

They received a call about a herd in the Napanee area whose owner was retiring.

When Chris asked how long they could think about it, “he says, ‘well, take as long as you want, but I can’t guarantee they’ll be here tomorrow.’”

Buying a herd sight unseen “was kind of scary,” Chris admitted.

But their veterinarian gave the cattle a good health report card upon arrival,



**A year after fire destroyed Carnor Farms’ dairy barn and part of its herd, Anna and Chris Regele restarted operations with new cattle and new technology. The Regeles installed a robotic milking system for their herd of 50 Jerseys, and are positioned to expand. (Staff photo by Diane Johnston)**

and they proved easy to train.

The herd’s previous owner “loved her cows. They were her babies,” Anna said.

In talking to representatives of the robotic system’s manufacturer, Chris said he was told that Jerseys tend to be “nosy.”

That curiosity is considered a plus when using a robotic milker.

In their case, they opted for one Lely A4 robot.

The automated system means producers no longer have to milk the cows themselves. Instead, cows wearing sensor-bearing collars walk to a stall when they’re ready to be milked. Their udders are cleaned and then milked by an automated arm.

The system records a host of data, not only during milking but 24 hours a day, ranging from an individual cow’s milk production to feeding behaviour that indicates its health.

It tracks, for example, the number of times a cow chews – fewer chews can signal a health issue, Anna said.

She said that data is even more important because they’re handling the cattle less.

But without the pressure of twice-a-day milking on a strict schedule, they

said the system has also freed them to spend more time observing the cattle.

“It is a switch. You’re now focused more on the cows, rather than the labour,” Anna said.

But in the first few days, both farmers and cattle were on a learning curve.

The cattle arrived at 1 a.m. and were fitted with collars.

The Regeles grabbed a couple of hours of sleep, and were up at 6 a.m. for the first milking.

A crew was on hand to teach them the system and fine-tune the equipment’s calibration, and each cow had to be walked through the process.

That first milking took 10 hours.

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But within a few days, even the most reluctant cow had become accustomed to the new regimen.

It's more a matter of adjusting the robot to the cows, said Chris, who continues to tweak the equipment to suit the Jersey's smaller frame and his own preferences.

### **FAMILY TIME**

But the new system is meeting one of the couple's goals – scheduling flexibility.

Their kids range in age from six months to just under six.

They still do barn chores twice a day, but they're fit around getting kids ready for the bus or an evening get-together.

A month after they restarted operations, Chris said it was his daughter's birthday.

Under the old system, he said they would have had supper, done the chores and then had about 10 minutes to read a story before the kids would have had to go to bed for school the next day.

This time, he said his daughter wanted a campfire, so that's what the family had – and then he did the chores.

### **THE FUTURE**

The new barn is built to grow.

It can accommodate more than 70 head, and they're buying production quota monthly at auction.

They're also working with the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, which offers help to existing operations for expansion.

If the next generation is to take over the farm, "we need to keep growing," he said.



**What grows in Ontario? Potatoes, yes. Bananas...not so many. Daniel Tassé, agriculture development advisor with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' office in Temiskaming Shores, quizzed kids at the recent Earlton Farm Show on what Ontario growers do – and don't – produce. (Staff photo by Diane Johnston)**

## Milking the numbers

•The number of dairy farms in Ontario declined from 4,701 in 2006 to 3,834 in 2015 – a drop of more than 18 per cent.

•In the same period, the amount of milk they produced increased from 2.4 billion litres to 2.6 billion litres.

•Across Northern Ontario, the number of producers decreased from 169 in 2006 to 124 in 2015.

•Milk production declined about 12 per cent over that time. Northern Ontario farms produced almost 31 million litres of milk in 2015.

•Temiskaming tops the dairy list in the North. In 2015, it accounted for 37 per cent of its producers

and more than 40 per cent of its total production.

•Between 2006 and 2015, the number of Temiskaming milk producers decreased from 60 to 46.


•Ontario producers ship, on average, 7.2 million litres of milk each day.

•Fewer cows are producing Ontario's milk. Ontario's dairy cow herd shrank from 330,000 head in 2006 to 302,000 in 2015.

•And what about cows' productivity? That's increased from 7,915 litres per cow per year in 2006 to 8,603 litres in 2015.


\*Source: Dairy Farmers of Ontario

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