



Elaine Forst (left) of The Forst Family Farm in Pittsfield, NH, holds the engraved silver pitcher she was awarded as Outstanding New Hampshire Dairyman of 1988 at ceremonies Friday night at The Big E in West Springfield, MA. With Forst is Dustin Bowles. Green Pastures, an organization that helps dairymen make the best use of their pastureland, presents the award annually to six outstanding dairymen based on contributions to environmental improvement, demonstrated leadership and participation in community activities.

Photography by Vincent S. D'Addario

First Woman Ever Is Selected As Granite State's Top Dairy Farmer

Durham — As a girl growing up in Pembroke in the 50s, Elaine Forst had no ambitions to be a dairy farmer.

"We had some chickens, and I dreamed of maybe having a beef cow," she recalled, but that was it.

Some 30 years later, however, things have changed quite a bit: this Pittsfield mother of four children and former Gilmanton school board member has been selected as New Hampshire's "Dairyman of the Year" — the first woman in the 40-year-history of the contest to be so honored.

"We are especially pleased," said Peter J. Horne, director of UNH Cooperative Extension, in making the announcement.

"We greatly admire her special qualities and leadership."

Forst is only the second woman to be picked as the top dairy farmer in any of the New England States, according to the NH Green Pastures Committee, which founded the competition.

Forst and the winners from the five other states were recognized at the banquet September 16 at the Eastern States Exposition in West Springfield, Mass.

There are almost 350 dairy farms in New Hampshire, but only the top few farmers are nominated each year, committee officials said.

Forst was selected in large part because of the efficient way she managed her herd of 450 grade Holsteins, according to Bruce A. Marriott, agriculture agent for Belknap County, and John D. Porter, UNH Cooperative Extension dairy specialist.

With about 270 cows milking in 1987, the herd average was just under 20,000 pounds of milk per cow, and each farm worker was responsible for more than 1,000,000 pounds of milk per year, two marks of a successful operation.

"That indicates a very high level of efficiency," Marriott said.

The award citation noted how Forst had made landscaping, feeding, and housing improvements and had doubled the herd size in recent years and still increased the average volume of milk produced, currently the highest in the Merrimack County circuit.

"The Forst Family Farm is just as the name indicates," the citation continued, noting that the farm has a "very capable and talented workforce" which works side by side with family members.

Even though the herd is large, the human touch has not been lost, the citation said, noting that "an employee's desire to keep a 'cute calf' or nurse along a weak one is often heeded," and that "other employees own special cows or equipment which keeps their interest in the operation.

"Elaine works hard as a manager and a mother to put the pieces together to run a successful family farm," the citation concluded.

After graduating from Keene State College with a bachelor's degree in elementary education, Forst taught third grade at Chichester Elementary School for three years before going full time into dairy farming with her husband. They began with 18 cows, she recalls and explains, "we learned as we went along."

They ran the farm together for the next 20 years — along the way Elaine even found time to win election and serve two 3-year terms on the Gilmanton School Board — and three years ago Elaine became the sole manager of the dairy farm. The herd and

barns, including a 260 free-stall structure, are situated on 140 acres on Upper City Road in Pittsfield, and Forst rents an additional 360 acres for feed crops in four locales in a 12 mile radius of the home farm.

Forst says she works seven days a week, sometimes as long as 15 hours a day doing everything from keeping the books to milking to feeding the calves, but hopes "to lay low on Sunday."

The farm has five employees, Forst says ("including me"), and her four children help out to various degrees.

Brian, 22, recently married, lives five minutes away and is mostly involved with the mechanized end of the operation — plowing, harrowing, mowing and chopping.

Barry, 17, a student at Gilford High School, does "a little bit of everything," and concentrates on trucking and running the equipment.

Heidi, 15, a sophomore at Gilford High School, feeds the heifers and takes a weekly four-hour turn at milking, doing about 110 cows.

Laura, 11, feeds the calves and serves as "my telephone answerer," because Forst is usually out working in the fields.

Forst said she intends to keep doing chores "until I can't physically do as much as I'm doing," but she's quick to state, "The way we're going, that should be a least another 10 years."

And she will continue as manager perhaps longer than that. "As long as I can talk, I'll run it," she says.

Forst isn't offended that the award is still technically called by the masculine anachronism "Dairyman." "Some might be miffed, but I'm not. I'd just as soon not have it 'dairy person,'" she says, but adds that "Dairy farmer" would be agreeable.

"Women have infiltrated other areas — they're lawyers, doctors, airplane pilots. The gist of it is that I could do

it," she says.

"The banquet I went to in Springfield was for 'Dairyman of the Year,'" she points out, "and I'm New Hampshire's 'Dairyman of the Year.' That's fine."

Jim Mitchell, an agronomist for UNH Cooperative Extension and chair of the N.H. Green Pastures Committee, which administers the contest, said a committee of seven persons chose Forst. The committee, comprised of Mitchell, the winners from the three previous years, and three UNH Cooperative Extension specialists, reviewed the accomplishments of each nominee, visited the dairy farms, and talked with each farmer.

The awards program began four decades ago after N.H. Governor Charles Dale challenged the governors of the other five New England States to produce better pastures than the Granite State, promising to pay off the wager with a hat if he lost.

A Connecticut farmer won that first year, 1948, — the tops from among 3,000 competitors — and the New Hampshire governor ceremoniously presented a chapeau to Conn. Governor James L. McConaughy before 6,000 spectators at the Eastern States Exposition.

The program received national recognition in 1953 when President Dwight Eisenhower presented the awards to the winners, and in 1962 the competition switched from New England-wide pasture judging to selecting the best dairy farmer in each state, where it has remained to the present.

Commenting on the winners over the years, Committee Chair Mitchell said, "They've been quite an impressive group of people."