



# The last milking

A remarkable streak comes to an end for Rock Island grandmother Mary Frances Martin

Some of the 41 Holsteins that make up Mary Frances and Ollis Martin's herd make their way down from the fields for the last time. Within the hour, the cattle would be loaded on livestock trailers and then transferred to rail cattle cars bound for a Georgia processing plant as part of the Cooperatives Working Together national herd reduction program.

Story and photos by Mark E. Johnson

**I**t adds up to exactly 19,004 trips to the milk barn. You do the math.

Twice a day, every day, for 26 years and 24 days.

Since the evening of Monday, Sept. 5, 1977, the day Mary Frances Martin and her husband of 43 years, Ollis, purchased their 167-acre dairy farm, she has twice daily pulled on her rubber boots and made the short walk from her tidy Van Buren County home to the milking parlor.

That's 19,004 trips without one missed milking — even through ice and snowstorms, power outages, tornadoes, heat waves, holidays, weddings, births, national emergencies, and really good mornings to sleep late.

"The Lord's been good to me," Mary Frances said quietly on the eve of her last milking, number 19,005. "I've never been ill to speak of. I mean, if you can get out of bed, you can milk."



Purchasing the dairy fulfilled a lifelong ambition for Mary Frances, who was raised on a small hog farm. After spending more than 20 years of their adult lives working in factories,

the Martins, longtime members of Warren Farmers Cooperative, jumped at the chance to purchase the Rock Island farm, already a working dairy. Having no professional dairying experience, they "figured out" how to milk the night they moved in, with Mary Frances gravitating to the job naturally.

But, on Tuesday, Sept. 30, 2003, her remarkable streak of consecutive milkings would come to an end. Due to a combination of the recent 25-year low in milk prices and the persistent lure of retirement, Mary Frances and Ollis decided to participate in a herd reduction program crafted and implemented by Cooperatives Working Together (CWT), a national, farmer-led-and-funded initiative designed to boost milk prices. According to its Web site, CWT's objective is to address the supply and demand



Mary Frances completes milking on the evening of Sept. 29 as Warren Farmers Cooperative salesman Larry Rhea, left, and the Martins' son-in-law, Kurt Maynard, look on. Rhea says the Martins have been "model customers of Warren Farmers Co-op" and are "just good people."

imbalances that are depressing milk prices by several different methods, including reducing the national milk cattle herd by 35,000 head. This reduction is projected to result in a .7 percent decrease in milk production, or roughly 1.2 billion pounds.

To the nation's milk producers, this means a possible net increase of more than \$7,000 in income per year. To Mary Frances and Ollis, it means being able to attend their grandchildren's basketball games

without having to leave at halftime to go home and milk the cows.

"We'd heard rumors about a government-funded buyout program last year, but I guess it fell through," said Ollis, a wiry hunting enthusiast with a deep voice and a quick smile. "Then, this CWT program came up, and it sounded pretty good. We were likely going to retire the dairy next spring anyway, so I guess the timing was right. We placed our bid, and they accepted it."



Ollis Martin, an avid hunter and fisherman, worked at Carrier and Genesco plants in McMinnville for more than 20 years before he and Mary Frances purchased the dairy on Labor Day 1977.

James Elliott Trucking, was unaware that the Martins were retiring the herd and had arrived earlier than normal.

Choked with emotion, Mary Frances helped Darren guide the tanker past the livestock rigs and into position to empty the dairy's holding tank for the last time.

As the milk was slowly transferred into the tanker, Darren stood beside the rig

and shook his head.

"I sure hate to lose y'all," he told Mary Frances after learning of the CWT program. "This is one of the best dairies around. Your place is always spotless, and it's always easy to get in and out of. I just wish we had more producers like you."

Eventually, Darren left with his load of milk, the livestock haulers left with the Holsteins, and the

Martins were left with 167 quiet acres and a sunny fall day.

### Sleeping in

Two months later, Mary Frances says she and Ollis have adjusted to life without dairying easier than they expected and have purchased 17 beef cows, mainly Angus and Charolais, to make use of the pastures. However, Mary Frances admits that she tries not to think about the cows and "misses that milk check."

"It's hard after you've gotten used to getting the check on a regular schedule," she says. "But, all in all,

it's been just fine. Ollis has been deer hunting nearly every day, and I've been crocheting and knitting. We've been going to all the grandkids' basketball games, and I'm going to make quilts to give them as gifts when they get married. There's always a lot to do."

"Plus," she adds with a grin, "We get to sleep a little later, too!"

To learn more about the Cooperatives Working Together program, visit the initiative's Web site at [www.cwt.coop](http://www.cwt.coop) or call toll-free (888) 463-6298.



Ollis guides the livestock trailer as it backs into position at the corral gate. Weeks after retiring the dairy, the Martins purchased 17 beef cattle for the farm.

On Monday — the day before the last milking — Mary Frances admitted that she was somewhat taken aback by the abruptness of CWT's process once it began.

"Well, they called us early last week and said they would send a man to tag the cows the next day," she said. "Then, after that, they called back and said they were sending the trucks tomorrow! I really haven't had much time to think about it."

### 'I'm not ready'

Tuesday dawned with clear, cool skies and developed into a picture-perfect fall morning, somehow inappropriate for the events of the day. Mary Frances' dairying days ended before sunrise when she ushered the last Holstein out the exits of the white concrete barn.

"It's sad," she said. "The worst part of the whole thing is that the cows have to be slaughtered. I've milked some of these cows for 12 years."

Herds in CWT's reduction program are shipped to packing facilities where they are processed for consumer uses, most likely as fast food hamburger meat. When two large pickups towing livestock trailers turned into the gravel drive at 8:30 a.m., the reality of the program seemed to hit home for Mary Frances.

"Oh, there come the trucks," she said, covering her mouth with her hands. "I'm not ready."

Ollis guided the drivers as they backed in their trailers to load the 41 Holsteins while Mary Frances stood at a distance and watched. As the first trailer neared capacity, she turned at the sound of another diesel engine approaching.

"Oh, no — it's the milk truck," she called to Ollis as the gleaming tanker made its way down the drive. The young driver, Darren Morris of



In an odd twist of fate, milk truck driver Darren Morris, standing with Mary Frances, arrives unexpectedly early for his pick-up as workers in the corral, right, are loading the cattle.



ABOVE: Darren talks with Mary Frances as she wipes away a tear. LEFT: A heifer with a CWT eartag waits in the corral to be loaded.