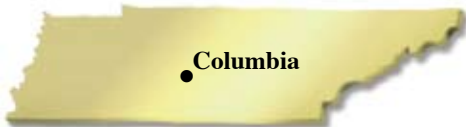


Randell Rummage had a simple plan for the dilapidated farmhouse. Toss a match into it. “Could you blame me?” Randell implores. “Look at the pictures. It was just an old fallen-in pigeon-roost. Who would want to keep that?”

It was 1985, and the Maury County dairyman and then Tennessee Farmers Cooperative director had just purchased a 161-acre farm at auction. At the end of a winding dirt path that led into the farm stood the nondescript clapboard house in disrepair, an eyesore that Randell and his wife, Judy, intended to make quick work of. That is, until they received an unexpected visitor.



“A fellow walked up here one day soon after the auction and asked, ‘What are you going to do with that house?’” Randell recalls. “Trying to be a fast-thinking country boy, I said, ‘Well, I’m probably going to sell it to the highest bidder.’ He said, ‘I’ll give you \$3,500 for it.’ I immediately thought, ‘He knows something I don’t!’”

After telling the prospective buyer he’d “consider it,” Randell and Judy quickly — and carefully — began exploring the house they’d been inside just a couple of times before. They looked for anything that would explain the \$3,500 offer. When the couple peeled back several layers of yellowed newspaper and hog’s hair and mud plaster from an interior wall, they revealed the secret that only a few people in the community — including the prospective buyer — seemed to know.

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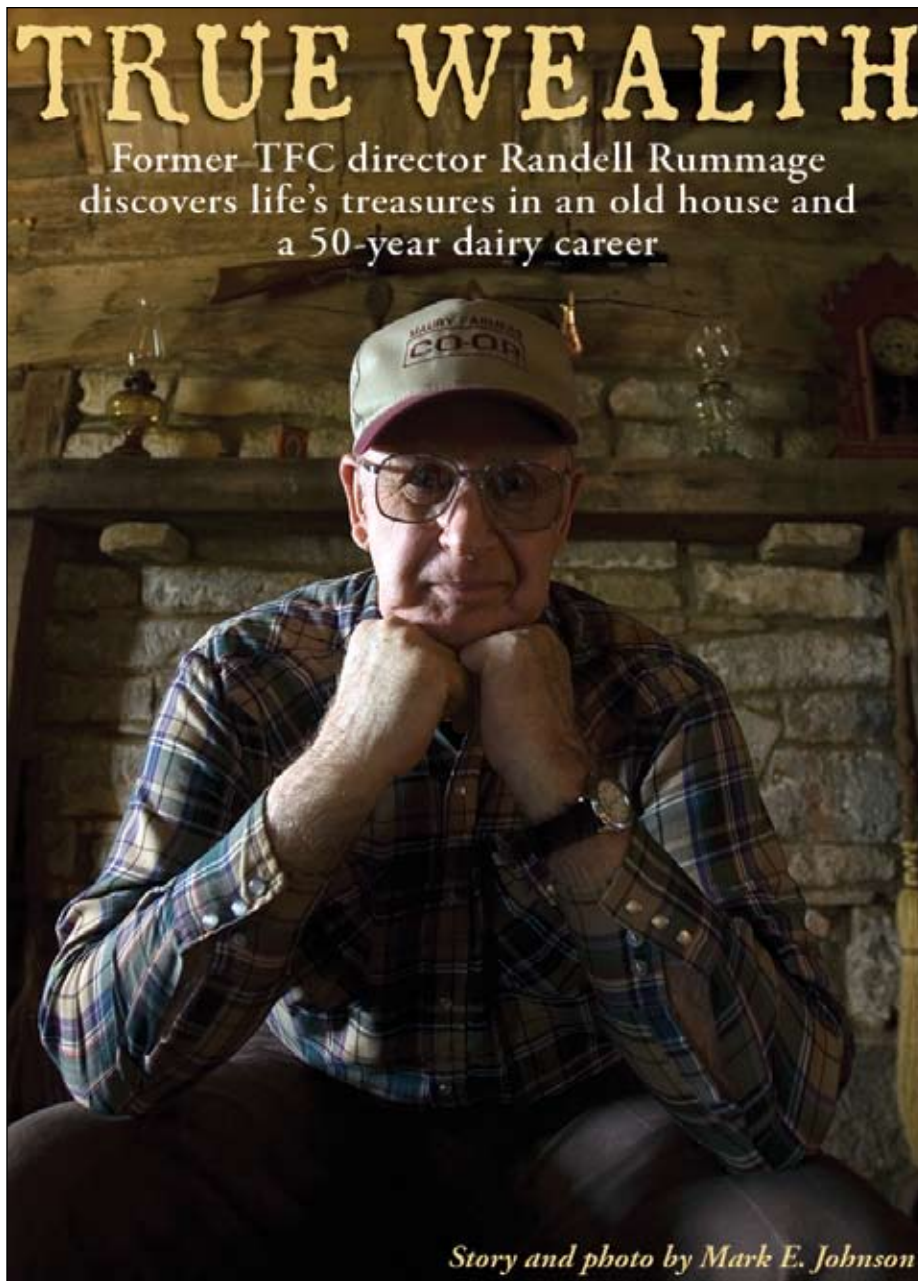
Some 30 years earlier, a teenage Randell was itching to get started in the dairy industry. While the 1950s and ’60s would be lean years for dairy producers, the industry was much more widespread in the state than it is today. Already displaying the “eternal optimist” gene common in most farmers, young Randell was eager to make his mark as a dairyman.

“I bought my first registered Holsteins in 1956,” Randell says. “They were brought in by [the University of Tennessee], and the 4-H leader at my high school carried me up to Knoxville to get them. I bought two.”

Three years later, newlyweds Randell and Judy, who had been high school sweethearts, purchased a Grade A milk barn and jumped into the dairy industry with both feet.

“I guess I thought I could support a wife with those cows, and being a town girl, Judy didn’t know any better,” Randell says with a laugh. “She just saw how pretty it was in the country. I guess neither one of us really knew what we were getting ourselves into.”

Nonetheless, the couple embarked upon a life journey that to date has



Seated in the living room of his 19th-century home, Randell Rummage is glad he didn’t “toss a match” into the structure when he first purchased it 22 years ago.



resulted in four children, 12 grandchildren, and an 850-acre, 100-cow dairy operation. And while his family tree has exceeded Randell’s expectations, he says the dairy industry has been a different story.

“I never would have guessed when I started dairying that it would decline as much as it has,” Randell says. “The ’70s and ’80s were great decades [for Southeastern dairy producers]. We could do no wrong. But in recent years, it has become difficult for the smaller farmer like me to compete with these mega-dairies like you find in the Midwest and western states. With land and fuel prices the way they are, not to mention urban encroachment, it’s a tough row to hoe.”

But Randell is quick to point out that, while challenging, the industry has provided him with a wealth of experiences and friendships and has taught him the importance of the cooperative system.

“I can remember back in high school when Daddy used to haul my milk to town in the back of a Ford car on his way to work,” says Randell. “In the spring, when [the local dairy processor] received too much milk,

they would send it back saying it had onions in it. They’d reject it. Well, there was nothing wrong with that milk. You could send it back the next day and they’d take it. Eventually, they started putting cake coloring in it to turn it pink so you couldn’t send it back. This was typical of the problems we had before we had milk co-ops. I think that some folks these days tend to take cooperatives for granted.”

Determined to have a say in the direction of his industry, Randell was elected to the board of Maury Farmers Cooperative in the mid-1970s, and in 1980, he became a director of TFC. He also served on the Dairymen, Inc., corporate board of directors as well as the Southeast Council of Dairy Farmers of America.

“I’ve spent a whole lot of time and energy in board meetings,” Randell says. “But, just like my decision nearly 50 years ago to become a dairyman, I don’t regret it. You have to make a certain amount of sacrifices in order to achieve something for your career and your family. That’s OK. Sometimes you have to go through some bad to get to the good.”

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Logs. What appeared to be very old logs. When the rotted paper and plaster peeled away, Randell and Judy were stunned to see 19th-century timbers obviously hewn with an axe, the gouge-mark of each strike clearly visible in the wood. Peeling back more layers, the couple exposed sturdy dovetailed joints tightly connecting the 28-foot-long logs. They discovered rafter beams carefully numbered with Roman numerals, most likely assembled on the ground as part of a skillful blueprint. Three keystone fireplaces emerged — two in the main house, and one in what the Rummages guessed was a servant’s quarters connected by a breezeway.

“As you can imagine, we were amazed and excited,” Randell says, smiling at the memory. “We didn’t know what we had exactly, but we knew enough to put the match away.”

What the Rummages had, they would soon find out, was one of the first homes built in what would become known as Maury County. Although a specific date cannot be attached to the structure, local historians figure the house was built by the Zion Presbyterian Group as early as 1807 after the Scotch-Irish pioneers headed west from South Carolina to settle on 25,000 acres secured by a Revolutionary War land grant.

“There’s apparently a good bit of history associated with this place,” says Randell. “We now think that this was the preacher’s house. I’m sure a lot of interesting conversations went on here.”

Convinced that they were now stewards of a slice of history, the Rummages began restoring the house almost immediately, and in 1995, they built an additional structure connected to the original house and moved in.

Randell says that, much like his career in the dairy industry, the restoration and maintenance of the old house were costly and sometimes frustrating, but rewarding and worthwhile all the same.

“If we had tossed that match, we’d probably have more money in the bank now,” Randell admits. “But wouldn’t life have been less interesting? Having this house has really put us in touch with the way things used to be. We can envision the struggles those people had to go through in the pioneer days. I mean, imagine how they would have benefited from a good chain saw! They had to scratch out a living from rough timberland, but they persevered and succeeded.”

“By the same token, I guess, Judy and I have scratched out a living in the dairy industry, and I don’t regret a minute of it. Sure, I could have gone to work at some local business or factory, and I’d be retired now, sitting on a riverbank with a fishing pole in my hand. But think of all the good times I would have missed! I can’t imagine life any other way.”