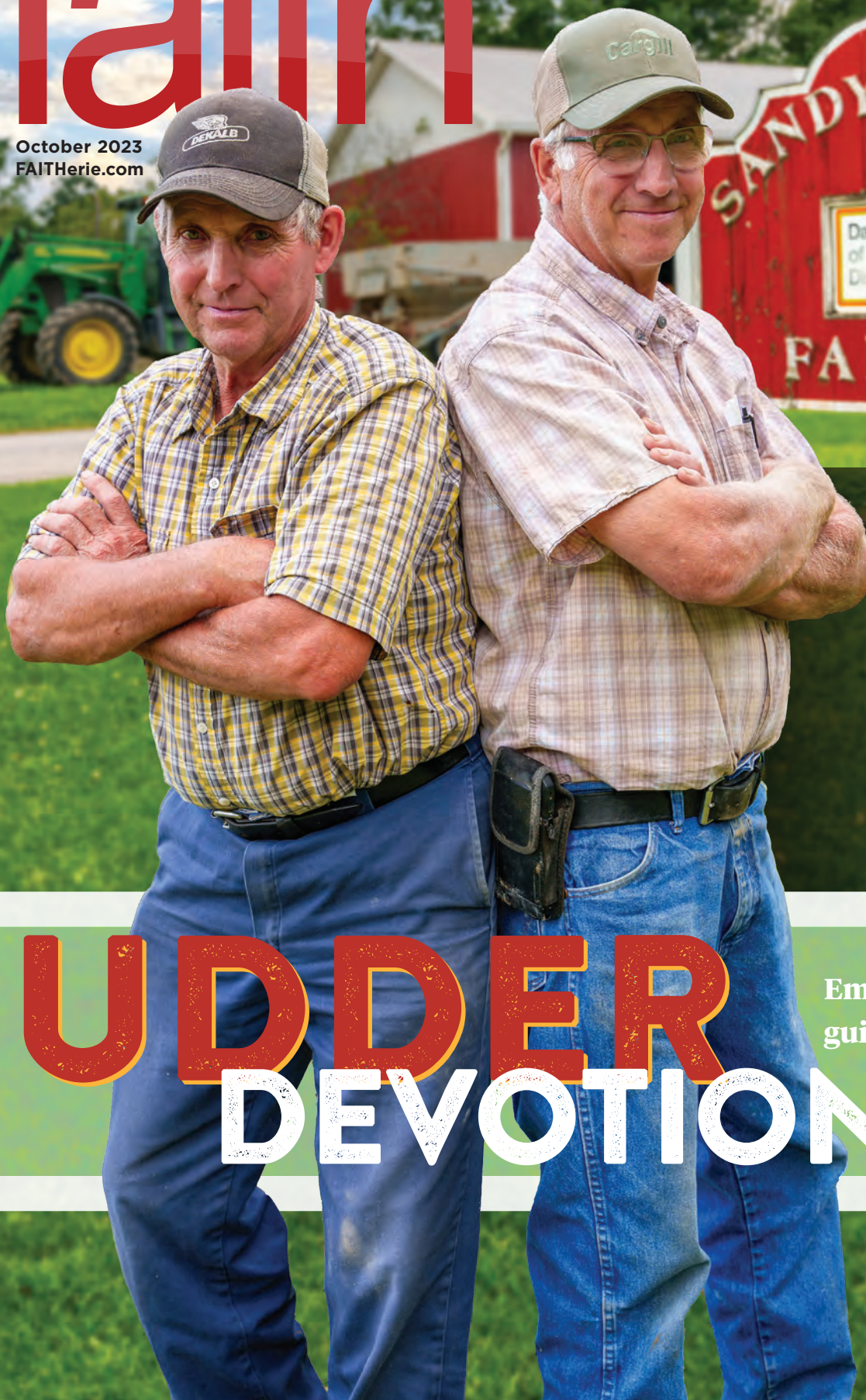


faith

October 2023
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EVER ANCIENT, EVER NEW

*A historical reflection on
pastoral planning*

ECHOES OF HOPE

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UDDER DEVOTION

Embracing God's
guidance

on the
farm

EMBRACING GOD'S GUIDANCE ON THE FARM

Bern Beichner's eyes sparkle with pride as he talks about the farm that has been in his family for generations. The farm's history traces back to the early 19th century when his grandparents' families immigrated from Germany in search of a better life. They settled in the United States in 1839, and in 1842, they bought a large piece of wooded property that would become the foundation of the family farm in 1908.

Bern and his brother Mark Beichner have been at the helm of Sandy Ridge Farms in Shipperville for many years now. They have seen it evolve from its early days as a cattle and hog meat operation to its expansion into the dairy business in 1976.

Bern reflects on the transition.

"The market for beef and hogs wasn't lucrative anymore. Dairy, on the other hand, showed great promise and had ample room for growth," he says.

Spanning nearly 800 acres, Sandy Ridge Farms, mostly used to grow alfalfa, corn, rye and soy to feed its nearly 400 head of cattle, 150 of which are milk cows. The remaining cattle are a mix of heifers — young dairy cows — and steers used for beef.

RICH IN ROUTINE

The milking process on the dairy farm unfolds with a harmonious blend of technology and tradition. As the dawn paints the sky in hues of gold and orange, Mark's two sons and nephew herd the cows into the milking station while Mark prepares the equipment. The familiar clatter of hooves striding in unison, punctuated by the occasional impatient moo, forms a rustic melody that heralds the start of another day's work.

Each cow, milked twice a day, wears a collar around its neck embedded with a computer chip, enabling automated identification and tracking. The cows walk through an antenna that reads their unique ID and tracks the milk production of each individual cow. Mark ensures that each cow is comfortable and content during the process. The milking routine is precise and quick. Once one round of cows has been milked, another is herded in within a few moments. There is a sort of rhythm to it all, a beat that Mark and his family team have mastered over the years.

"We take pride in producing over 4 percent butterfat milk," Mark explains.

This milk is far richer than the typical whole milk found at the grocery store, which contains 3.25 percent butterfat.

"It's loaded with vitamins and protein," he adds.

The entirety of Sandy Ridge Farms milk is sold to Land O'Lakes, where it is transformed into butter, cheese and cream. While they do not directly provide or sell to the community, they feel

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
VINCE DRAGONE



A close-up photograph of a black and white cow, likely a Jersey or similar breed, looking directly at the camera. The cow's face is the central focus, with its large, dark eyes and pink nose clearly visible. It is positioned behind a large pile of golden-brown hay. The background is a blurred barn interior, showing wooden beams and other cows in the distance. The lighting is warm and natural, highlighting the textures of the cow's fur and the hay.

UDDER

DEVOTION



Bern (left) and Mark (right) Beichner, owners of Sandy Ridge Farms.

"We were mortgaged to the max. We didn't know how we would ever put another barn together to survive," Bern recalls.

However, the community rallied, and with the help of more than 100 volunteers, a new barn was erected in just one day.

"If that isn't a work from God, what is? He gives you hardship, but there's always a window of light shining somewhere," Bern says, reflecting on the support they received during that time.

THE SAVAGE CHARGE

In 2007, another shadow was cast over the farm. An unpredictable incident with a bull brought the routine of daily life to a grinding halt.

On what began as an ordinary day, Mark was attempting to corral a young bull and a couple of steers. But this day, the bull defied expectations.

"He just didn't want to cooperate that day. I don't know what set him off," Mark recounts, a hint of an old fear echoing in his voice.

Caught off guard by the sudden aggression, Mark found himself at the mercy of a charging bull. Each charge from the 1,200-pound animal was a terrifying, powerful force, breaking Mark's ribs and knocking him unconscious, leaving him prone in the dirt of the pen.

When he came to, he found himself alone with the bull. His every instinct screamed at him to keep quiet, not to provoke the bull further. But he knew he needed help. He reached for the two-way radio and called out to Bern.

His voice, however feeble, echoed across the farm as an urgent plea for help.

His voice, however feeble, echoed through the farmland as an urgent plea for help. The sound roused the bull, its eyes snapping towards Mark, and an unsettling glint of aggression reignited.

great satisfaction in knowing that their hard work contributes to supplying quality dairy products to people far beyond their farm's borders.

To produce high-quality milk, the farm works closely with an animal nutritionist to develop the best recipes for their animal feed, ensuring their cows receive the best nutrition possible.

Mark lightheartedly shares, "Our cows have a better-balanced diet than most Americans."

WEATHERING STORMS

The brothers have weathered numerous challenges throughout the years, from economic downturns to accidents on the farm. Bern recalls a particularly trying event that tested their faith in the summer of 1988 when a lightning strike caused one of their barns to burn down.

The sound roused the bull, its eyes snapping towards Mark.

Bern, alerted by Mark's call, responded swiftly.

The bull, hearing the intrusion, charged again.

With quick thinking and nerves of steel, Bern maneuvered the tractor between Mark and the bull, effectively forming a steel barricade. This gave Mark the chance to summon his remaining strength, and he hobbled out of the pen, escaping the deadly showdown.

A medical helicopter transported Mark to Pittsburgh, where he remained in the hospital for 22 days.

Life on the farm is rife with danger, a fact Bern acknowledges somberly.

"When you're dealing with animals that weigh over a thousand pounds, accidents can happen," He says. His voice held concern and a touch of sadness as he spoke about his brother's ordeal.



Sandy Ridge Farms milks 150 cows twice per day.

EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS

News of Mark's encounter traveled fast among the close-knit community, sparking an immediate and profound response of support. Neighbors, friends and even strangers poured onto the farm, lending their hands and hearts to keep the farm running while Mark fought for his recovery.

"The response was overwhelming. People came out of the woodwork to help with the daily chores," Bern marvels, his words infused with immense gratitude.

Support didn't stop at physical labor. Upon hearing about the incident, their siblings — spread across the United States — initiated a prayer chain that reverberated across the community.

As Mark grappled with the aftermath of the bull attack, he was

confronted with the daunting task of returning to the barn — the scene of his near-fatal encounter.

"The first time I came back to the farm, I couldn't bring myself to step inside the barn. I stood at a distance, emotions welling up that brought me to tears," Mark confesses, his voice holding traces of past trepidation. "But day after day, I pushed myself, summoning every ounce of courage to gradually approach the barn again."

And with faith as their guide, Bern and Mark continued to nurture the farm, knowing that God had a plan for their lives and the land they worked on. The incident with the bull reinforced their belief in the importance of leaning on their faith and community during times of adversity.

"Every morning, we rely on our faith to navigate the day's



challenges. Trusting in the Lord is essential for the work we do here," Mark says.

They see God's hand in every aspect of their work, from the weather to the health and well-being of their livestock.

The farm has also been a place of profound spiritual reflection for Bern and Mark.

"I've prayed the rosary many times in the combine while harvesting the field," Mark shares. "If you don't have faith, you can't farm."

CULTIVATING TOMORROW

As they discuss the farm's future, they acknowledge the challenges of an ever-changing industry and economy. Technology has brought both advancements and complexities to the farm, but they remain committed to carrying on the legacy

of their ancestors.

"We're more diversified than just milking cows here. So that'll continue to grow," Mark explains.

Bern adds, "We want to leave a legacy that we always provide for our families, too."

Their love for the farm and the sense of community keep them going as they gradually pass on the responsibilities of the farm to their sons.

"You never retire; you just slow down," Mark says with a wink.

"You're not going to find a better place to raise a family than on the farm," Bern says.

As the conversation comes to a close, Bern and Mark look out over the fields that hold the memories of their ancestors and the dreams of future generations. Their story is one of resilience, hope, and the steadfast belief that, with faith and perseverance, the farm will continue to thrive for generations to come. †



Scan the QR code to watch *Udder Devotion*, the film.