



The life of a dairyman

BY 8:00 A.M. FRIDAY MORNING, WHEN most people are settling into the office and checking email, **Will Gilmer** is already five hours into his 12-hour work day.

The third-generation dairyman and his father milk around 210 Holstein dairy cows seven days a week, 365 days a year. Gilmer graduated from Mississippi State in 2001 with a Bachelor of Science of Agricultural Engineering Technology and Business.

“We have what’s called a 14/10 rotation. Milking begins at 3:30 a.m. and starts again at 1:30 p.m.,” Gilmer says. “This schedule frees us up in the evening to spend time with our families and out in our communities.”

Gilmer likes to stay active in the Shiloh community of Lamar County, Alabama where the farm is located. Currently, he’s the president of his county’s Farm Bureau. He also submits a weekly agricultural article to the local newspaper, *The Lamar Democrat*. He has also spent time in the national spotlight. In 2010, he was the Young Farmers and Ranchers Committee Chairman for the American Farm Bureau. In 2015, he was one of the first “Faces of Farming and Ranching” as a national spokesman for

the U.S. Farmers and Ranchers Alliance. And he’s kind of a big deal on Twitter.

Gilmer Dairy’s social media following is vast. Will Gilmer’s over 11,000 Twitter followers nearly surpasses the population of the entire 600-square-mile county where the dairy farm is located.

That desire to inform the public about dairy farming, he said, began during his time at Mississippi State. He started out as a computer science major, but midway through his college career, he decided returning to help run his family’s dairy farm was his life’s ambition.

“As a student at MSU, I realized there was a need to educate the general public about life on a dairy farm,” he said. “Many of the students who weren’t in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences had no idea where their food came from.”

First, Gilmer created a website for the farm. Over time, Gilmer blogged about daily life on the farm. Once social media took off, he started to engage with people via Twitter.

“Now I am conscious of branding,” he says, “But it all began with a sincere desire to get our story out there and say here’s what we do. We want to be ethical and good stewards of the land and good caretakers of our animals. And we want

a good end product that we can enjoy with peace of mind.”

The farm has been in the Gilmer family for over 100 years. Will’s great-grandfather started the farm on land purchased from his father-in-law, planted cotton as a cash crop, raised livestock, and grew food crops to feed the family and animals. Will’s grandfather, Gray, the youngest of nine children, returned to the farm in the 1950s after a successful career with the Tennessee Valley Authority. Gray Gilmer transitioned the farm to focus solely on dairy. Once Gray’s son, David, finished at Mississippi State University (also a graduate of agricultural engineering technology and business), he returned to help his father run the dairy. A few decades later, Will did the same.

“I worked for my father for about four years. He wanted to make sure I was fully aware of what I was getting myself into. Then he took me on as a partner in 2005. That’s how the business is today—it’s a partnership between my father and me.”

Will says the dairy is more challenging today than it was when he graduated sixteen years ago.

“It’s a global market now and margins are razor thin. You have to be on top of what you are doing. You can’t leave much up to chance. You have to know what your costs are and what production you can expect. You have to be a sound business person. You can’t just milk cows,” Gilmer said.

The farm has about 435 Holstein cows on 600 acres of pasture. At any given time, the farm has around 220 milking cows and produces a little over 3,000 gallons of milk every two days.

The Gilmer Dairy Farm participates in the Dairy Farmers of America Gold Standard Dairy program, which also incorporates the National Dairy FARM Program. The voluntary on-farm audit assesses areas including animal care and wellness, environmental stewardship, employee training, and milk safety and quality.

Gilmer met his wife, Joni, while at Mississippi State University. Joni teaches first grade and the couple has one son, age 11 and a daughter, age seven.