

Progressive Dairy

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If I have been on your farm in the past three decades, you most likely heard me quote my grandfather on my mother's side. He was the cow guy in my life: my mentor, my sounding board, my guiding light and my kicker-of-butts when I needed it. He was the king of one-liners, storytelling and the keeper of every corny joke ever told in the history of mankind.

He was why I got into cows in the first place. He loved it all his life, and I wanted to love it as much as he did. It has been a good choice, for I love what I do every day walking cows, balancing rations and teaching the next generation of nutritionists what I have learned and what the old man taught me in those early days. Recently, one of my customers told me I should write all those quotes down from my grandfather and share them because most of us need a refresher every now and then. So I did just that.

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"The only day on a dairy farm that goes exactly as you planned it, is the day after your funeral." This was his way of blowing off the pressure of change. No one likes change. By making a joke of it, he defused the situation, and the change did not fester.

"If it has an udder or a motor, it is just a matter of time before it breaks your heart." It is not a question if it will break, but when it will break. His saying kept us prepared for breakdowns. It is going to happen, so don't worry about it. Fix it and move on.

"Well, that's the most milk she is going to give. It is all downhill from here." He would say that almost every time a heifer calf hit the ground, and he was absolutely right. At that moment, the calf's genetic potential is at its maximum. It is then up to poor management and poor nutrition to rob that genetic potential of that individual animal. It reminded us that it is our responsibility to maximize that animal's genetic potential. We owe it to the calf.

"Never go up the silos until the pigeons come back." He only said this after the silos were filled. For a bunch of years, I just thought this was some kind of old wives' tale, but then in graduate school, we were reviewing the complex chemistry of fermentation, and it hit me like a ton of bricks. If the silo gas kills the pigeons, it will also kill humans that go up there too – kind of like using a canary in the coal mine to determine when it was safe to enter the silo.

"Make hay when the sun shines; sharpen the knives when it rains." This was a constant reminder to keep thinking and planning what will need to be done and to always be ready to go when the opportunities presented themselves. I never remember him saying we couldn't do a task today because he wasn't ready. Greasing the planter a month before we really needed it, always keeping the medicine cabinet full and always keeping enough mineral in the shed for the grinder batch are just a few examples he planned ahead for.

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"Family is everything, and you can't get away from them." Gramps was always happiest when family was around – the more the better. He lost a daughter (my mom) when she was just 35 in an auto accident. He was devastated, and we walked on eggshells around him for a month. Then, one afternoon, he announced we were having a family cookout that Sunday. It was like a light switch. From then on, it was family and friends over all the time. Old griefs were forgotten, and new friends were made every day.

"You always remember when the best ones die. Bad ones die too, you just don't remember them as well. Always be one of the better ones." I hear frequently on farms that their best cow just died, but never the worst cow. It is easy to forget the average. Therefore, you should always strive to be great, so folks remember you long after you're gone.

"You can measure a man's character by the extra bushels of corn per acre he claims to have made." It takes a strong character to always tell the truth, and braggarts are never trusted.

"Don't take life too seriously, you will never get out of it alive anyway." I always took this to mean live each day to the fullest because you just never know. Don't take yourself too serious because in the end, it just doesn't matter. Laugh at life because it sure is making fun of you.

"Good guys always finish first; it just takes them longer to get to the finish line." If you work hard, keep your nose clean and keep your focus, you will win the race. Those who lie, cheat, steal and break the rules might seem to win the race, but they are never there at the finish line when it counts.

"Drought years will worry you to death, but wet years will kill you." In 30 years of consulting, I have seen this many times. Dry years hurt the quantity, but the quality stays high and the cows milk well, which help cash flows. In the wet years, the quantity and the quality are poor, and the cows milk poorly, hurting cash flows. Worse, the wet year's issues seem to sneak up on you all at once while you spend months worrying about a drought affect.

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That is his farming list as far as I can recall. He had lots of sayings about attorneys, politicians, weathermen and the female persuasion, but I'll keep those to myself because this is a family magazine read by many of those mentioned folks. Besides, as Gramps always said, "You can tell a lot about a man by the company he keeps, the stories he tells and how he treats the things he loves." 🐾



- Steve Massie
- *Western Field Nutritionist*
- Renaissance Nutrition Inc.
- [Email Steve Massie](#)