



## SOUTH CAROLINA HERITAGE CORRIDOR

# These Cows Are Happy All Year

## *Crop Rotation Makes for High-Quality Milk at a Pelzer Dairy*

*Article by Paula Reel*

*Photos by Elizabeth Harm*

“April is the cruelest month,” opined poet T.S. Eliot in his signature modernist poem “The Waste Land.” He could have been giving voice to many differing groups. American taxpayers often find one day in April to be particularly cruel. Civil War historians note that the first shots fired on Fort Sumter, as well as both the death of the Confederacy and the president of the United States, occurred in April. Fans of William Shakespeare mourn his loss on April 23 annually.

But good things have happened in April, too. Take, for instance, the birth of Shakespeare on April 25, 1616; the establishment of the first colony in what is now the United States on April 2, 1513 (by Ponce de Leon); and the breaking through of the paddock fence by Tom Trantham’s cows in 1989 that led to his innovative dairying system and the development of some great-tasting milk.

Huh? Cows made the top three? Well, if you ask any of Trantham’s customers, they might tell you the cows’ breakthrough should rank even higher. You see, the dairy farmer was at his wits end in 1989, trying to figure out how to get his herd to produce more than the already-high levels of milk they were producing. Bankruptcy was knocking on his door. Frustration was setting in as he waited on a loan to buy chemicals he thought would help his cows’ production increase.

Then one spring day, the holsteins broke free of their confined feeding area into a seven-acre lot



destined to be chemically burned and planted with sorghum for silage. They devoured the lush foliage that had just sprouted. Besides having to corral some cows, Trantham had to deal with substantial extra production at the next milkings. What caused the increase? It seems the nutrients the cows had ingested in the new food source had boosted their milk production. What, Trantham wondered, if the cows had fresh plants every day?

Watching them in anger and disbelief, he discovered that they ate

only the top halves of the plants as they grazed. Concerned and more than a little curious, Trantham had the plants tested for nutrient values. Turned out that most of the plants’ nutrients were in the top half of the plant, so that’s all the cows chose to eat before moving on to greener, more nutritious pastures.

Years later, after much experimentation and several awards (Trantham’s efforts have been recognized internationally), Happy Cow Creamery uses only natural organic methods and an innovative



grazing protocol Trantham invented called Twelve Aprils, which provides the cows with tender, lush grazing materials year-round—as if it were April every month. The cows are moved daily from one small, high-quality grazing area to another, allowing them to eat only the top halves of the plants before moving on. The rotation process involves 29 areas, allowing the paddocks a regrowth break between feeding sessions.

Grazing cows equal non-stressed cows, which equals greater milk production. As we all know, nonstressed equals happy, thus the name of the creamery. Actually, Trantham attributes the moniker to Dan Ezell, a former Clemson Extension director who introduced Tom at a meeting as “the man with the happy cows.” Thus, Happy Cow Creamery was named, and a business was born in 2002.

With a maximum of 92 holsteins (Trantham usually maintains a smaller herd but an abundance of heifer calves last spring boosted the numbers), Happy Cow currently bottles 500 gallons of milk daily.



This keeps the Trantham family busy. All are involved in the process—a fact that gives Tom tremendous pride. His son Tom III runs the shop and his daughter-in-law Ashley is the tour guide for special groups who visit. Wife Linda is constantly doing whatever needs doing—and for the past 27 years, that’s been a lot. The hope is that Tom IV will continue in his grandfather’s path one day.

An Asheville native, Trantham dreamed of creating a great family dairy farm. When he visited this site 27 years ago, there were 566 dairies statewide. In 2005, there are only 83; five of those are expected to close by the end of the year.

Would he ever franchise his plan, procedures, protocol? “Sure,” he says. “There’s certainly been talk about doing that. I’d love to help save local businesses, and if this will do it, then great. The huge companies, whether they be selling toasters or shoes or milk. . . .” his voice trails off, then continues with a de-

termined note. “When you continue to lose your local small businesses, I see no future in that for us all.”

The Happy Cow Creamery provides a sales shop on Trantham’s 100-acre farm, where visitors can watch the movement of happy cows through the unique milking parlor. Milk is pumped just once, from the parlor into two pasteurizers in the old farm silo. Gravity takes over from there, moving the milk to the bottling room where it’s packaged for consumer consumption. An “old-timey” low-temperature vat pasteurization is utilized, which is more protective of the natural enzymes found in milk.

For those wanting to see the cream rise to the top, here’s good news: Happy Cow milk is not homogenized. There are no artificial vitamins or additives, either. The short trip from grass to glass ensures a delicious and nutritious product. Trantham attributes the creamery’s prosperity to the great taste and health benefits of his milk.

### ***Heritage Corridor Farmers Association***

**H**appy Cow Creamery is one of the visitor-friendly farms of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor’s Farmers Association. The HCFA is made up of more than 30 farmers and agricultural partners located within the 14 counties of the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor. The goal of the HCFA is to provide a fun, family-oriented educational experience. For more information about the members of the HCFA and scheduled events, visit the Heritage Corridor Web site: [www.sc-heritagecorridor.org](http://www.sc-heritagecorridor.org).



Travelers from all over come to buy it, and word is spreading. It doesn’t hurt that the store also stocks high-quality foods from other areas of the country: Amish butter from Ohio, cheese from Wisconsin, organic citrus from Florida and pure Vermont maple syrup. Local favorites include Tom’s own organically grown fruits and vegetables, hormone-free ground beef from a Pelzer farm, free-range chickens and eggs, pastured pork, and bread made by a Gaffney woman.

Happy Cow Creamery’s chocolate milk, made from high-quality chocolate and pure vanilla bean, is a specialty. Bring a camera to catch that great shot of a milk moustache.

Is April the cruelest month? Philosophical folks will debate that until the cows come home. Your

best bet is to come see for yourself. And don’t wait until April! ❖

*Paula Reel, Region One coordinator for the South Carolina National Heritage Corridor, grew up on a farm and loves taking her daughter to visit farms along the corridor. She lives in Pendleton.*

Happy Cow Creamery is at 332 McKelvey Road in Pelzer, just off Hwy. 25 south of Ware Place in southern Greenville County. The store is open Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-7 p.m.; Saturday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Tours are available on request by calling (864) 243-9699. Check [www.happycowcreamery.com](http://www.happycowcreamery.com) for updates on seasonal events and information about the dairy’s history and products.