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The Harrises were deeply involved in the purebred Holstein breeding business, using new techniques at the time such as artificial insemination and embryo transfers. Their prize bull, pictured here, was named Oak Green Virginian.



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"I guess one of the most appealing things about her is, and you can see it, she's proud," says Richard Harris of one of their prize Holsteins, Oak Green Elevation Sunday. This cow could produce 100 pounds of milk daily.

"She's Proud"

Sitting at their kitchen table, Martha and Richard Harris shuffle through photographs of Holstein cows. All have Oak Green as a prefix to their name. That's the name of the Harris Farm. If you see a Holstein with Oak Green in its name; it came from here, or at least its mother or father did.

Here's Oak Green Elevation Sunday. "Elevation was about the sire of the century, wasn't he honey?" asks Martha. "Still is," confirms Richard. This cow we're looking at is one of Elevation's daughters.

What makes her a winner? "Straight across the top line. Straight back legs. No black feet and no black tail. The tip of the tail has to be white and the feet have to be white," Martha rattles off the conformation standard by heart.

Richard Harris peers at the photograph. "Well of course pictures are not very good, but she's uh, certainly large enough, got style and balance and I guess one of the most appealing things about her is, and you can see it..." Now, here's the zinger: "She's proud."

Richard provides no more explanation than that; so Martha fills in the gap. "If you've been around animals, you know the ones who think they're great. They walk differently. They hold their heads differently, and they are. If you've ever seen the dog show on TV (Westminster) that's a good example. The dogs know that they've got it...Horses are the same. The ones that are great, know they're great."

Oak Green Elevation Sunday was not only proud and knew it, she could produce 100 pounds of milk per day. And, yes milk is measured in pounds not gallons. There are 8.6 pounds of milk to a gallon. It's a little heavier than water.

So, 100 pounds of milk a day translates into 11.6 gallons. The Holstein Association rates cows from Fair to Excellent. Back in 1959, when the Harrises came to Orange County on their honeymoon to see the Excellent-rated cow on Meadowfarm, there were few like her. "We had a lot of 'excellent' cows later," says Martha, "there began to be more excellent cows in the breed as breeding improved." The



Richard and Martha Harris as they appear today.

Photo by Phil Audibert

Harrises are a big part of the reason for that.

Looking at Oak Green Elevation Anita, you can see she has a compact udder for an animal that can produce 100 pounds of milk daily. "Very attached, not hanging down, a strong attachment," confirms Martha of the milk factory bag.

"Of course nutrition and a lot of things have changed

since then and there are herds now that'll average almost 80 pounds per day per cow," chimes in Richard. "And they milk three times a day instead of twice a day. Things have changed a lot as far as feed conversion, feed efficiencies and all."

He looks fondly at a framed photograph of their prized Holstein bull, Oak Green Virginian. Martha explains about "proving" a bull, comparing the milk production of his daughters to others of the same age in the same and in other herds. "If his daughters consistently gave more milk, than their herd mates, eventually you could get a positive proof on a bull...We were real involved in doing that for awhile."

The Harrises were also instrumental in putting together Virginia Genetics Inc., a group of the state's top 10 dairymen. "They were all outstanding with outstanding herds. And by using bulls that we raised, each of these 10 bulls that they had bred and raised, ...we were able to get positive proofs on I don't know how many over the years, from the entire group...another thing that made dairy more interesting than just milking cows."

Today, Richard and Martha Harris are focusing this same energy on something different...horses. "He loves genetics. He LOVES genetics," says Martha excitedly, adding, "We're into raising Thoroughbreds and racing." Currently 10-12 Oak Green born and bred racehorses are in training at Charlestown, where Richard and partner Carl Owens have just built a Holiday Inn. Is there anything these folks don't do?

Richard hauls out some photographs of his favorite hunter, Bouncer. There he is, at age 74, dressed in his Pink coat, he and Bouncer taking a coop with the Bull Run Hunt. You'd never know it to look at him...weathered tanned face, that aw shucks drawl, creased ball cap, grimy denim work clothes...just another Orange County dirt farmer hauling a load of barley to the co-op.

Richard Harris— still farming after all these years



Photos by Phil Audibert

At age 74, Richard Harris still actively farms, growing barley, corn, wheat, soybeans and beef cattle. Eight years ago, he retired from a long and distinguished career in dairy and purebred Holstein breeding. Below, a head of barley. Note the long whiskers, known as a beard, which can make combining the grain difficult. It's also dusty and will "itch you to death."

"Boy those heads are wet," says True Blue farmer and entrepreneur, Richard Harris as he rubs the chaff off a head of barley. The small grains, the building blocks of everything from bread to beer, roll around in his hand. They taste nutty and nutritious.

Richard points to the "beard," the whiskers on the barley head that make combining difficult. "Barley is very very dusty when you're combining it and that dust will just tear... you... up," he drawls in his signature Carolina accent. He pauses to make sure you understand. "It will itch...you...to...death and," his eyes twinkle, "it will also get in your pants." Big laugh.

Richard can't combine today; it

rained this morning, and skies continue to threaten. So, he's had to change his plans...yet again. He bounces along the farm road in his beat up pickup, blissfully ignoring a whining chime telling him he needs to buckle his seat belt or he has a door ajar or something.

"In agriculture, you never can guarantee the price of your product or the input cost. And of course the weather is always the big question...you can't guarantee the weather." He pauses to ram home his point. "The ONLY thing that I can guarantee you in agriculture is you're going to be fixing something...before noon every day." Ain't it the truth!

Today it's a grain drier. Fueled by



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natural gas, a heater has blown hot air through a chamber in the middle of the drier, bringing the temperature of the grain up to 135 degrees, wringing the moisture out of it. Then, a fan circulated outside air through the dry grain to bring it back down to 90 degrees. "But then it started raining and so I didn't want to pull all that moist air back through the barley to cool it back down," explains Richard. So he stopped the drier. Then the rain stopped; so he started the drier again.

Parked somewhere is a truckload of dry grain about 500 bushels worth that needs to go to the co-op. "I need to take a load of grain to town so I can have the empty truck to put that grain that's in that drier," continues Richard of this musical chairs game called farming, " 'cause it doesn't look like the sun is going to shine."

Richard Harris is playing this grain game, but not because he has to. At age 74, this nationally recognized dairyman was supposed to retire eight years ago. He farms because, well, that's what he loves to do.

Maybe it's the risk, that gamble with Mother Nature that puts that glide in his stride and that twinkle in his eye.

This wet weather has come at the most crucial moment in the barley growing process. A hail storm, heck, just a strong wind could ruin it. "I'm sure every farmer has been hurt more by the lack of rain rather than too much rain," says Richard as he points to a bare patch in the field. "Last fall, right after this grain was sowed, we had five inches of rain one weekend, and that much moisture swelled those kernels up to the point that they didn't germinate; they rotted."

Still, a drought is worse.

Richard Harris has always wanted to be a farmer. It was what he wanted to do when he entered N.C. State as an Ag major in the early 1950s. It was what he wanted to do when he met lifelong friend and business partner Carl Owens, who introduced him to Carl's high school classmates, Martha and Barbara. It was what he wanted to do when he married Martha and on their honeymoon, they came to Orange to see a cow.

Not just any cow, mind you; this was a special cow. "I was almost possessed by purebred Holstein cattle," admits Richard. "I wanted to breed some of the best or to see some of the best. We came to Orange County, Virginia on our honeymoon to see a particular cow. Her name was Minnow Creek Eden Delight, and she was owned by Jack Taylor who owned Meadowfarm."

And while the newlyweds were admiring this milk producing machine, they decided to have a look around. "Alfalfa was just the most beautiful, and the



Contributed photo
The Harris and Owens families as they appeared in front of Morton Hall shortly after they arrived in Orange County in 1959. From left to right, Richard and Martha Harris holding daughters, Sharon and Ellen; Barbara and Carl Owens, with son Wynn.

best looking corn that we ever saw," remembers Richard, fondly. "We decided maybe this would be a good place for us to look around for a farm." Martha, Richard's wife, business partner and best friend for the past 51 years, remembers being invited to lunch with Mr. and Mrs. Frank Walker at Rosni Farm. The Walkers had quite a reputation for breeding high quality Holstein heifers.

Richard and Martha walked up to the front door, and noticed that a servant was polishing the brass door knob. Later, the same servant donned a white jacket and served lunch. "At that time, Martha decided maybe the dairy business wouldn't be too bad," says Richard with that twinkle. "That was my introduction," confirms Martha, shaking her head at her own naiveté.

Whoa! Reality check. Dairying has to be the hardest job in all of agriculture. "I got up at 3:30 for 30 years," continues Richard "You never quit till dark. So

you hurried up to go to bed so you could hurry up to get up." That 3:30 wake up call was merciless: every morning...flu mornings, birthday mornings, Sunday mornings, Christmas mornings, ice storm mornings...every single morning for 30 years. That's the reality of dairying.

So, Carl Owens and Richard Harris, up and coming dairy farmers in their early 20s, both newlyweds with families on the way, formed a partnership. Richard remembers when they first approached a real estate agent. "He didn't take us out to see a farm; he immediately took us down to the bank and introduced us to the banker. He'd sized us up right quick. He knew we had to have some help."

Richard had just come off renting a dairy farm in North Carolina. "I was paying \$300 a month for this farm and I just thought that was money down the hole. I didn't realize that it was going to cost me \$1,500 a month to own one," he says wide eyed. "I got an education real quick."

As luck would have it, a letter came in the mail, addressed to a Richard "Hash." It had actually been forwarded to Richard by his sister the postmistress in



Contributed photo
Costing more than \$200,000 brand new, this machine can combine a 22-foot wide swath. Richard Harris says it's almost impossible for young people to start farming from scratch with those kinds of equipment costs, not to mention the price of land nowadays.

New London, NC. It was from a Lester Napp of Orange County offering his farm, Morton Hall with 570 acres. The realtor had not shown this farm, because it was not a dairy farm to begin with. But that oversight turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Napp allowed the Harris and Owens to use some money they'd

scraped together to build a milking parlor as a down payment on the farm. "We built a modern up-to-date milking parlor, and we were years ahead right there," says Martha gratefully. "So that made it possible for us to come and for us to get started."

That was 1959. For the next 10 years, the Harris and Owens partnership worked the dairy farm together. The Owens family lived in a tenant house on the property, and the Harrises lived in Morton Hall, which served as Confederate General Richard Ewell's headquarters during the winter of 1863-64.

Around 1969, Carl Owens bought a nearby farm with his brother, moved there and the dairy partnership ended. But to this day, Richard and Carl are close friends and business associates in many other ventures.

The Harrises built their current home in 1971 and rented Morton Hall out until "eventually we had it taken down; it became so dangerous," says Martha. Also during this period the Harrises bought Hawfield at the foot of Clark Mountain, and another farm near downtown True Blue.

At the height of their dairy business, the Harrises were milking 700 cows twice daily. They had a dozen or more employees and were working three different farms within three miles of each other. "It was a very, very, very, very busy life," says Martha emphatically. "It was a good life for about 40 years."

What made the 3:30 alarm clock bearable was the purebred Holstein breeding side to their operation. "We were in the purebred Holstein business," explains Richard. "That's what motivated us to be in the dairy business to start with. I just wanted to be able to breed a better cow and own better cattle." Did he hope to breed the best Holstein in the world? "Well, I wanted to try," says Richard with that twinkle. "We never did have the very best in the world but we had some very good ones." Out comes a photo album filled with, not family photos, but pictures of prize cows and bulls.

Martha was just as involved in the breeding operation as Richard was.

"We were just in it at the right time," she continues.



Contributed photos
Martha and Richard Harris's college photos taken in 1956 and 1955.



"It made dairying tremendously more interesting than just milking cows twice a day." This was cutting edge stuff in the early 1970s, "when artificial insemination was developed and the embryo transplant was developed, and then super ovulation," fills in Richard.

He explains super ovulation: you give a cow a series of injections that make her ovulate multiple embryos. Then, using collected bull semen, they would fertilize the multiple embryos. "Then you flush the embryos out and put them in recipients. That one cow could have ten or 12 off spring a year." In fact they remember going to a sale in Texas where a prize cow sold for \$1.1 million. She came with an entourage of surrogate moms, all pregnant with her calves.

The Harrises traveled to conventions and sales all over the country, and they usually took the kids, who numbered two daughters and two sons by now. At one point Richard Harris was President of the Virginia State Dairyman's Association. They traveled to upstate New York to learn about marketing. "The people who really drove the market were Wall Street investors because of this embryo transfer and everything," says Richard. The Harrises won so many trophies and plaques they didn't know where to put them all.

And so who minded the store when they went away on these trips? "We could be away usually four or five days maximum," remembers Martha. "You could leave things for about that length of time before disaster struck."

And sometimes disaster did strike. Two barns burned down, both of them intentionally set. In the first one, they lost 34 animals; the second, the calf barn, they saved them all. "They were both set by the same person," says Martha through pursed lips, adding that the arsonist is currently locked safely behind bars.

As are the suspects who went on a three-county killing spree at small country stores back in the late 70s. The two elderly defenseless owners of the True Blue store, right next to the Harris's third farm, were gunned down in cold blood. "Richard is the one who found them that day," says Martha quietly. "He could

see her lying on the floor...That was a bad day."

But today is a good one, despite the changes in plans, despite the rain. "We don't do things in a big way any more," says Richard as we clunk along in his pickup. His two sons lease his 1,500 acres from him and with tongue firmly planted in cheek, he says, "Daddy has to go out and RENT his."

Richard seems content to grow barley, corn, wheat and soybeans. He also keeps 58 mixed breed beef cattle on the side. He does all this with the help of one man, James Lewis, who started work with Richard at age 16.

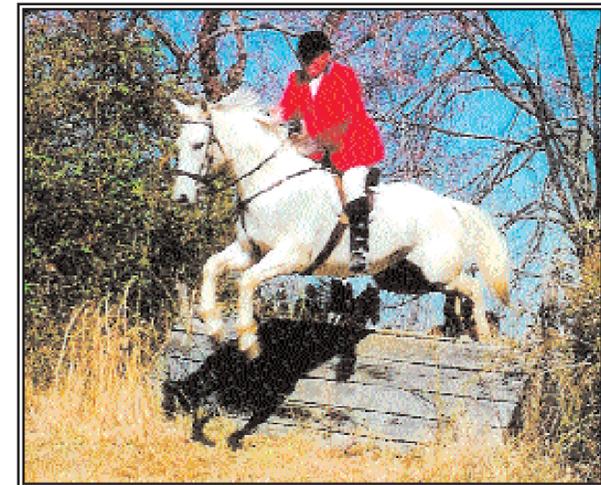
"Daddy just does what he's able to do and I'm just thankful that my health permits me to do what I enjoy doing. You see, I was supposed to retire eight years ago," says Richard.

Ask him about young farmers today, starting out from scratch like he and Carl did back in 1959, and he'll say it's impossible. "You've got to generate enough income to pay your expenses PLUS service that debt. It would be difficult now." Besides, land values have skyrocketed.

And things are so much more complicated nowadays. Richard and Martha think back to a blizzard that happened in March of 1962, when 32 inches of snow fell. Naturally, the power went out. Here they had a herd of bawling cows and no way to milk them.

In those days a kicker baler had its own gasoline motor. "We took that motor off the bail kicker, siphoned gas out of the trucks and the cars; there was no electricity to pump gas, and we put that gasoline motor up where that electric motor was and that's how we milked," says Richard. Here it was 0 dark hundred in the morning; they couldn't even see to milk. "So, with the woodstove in the main house, Martha was able to melt paraffin and make homemade candles," continues Richard.

Martha remembers that day well. "All the children's crayons, everything we could find in wax we melted it and dipped string and made candles." Of course, for sanitary reasons, they had to dump the milk. But at least the herd was quiet and content, and nobody was crying over spilt milk.



Contributed photo
Richard Harris still foxhunts regularly. Here, he and Bouncer take a coop with the Bull Run Hunt.