



(Bottom to top): Char Rabe, Brandi Johnson, and Amy Hildebrandt

Merri Milkmaids

Being a livestock kid from a different county, I had not spent a lot of time outside the beef barn at the Boone County fair until I started my position at the Winnebago-Boone Farm Bureau over a year and a half ago. However, since I have had the opportunity to learn about the fair, I have learned that there is one booth you do NOT want to miss: the Merri Milkmaids Ice Cream booth.

Since 1973 the Merri Milkmaids have been serving ice cream and promoting dairy at the Boone County Fair. It all started with several dairy farmers' wives and their passion for the dairy industry. Char Rabe, an original Merri Milkmaid, recalls the day her neighbor, Joy Harris invited her to a meeting, but at the time, she wasn't quite sure what she was getting herself into.

“It turned out to be the Merri Milkmaids and they were discussing serving ice cream at the fair,” said Rabe. “It was the first year they were doing that, and I have been involved with the fair business ever since!”

At that time there were between 20-30 members of the Merri Milkmaids. At this current time, there are two active members of the club: Char Rabe of Caledonia and Gen Ellingson of Poplar Grove. These two ladies have been making sure the ice cream booth at the fair runs smoothly for the last 43 years. This year, they have decided to hand this task down to two young, capable dairy farm wives: Amy Hildebrandt of South Beloit and Brandi Johnson of Poplar Grove. Hildebrandt and Johnson are very excited to take on the tradition. However, they know that they have some big shoes to fill.

“I think I can speak for both of us when I say we feel very honored that we were asked to do this,” said Johnson. “We want to continue doing things the way Char and the other ladies have

done them as well as give back to the community. Because we are dairy farmers, we would also like to promote dairy products as much as we can. We would like to get a few more farm wives, even if they are not dairy farm wives, to join Amy and I. We are very open and are always looking to grow our group.”

Back when the group started selling ice cream, it sold for 25 cents per “dip” of ice cream. Now, you can get 2 scoops of ice cream for \$2. The ice cream comes from Muller Pinehurst Dairy in Rockford. Since they started selling ice cream, their menu has not fluctuated much. They experimented with sherbet once, but it melted too quickly to sell. They stick to the same 8-10 flavors they started with in 1973. Since the beginning, the number one seller has been Butter Pecan. However, Char Rabe’s favorite will always be chocolate.

Due to the dwindling number of dairy farm wives to work the booth, North Boone Booster club helps fill the shifts at the ice cream booth. Different clubs from school come in and work the three hour shifts. The Merri Milkmaids then award three \$750 scholarships to graduating North Boone seniors every year.

Aside from the scholarships, the Merri Milkmaids also make large donations to the Salvation Army and local food pantries every year.

“You would be surprised how many kids and maybe some adults don’t know where their ice cream comes from,” said Johnson. “For some of them, the grocery store is the furthest that they see, they don’t see the processing and they definitely don’t see the cow that it comes from. With us being in that business, we would like to promote the dairy industry a little bit more.”

Being able to make a connection at the fair between the cows in the dairy barn and the ice cream from the Merri Milkmaids is important to Hildebrandt and Johnson. They hope to make both places more interactive and educational for consumers.

As far as future plans go for the Merri Milkmaids group, “we want to keep things the way they are but we are always open to suggestions and ideas. I think Char and the other women have done a great job and we want to continue and honor what they have started.”

“Even though our cows are gone, I am still very passionate about the industry,” said Rabe and she is confident in leaving this project in the hands of these young and energetic women.

As for this beef girl, I may not share the same dairy background as these women, but I can sense their passion and I can share their excitement about the future of this project. So, make sure you stop by the Merri Milkmaid booth at the Boone County Fair, say “Hello” to the new leaders, and thank a dairy farmer for the creamy goodness! (Published July 29, 2016)

Update

Since this article was published Char Rabe has passed away and the price for two scoops of ice cream has increased to \$3.00. (Updated August 6, 2020 by Chloe Gustafson, WBFB 2020 Intern)