



## The *New* American Farmer

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Tom Trantham, Twelve Aprils Dairy Farm

Pelzer, South Carolina

### Summary of Operation

- 75 dairy cows (*Holsteins*) on 95 acres; on-site creamery and farm store
- Management-intensive grazing on 60 acres
- Seeded grass and legume pasture divided into 25 paddocks

### Problems Addressed

*Focus on production, not profit.* High feed costs for total mixed ration and low milk prices squeezed Trantham to the point of bankruptcy, despite his impressive herd milking average. “I was advised by financiers that there was no way I could make it,” he recalls. “They told me to file for bankruptcy.”

It got so bad, a despondent Trantham used to go to bed at night and hope the dairy would burn down.

### Background

Tom Trantham was South Carolina’s top dairyman who, while producing more milk than anyone else, lost as much money as if he were walking around town with a perpetual hole in his pocket. Despite an annual herd milking average that reached as high as 22,000 pounds, Trantham couldn’t pay his bills because his high-production confinement system demanded expensive specialty feeds and other inputs. Most of the costs went into a total mixed ration (TMR) that required as many as 17 ingredients, such as a 20-pound bag of beta carotene that cost \$50.

Trantham, who used to manage a grocery store in California, moved east and began dairying in 1978. His original system focused on production — and lots of it. Following the standard practices, he grew forages and bought grain and fed them to his herd of confined cows. He designed a manure collection system and spent uncountable hours milking to keep up the herd average. His low return and debt load brought him to his knees and took a toll on his marriage.

The expensive TMR supplemented the forage he grew each season and stored in his silo. The work was endless, and the bills were monumental. Those costs were made more difficult to offset by plummeting milk prices.

His financial quagmire ended when he switched to management-intensive grazing (MIG). Although he produced a lot less milk — he dropped to a 15,000-pound herd average one season — he could pay his creditors and even stash away some profit because his input costs were lower. Trantham has documented as much as a 42-percent reduction in input costs in his best grazing year. “I was down in milk production, but I was able to pay my bills,” he says. “I kept doing things less conventionally, and yet things kept getting better.”

### Focal Point of Operation — Pasture management and on-site creamery

When Trantham ran out of money or credit to buy fertilizer in 1994, he took an old manure spreader from the back of his barn and treated one of his pastures. That April, the field was lush with native

grasses and young weeds. That April, lamb's quarter and other young weeds appealed to Trantham's cows. After he turned them out in the pasture, they grazed rapidly and efficiently.

"I said to myself, 'If farmers could have 12 Aprils, they could make it on pasture,' " he says. The idea took hold: Given the optimum growing conditions of South Carolina's April, pasture species could sustain a healthy herd of milkers.

To this day, Trantham continually refines and enhances his pasture system, seeking those perfect April conditions every month of the year. In succession, Trantham seeds grazing maize, sudangrass, millet, small grains, alfalfa and clover, experimenting with new varieties if they seem to fit. Variables such as weather determine that no two years are exactly alike, but on average he makes five to seven plantings a year, seeding six to eight paddocks with the same crop on successive dates.

When Trantham first went into MIG, he created 7- to 10-acre paddocks with wire fencing. Working with SARE-funded researchers at nearby Clemson University, he devised a forage seeding system relying on small grains, sorghum and alfalfa to offer his cows succulent growth every month in new pastures.

"You take a calendar and put down when to plant what forage, when it'll be big enough to graze and for how many days," he says. "I tried berseem clover last year, and it grows fantastic in the winter. I grew black oats, it looked like carpet. You have to think about what's going to grow in your area."

Trantham recommends that producers talk to local researchers and extension agents about what grains and forages grow well at various times of the year.

"I find the earliest thing I can plant, the lat-

est thing I can plant and the things that grow well in between," Trantham says. "You'll find there's something that will grow in 12 months" in most areas. "The buffalo survived all year long."

He joined a SARE-funded group that toured dairy farms in Ireland in 1999 and came home with plans to shrink his paddocks. His 70 acres of grazing used to be divided into eight paddocks, but now he has 25 paddocks ranging from 2.5 to 3.2 acres that are grazed for only one day at a time.

"I used to be opposed to moving fences daily because of the increased labor," he says. "But in Ireland I found out that if you put a herd in 10 acres, they will walk that entire pasture eating only the best forage. That first milking will be great but production will decrease from there, until the herd is moved again."

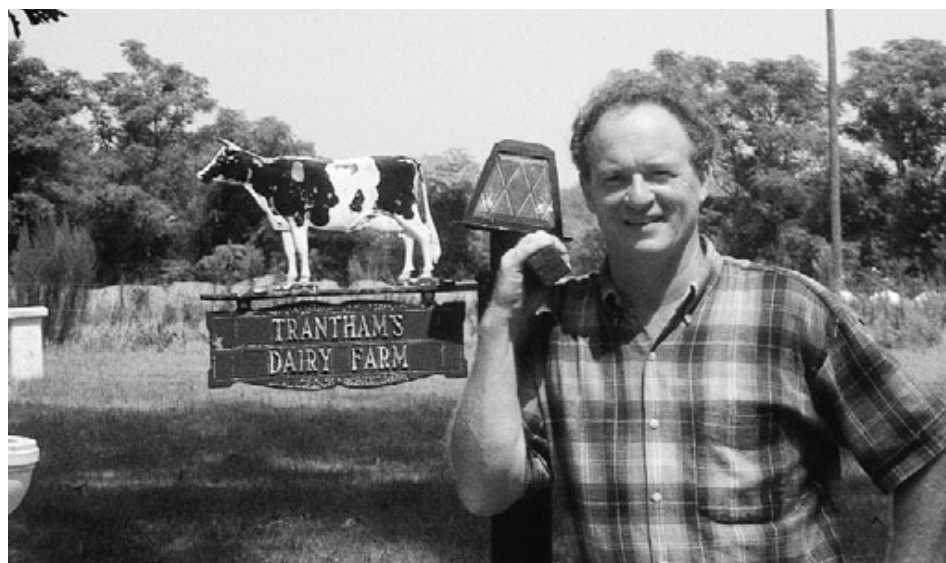
In 2002, Tom and his wife, Linda, and Tom's son, Tom Trantham III, opened Happy Cow Creamery at the farm. Trantham converted his old silo into a milk bottling plant, and opened an on-farm store

where customers purchase milk and other farm products. The creamery has become so popular that they have been bottling milk up to three times a week, and are serving customers from across South Carolina and surrounding states.

### Economics and Profitability

Clemson researchers compared Trantham's management-intensive grazing to his former confinement system and found a 31 cents per cow per day savings under a grazing system. In 1994 and 1995, the herd grazed 437 days, leading to a \$15,805 savings for Tom's 70 cows.

Grazing translates to considerably more income for Trantham. When he was 23, he managed a market in California for \$16,000 a year, a respectable 1960s-era salary. Throughout eight years as a conventional dairyman in South Carolina, Trantham never netted as much as he had earned as market manager. After switching to management-intensive grazing, he began netting \$40,000 annually. "That's an extra good year," he admits. "And that's on top of the low cost of living here."



Person Roland

*Tom Trantham has influenced scores of experienced and beginning dairy farmers through presentations at conferences and as the subject of magazine stories.*

Trantham's goal: To milk 60 cows and earn \$60,000 a year, with fewer hours of work. "I'm going to do it, too," he says. The store should help.

From October 2002 to October 2003, sales at the creamery increased 307 percent, Trantham says.

### Environmental Benefits

When Trantham grew his own feed, he spread about 150 pounds of purchased fertilizer each year — even when fertilizer labels called for 125 pounds. "I spent thousands of dollars to put out more chemical fertilizer than needed because I had to be the top producer," he says.

In 16 years as a grazer, Trantham has purchased commercial fertilizer just once for a new alfalfa field. Allowing the manure to be spread by the herd as they rotate through paddocks has contributed to soil testing high in fertility without purchased inputs. A soil tester told Trantham his soil was the highest quality with no deficiencies, something he had never seen in his 30 years in the business.

The manure no longer poses a containment problem for Trantham. He directs manure-laden wastewater — from washing down the milking parlor twice a day — into a lagoon, which he mixes with well water and sprays on newly planted or freshly grazed paddocks. The water is filled with high levels of nutrients from the animals themselves. It's a far cry from Trantham's past practice of dumping truckloads of manure in his cornfields.

"It was excessive, with runoff and pollution knocking on my door," he says. "In the future, we won't be able to farm like that."

On the fields, cow pies last no more than a week. Cows graze "like crazy" two weeks later.

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### Community and Quality of Life Benefits

Trantham went from a life of despair to one where he is challenged to hone a profitable system year after year. He takes great pleasure when he opens a new paddock gate and watches "his girls" graze with gusto. "I feel like I'm goofing off instead of working because what I do is so enjoyable," he says. "Cows grazing with that intensity will make some milk."

Trantham has influenced dozens of beginning dairy producers by holding up his farm as an example. Frequent tours and pasture walks have prompted at least a few dairy producers to try grazing systems. He has reached national audiences by speaking at conferences around the country, where he has shown slides depicting green pastures and contented cows to rapt audiences that seem to appreciate his sense of humor as well as his system. In 2004, he and Linda began promoting farm tours as another revenue source.

In 2002, Trantham was named winner of SARE's Patrick Madden Award for Sustainable Agriculture.

### Transition Advice

Dairy operators considering switching to pasture-based systems should not make a cold-turkey plunge. A producer can realize savings, Trantham says, by turning his herd out on good pasture for just one month.

"The first day I went to 'April' in November, I saw a reduction in input costs that day,"

Trantham says. "Switching to 12 Aprils is not like taking a drastic chance. It's like tip-toeing into cold water. Once you're in, it's not bad."

A newcomer to MIG should talk to other graziers and take pasture walks. After absorbing all you can from others, take a walk in your own pasture and see the possibilities. Plant a forage crop and buy fencing. Beginning graziers should consider grazing for a few months of the year to introduce the system. "Before you buy your Lincoln, you're going to have to drive to town in a Chevrolet," he says.

### The Future

Responding to customers, who line up outside the crowded store on Saturdays, waiting for room to enter, Trantham and son, Tom, plan to open another store in or near the city of Greenville. The original store is open six days a week. "It's incredible how our business has grown," Linda Trantham says.

■ Valerie Berton

### For more information:

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