

# The real face of an innovative industry

By Christy Couch Lee

## RED LARSON: The Real Face of an Innovative industry

**You can see it in his eyes.**

*Kindness. Wisdom. Strength.*

*Those eyes have seen a lot in his 91 years in the dairy industry—the tough times and the good.*

*His family weathered the Depression. He served in World War II and watched friends leave, never to return. He has sat across the table from U.S. Presidents on behalf of the American dairyman, and he's rolled up his sleeves to do the tough work alongside dairymen just like himself, for the betterment of the industry.*

*Louis "Red" Larson is the owner and president of Larson Dairy Inc., Okeechobee, Fla. Today, along with two sons and two grandsons, Larson owns and manages 10,000 acres and milks 7,600 cows three times a day.*

*He's experienced a great deal in his lifetime. And the entire U.S. dairy industry is better because of it.*

### HUMBLE BEGINNINGS.

Larson was born in Brandon, S.D., where his family raised corn, oats, steers and hogs, and fed a few cows, selling the cream to a local creamery.

"My grandparents and great-grandparents immigrated from Norway and settled in the Dakota Territory shortly after the Civil War, on the promise of a quarter-section of flatland," Larson says.

Larson's father, Louis Edwin Larson, inherited the farm, but lost the land after three years of severe drought.

"My mom's father was a blacksmith, and he was brought down to Hollywood, Fla., to drain swamps," Larson says. "So we packed up everything and moved to Florida when I was 8, and my dad went to work with my grandfather at the foundry.

"I never lost interest in the cows," Larson continues. "When they loaded that last load of cows from our farm in South Dakota—well, it hurt to see them go."

As a young man, Larson began working on a local dairy farm, hand-milking 30-40 cows twice a day for \$2 a day, plus room and board.

Most of the cattle at that time were shipped in from the southern states of Tennessee, Mississippi and Georgia, Larson says.

"They were a non-descript Jersey type of cattle, with some native cattle bred into them," he says. "The man I worked for had survived the Depression and bottled his own milk, trading on Miami Beach. He upgraded his stock, and the quality of his cattle began to improve. In the early '40s in this area, either you sold your milk in bottles, or you sold to Borden Dairy or Southern Dairy – that was about it."

But World War II changed that.

"The advent of the war brought the growth of bottling companies," Larson says. "Many farms that had bottled their own began selling directly to proprietary bottlers."

### CHANGES OF THE WAR.

World War II brought changes in Larson's life, as well. He was commissioned into the Army Air Corps, where he became a B-26 pilot.

"I was never in combat, as I trained at the end of the war for invasions of Japan," Larson says. "None of us would have probably survived the invasion of Japan. But we dropped the bomb, and that stopped all of that.

"The realism of the war certainly changed life," he continues. "A couple of my buddies volunteered to join the Marines. When boys you go to school with get killed, it changes you."

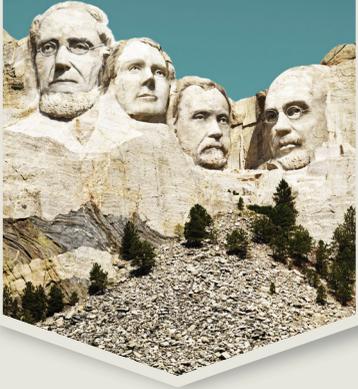
Larson returned to Florida, enrolled at the University of Miami and began tryouts for the university football team.

"Then, I met a little lady, and everything changed," he says. He married this "little lady," Reda, on Oct. 5, 1947.

Nearly two years before, a friend and dairy farmer lost his brother in the Battle of the Bulge in Belgium. "[In 1947] he asked if I would come to the farm and take



*Trained as a B-26 pilot and losing buddies to war, the reality of it all changed Red's life perspectives.*



## REAL FACES OF DAIRY

The Faces of Dairy campaign is a year-long project designed to honor and celebrate the past, present and future people—well known and lesser known—shaping the American dairy industry through their personal stories. It provides a forum to highlight the many advancements creating an exciting and vibrant industry serving a global market.

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his brother’s place, and I realized it was my chance,” Larson says. “Six weeks after we were married, Reda became a dairy farmer’s wife.”

Larson worked for a few different dairies through the years. Then, in 1949, an elderly farmer asked Larson to become his partner on his 400-cow dairy—on which Larson brought his own 100 head.

“He had a contract with a bottling company that furnished all of the milk to Key West, which at that time, was an army camp. The first thing they wanted to drink when they hit shore was milk,” Larson says. “We had a good contract—62 cents a gallon to deliver to Key West. We started by hauling 10 gallon cans, and moved up the ladder to a holding tank, then to a pipeline milking system.”

Urban expansion led to Larson and his partner selling their farm in 1954. He purchased a farm in Palm Beach County—two miles from the ocean—and began producing milk with 124 cows and one bull.

In 1956, he and several local dairy farmers hired Cornell University agricultural economist Leland Spencer to help develop the first federal milk marketing cooperative in Florida.

“This did away with the handler pool and established a market-wide pool,” he says. “We had 60-80 small dairy farms surrounding Miami, Palm Beach and Hollywood involved.”

Urban expansion continued. And several dairy farms relocated to the Lake Okeechobee area.

“It was a longer haul, but the land was plentiful,” Larson says. In the late ‘60s, Larson bought his first 2,000 acres in the area for \$78 an acre.

“We were still operating two dairies in Palm Beach County at the time,” he says. “But my wife and four children didn’t want to move to Okeechobee yet. So I left my family on Monday and would visit farms—making three trips a week. In 1971, we received an offer we couldn’t refuse, and the family moved.”

## ESTABLISHING THE LEGACY.

From 1960 to 1982, Larson purchased 37 farms, including land, cattle and equipment. At one point, he and his family were milking 6,000 cows.

“By 1982, we had more farm than myself and my two sons could manage,” Larson says. “We realized we didn’t need to bite off more than we could chew, and we needed to improve from within.”

Larson and Reda formed a C corporation and began to distribute stock to their children.

“As the years went by, our children became equal owners in the corporation,” he says. “Our son, Woody, owns four dairies of his own, aside from his interest in the parent company. His two

sons, Jacob and Travis, also operate Larson family dairies. Our other son, John, is also involved in the business.”

Larson’s daughters, Kathy Cooley and Barbara Stuart, reside in Ocala and Orlando, respectively.

## YEARS OF SERVICE.

Larson has been instrumental in working on behalf of dairymen. He worked with local dairymen to form a cooperative to end the Florida Milk Commission, which set milk prices in the state.

“The issue was on the front page of the Miami Herald more often than it wasn’t,” he recalls. “The milk dealers were getting a few bigger

## SHARE YOUR STORY

Throughout 2016, the Real Faces of Dairy project encourages everyone to share their dairy story and upload pictures of what dairy means to them. The dedicated website will feature interactive activities, including photo and essay contests. Visit [www.realfacesofdairy.com](http://www.realfacesofdairy.com).

companies in, and they were becoming involved in the political process. I was able to sign some dairymen up. Some, after hearing about the cooperative, would say, 'I don't think so.' And I even had one farmer tell me to get off his farm. But we got it done."

Larson eventually served as president of the cooperative, and then began his tenure on the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) board, of which he eventually served a two-year term as president.

He also served on the U.S. Department of Agriculture Dairy Advisory Committee during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, where he helped develop present-day milk marketing techniques.

"During that time, we made a lot of progress," Larson says. "We overlaid the agenda of the NMPF with the Dairy Advisory Committee. We were able to get the midyear adjustment put into the parity index program, and now the pen that President Carter used to sign the bill hangs on my office wall."

The Larsons continue the legacy of serving the industry, by contributing their time to the dairy and cattlemen's associations on the local, state and national levels.

Larson has been recognized numerous times for his service to the industry, including being named the Southeast Farmer of the Year at the Lancaster-Sunbelt Expo in Moultrie, Ga. He was also inducted into the Florida Agricultural Hall of Fame and Dairy Hall of Fame, and was named the University of Florida (UF) College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Alumni of Distinction and Dairyman of the Century.

His family also established three endowments—a \$1.5 million gift—at the UF Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Because of this gift, the dairy science building will now be known as the L.E. "Red" Larson Dairy Science Building for posterity.

## CHANGING TIMES.

Yes, Larson has seen a lot in his 91 years. Of all of the changes, he believes improvements in milk quality have made the greatest contributions to the industry.

"The standards we have now were unheard of 50 years ago," he says. "The ability to get it done and the methods of operation—the refrigeration and sanitation."

Marketing, he believes, is an area that can still use improvement.

"There's no use to produce milk unless you can sell it for a profit," he says. "I do believe in the free market, but at the same time, there is a level at which the dairy farmers need a safety net—otherwise, they can become victims of their own success."

His advice for success in the American dairy industry is simple.

"Have patience and be courteous," Larson says. "If you have patience and are working for a good cause, you'll get there. And while you're doing it, be courteous."

For nine decades, this approach has worked for Red Larson. He certainly must be doing something right.



Red farms with two sons and two grandsons, together milking 7,600 cows and farming 10,000 acres.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Couch Lee combines a background and passion for agriculture, and has owned Cee Lee Communications, Hoopston, Ill., for six years, specializing in freelance writing and photography in the agricultural industry. You can read more about Christy at [www.realfacesofdairy.com](http://www.realfacesofdairy.com).

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**NEXT MONTH:** *The faces behind an evolving industry. In our April issue, we'll profile a Mexican immigrant who came to the U.S. seeking opportunity, starting as a day laborer and growing into the manager of two large Texas dairy farms.*