

# ***Georgian Central Soil & Crop Improvement Association November Bulletin, 2021***

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*Photo credit: Nicole Mills*

## **Valleykirk Farms**

*L to R, June the Farm Dog, Bob and Mary Ann Kirkconnell, Courtney Denard, Bree and Rob Kirkconnell*

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# Member Spotlight

*In this last issue for 2021, we spotlight the current Grey County SCIA President Rob Kirkconnell in the waning days of his extended term in this role. Rob, his wife Courtney Denard, their daughter Bree, and Rob's parents, Bob and Mary Ann Kirkconnell, spoke with me the day after Hallowe'en. As the interview progressed, it seemed to be very timely, as this date has been pivotal in their family history. There were a total of six grandchildren in the home during the interview, as Mary Ann operates Nana Daycare. This is a close-knit family with a great love of their farm, Valleykirk Farms.*

## History

Although Bob was not raised on a farm, while growing up in Dundas, he helped on a number of farms, and in 1972, while working at Canadian Westinghouse, he was given the opportunity to establish a dairy herd. Over the years, Bob increased his herd to fifteen red and white Holsteins, and created the prefix, Valleykirk, blending his geography with his surname. In 1980, Bob and Mary Ann were married. Mary Ann grew up on a hobby farm and admits that she did not know anything about dairy farming when they wed. She quipped, "I figured if he'd been a grocery store owner, I would have learned how to be a grocer, so since I married a dairy farmer, I learned how to do that." Mary Ann credits her love of reading and learning for her farming education. Bob and Mary Ann also attended meetings and educational sessions, keen to try innovative ideas that they acquired.

When they made the decision to purchase a farm, Bob found "a miraculous looking farm up near Owen Sound" in the listings. It was 200 acres, with a six-year-old dairy barn, and a 40-cow pipeline. When the newly married couple drove up to look at the potential purchase, they had reservations as they meandered through the hills and rocky country in the Durham area. However, when they arrived at the for-sale sign, they knew that they had found "God's country!"

## Family

On Hallowe'en 1982, Bob and Mary Ann moved to Grey County with two-year-old Rob, four-month-old Melanie, and thirty Holsteins. In 1984, '86, '88, and '90, four more children graced their farm. Mary Ann started a home daycare and noted that if she hadn't, they wouldn't have the farm today. Mary Ann later worked in the school system before reprising her home daycare for her grandchildren at the onset of the pandemic.

Bob and Mary Ann have a total of 13 grandchildren and everyone lives within a 15-minute drive. Mary Ann emphasized that it's a family farm and cherishes that fact! She enjoys seeing Bree in the barn with her dad continuing the legacy that she and Bob started with their kids. It warms Courtney's heart to observe Bree's love of the farm. Bob's face reflects that the farm is incredibly special, "It is home, where the family is and starts." Bob added, "If you are away, you always look forward to coming home, just like Alice in Wonderland."

After high school, Rob attended the agricultural program at Ridgetown College. Between his first and second year, he bought a bale wrapper, and started custom wrapping hay. He worked off the farm, before returning full time when he was 22. Rob met Courtney while she was getting her graduate degree at the University of Guelph. She grew up in Eastern Ontario

(Belleville) and was not from a farming background. Courtney moved to the farm in 2008 and started working as a freelance writer, and then joined Ontario Farmer as a journalist in 2013. Rob and Courtney were married February 2010 in the dead of winter. That was somewhat strategic on Courtney's part, as she wanted Rob home for future anniversaries. June the Farm Dog joined their family in 2015, and Bree was born the day after Hallowe'en in 2017.

## Farming

Valleykirk Farms is situated near the property with the truck on a pole. For readers not familiar with that landmark, the Kirkconnell farms are about five kms southwest of Rockford. The family milks 53 registered Holsteins and have 115 head on the farm. Bob appreciates that Rob has continued the tradition of including red and whites in the herd, and adds with a grin, "He's got red hair, so he has to have red and white cows." Mary Ann has done a lot of the milking, with the assistance of Rob in later years. Interestingly, growing up, all of the kids knew how to milk cows because if they didn't help with the milking, they couldn't play hockey and baseball. In this sporty family, that would be a big carrot to get the milking chores completed.

The Kirkconnells have made a number of changes since they moved to the farm. In the early 90s, they expanded to a 50-cow pipeline and made the stalls bigger to increase cow comfort in 2013. In 2017, they retrofitted the old barn, which included the installation of one Lely Robot, and the addition of a 60 X 108-foot structure. Rob explained further, "Basically, we moved all the dry cows and heifers to the old dairy barn and all the milking cows to the old heifer barn." They also converted the old tie-stall area into a calf facility. Overall, the new build delivered better ventilation, better stalls, sand bedding, and better manure management. During this initiative, the goal was to reduce labour requirements and improve the herd, production and the bottom line. The transition to the robot was on Hallowe'en of 2017, and Bree was born the next day.

Valleykirk Farms has a number of examples of automation. They used a Juno feed pusher prior to the barn retrofit and added a TMR/conveyor feeding system at that time. Last December they added the automatic calf feeder. The family wholeheartedly agree that the move to automation has been a wise decision. Rob commented, "The retrofit was an excellent investment as the cows are much healthier and their production has increased." Mary Ann was doing the bulk of the milking, so she has relished the move to robotics. She finds that the chores are still physically demanding but, "If you're not so tired from doing the milking, you can pay attention to the tiny details." Courtney believes that robots are a huge opportunity that should be embraced and considered more widely. She does not feel that the implementation of robots has modified the heart and soul of this family farm. Installing the robot has contributed to better family life and has allowed Bob and Mary Ann the option to step back a little, or as Mary Ann puts it, "Keep their fingers in the pie, but not their whole hand."

Rob emphasizes that the accomplishments of their farm are due to a team of people. "It's not just the four of us," he explains. Their extended team includes their vet, nutritionist, hoof trimmer, banker, agronomist, and a Lely tech. Courtney

# Member Spotlight cont.

feels that it is important to surround yourself with, "Smart people who have been in the industry way longer than you." They seek out people who are kind, professional, and they strive to support women in agriculture.

Rob encourages farmers to keep learning and challenging themselves. He follows through on this advice by setting a goal to learn something new and pushing himself out of his comfort zone annually. Both he and Courtney feel that it is important to celebrate your successes, even the small ones, and advocate whenever possible. Rob delights in sharing the successes with his family. Courtney is a vocal proponent of the importance of mental health in agriculture. In that vein, she encourages everyone to take a break, get off the farm, have fun and rejuvenate. Of course, this is much easier to accomplish when you have a supportive family that can fill in as you take your break.

In the year 2000, Bob and Mary Ann purchased the farm across from the home farm and that is where Rob and Courtney live now. With land that they own and rent, the family works 400 acres and all of the land is in close proximity to the main farms. Bob and Rob share fieldwork responsibilities. Rob and a neighbour work co-operatively with Rob doing custom baling for the neighbour and the neighbour combining for Rob. Bob really appreciates this teamwork, as those co-operative efforts had largely dwindled in the rural landscape in past decades. The Kirkconnells have invested in their own hay equipment, but custom operators perform other harvesting on their farm.

Valleykirk Farms predominantly grows small grains, corn silage and hay. Last year they planted winter wheat for the first time and this year they grew soybeans for the second time. Last year, they tried feeding winter triticale and were quite happy with the cow's response. This year they planted cover crops after corn silage - rye, clover and tillage radish. Rob was proud to report, "For the first year ever, this winter our whole farm will be green."



**Cutting winter triticale, peas and radish on May 24, 2021**

The typical rotation varies by the land, but usually the fields are three to four years in hay, then corn, then a small grain and then back into hay. In the last four years, they've sold large round and square bales. The farm started soil testing in 2012 and Courtney believes that was a game changer. The Kirkconnells are committed to continuing soil testing every three years. They collaborate with an agronomist to assist with crop planning goals and improving fertility levels. They have added nutrient/micronutrients to the soil, including sulphur, boron

and zinc, and are seeing positive results from these actions. The addition of a liquid manure storage in 2017 has provided them with the luxury of spreading the manure where and when they want to.

This family have changed their tillage practices over the years. Currently, they disk and cultivate. They have been experimenting with no-till over the last couple of years. Rob really likes the timesavings, as it requires fewer passes than traditional tillage practices. Rob admits, "Cropping has never been my strong point." He says that he likes to challenge himself to do new things.

## Challenges

Mary Ann and Courtney both feel that making enough money to support two families with their herd size, quota holdings, land base and labour resources is a challenge. Hand in hand with that challenge is the possibility of burnout in one's efforts to dismiss these concerns. Bob believes that Canada should do more for their own farmers, such as increasing processors, reducing imports from other countries, and meeting the needs of our Canadian consumers domestically. Finally, Courtney echoes many voices across Canada with her acknowledgement that the industry needs to attract a younger generation and take action to make that possible.

## The Future

The farm's future aspirations are about maximization and efficiencies. Rob wants to maximize the number of cows they milk relative to the capacity of the robot and maximize production. Courtney adds that becoming a Master Breeder is on her bucket list. On the cropping side, Rob wants to maximize the usage of their land with double cropping and possible tile drainage. Growing more cover crops will also give the farm more resilience in a changing climate. Rob thinks that there are huge opportunities for enhanced profits, "With forward contracting you can book in some pretty good prices." Courtney is encouraging more diversification in the crops grown on the farm. Mary Ann's future aspirations are of a more personal nature, "I'm hoping that we will be healthy enough that we can stay here on the farm 'till we die.'"

## Grey SCIA

Rob has been on the Grey SCIA board of directors for seven years. He is excited about the recent rewriting of the constitution and feels that this will result in a more engaging board moving forward. He credits Soil and Crop as a source for innovative ideas that he can rollout on the farm. He has also learned a great deal about meeting procedures, which has boosted his confidence in other organizations.

*We would like to thank Grey County SCIA for suggesting we interview Rob and his family. It was a delight to speak to them. We thank them for taking the time to share their farm story. Their passion for their family and farm is inspiring! Grey SCIA would like to thank Rob for his energy, organization skill and commitment to the association in past years.*

**Lorie Smith**