

Farm Alive After Father's Death

Son Loses 'Best Friend' to Lou Gehrig's Disease

By Ken Smith
State Editor

Richland Center

Ron Ewing has been a full-time dairyman since he was about 12 years old. Other people who started such a demanding occupation at such an early age might feel they've missed out on something. But Ron, now 23, wouldn't have had it any other way. That's because his story is one of love between a father and a son, and of a son for his father.

Ron was 12 when his father, Lee, learned that he had Lou Gehrig's disease, an always fatal, but slow moving, degenerative disease of the nervous system. Lou Gehrig's disease was named after the baseball player who was its most famous victim. It's more properly known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The disease is still not well understood and is the subject of intense research. It often completely paralyzes its victims before they die.

The news that Lee had the disease was a blow to the entire family, but it set up an especially tough situation for Ron and his dad. Lee had bought the basic 220-acre farm before Ron was born. It was the site of the family home, but was not an active, commercial farm. Lee ran a grocery store and some apartment units he owned in Richland Center, and he raised beef on the farm.

When Lee began to become disabled, there were problems. Medical bills mounted. Ron's mother, Norma, went back to work as a teacher, but the medical bills forced a decision.

"Dad asked us what we wanted, to sell the farm or the things in town, and the kids voted to live out here," Ron recalls. Ron's sister, Keadolyn, now 28, was already away at college, and David, now 20, was too young to do much farm work. "We sold the apartments to pay the medical bills, and Dad got me started in dairying," Ron says matter-of-factly.

"I was only 12 years old and in the seventh grade, and I was milking twice a day. Mom would help me out with farming, but she had a job," Ron describes. "I quit school as a sophomore to take care of Dad because by that time he required care all the time."

"He couldn't move at all. It got worse and worse. I performed total care for him for about two years," Ron continues. "But Dad and I were very, very close, even before he got sick. We were very tight. We did everything together."

"We got even closer when I had to take care of him like that," Ron adds. "I'd wheel his wheelchair out in the barn. I think we were good for each other at that time. Once in a while he'd get depressed, but not often. The rest of us—we'd get depressed—but he was the one that was sick and dying."

Norma tells the story of a time when Ron and Lee went out to cut their own Christmas tree. Lee couldn't walk or use his arms at the time, so Ron carried his dad. When Ron set Lee down on a stump, he rolled off like a rag doll, and father and son lay on the ground laughing for several minutes. Norma says that in her mind Ron's missing school was made up for by the two years of such closeness at a critical time.

"He was always busy teaching all of us, trying to round us off and set us up for our lives," Ron describes. "I wonder what it would be like if he was around here still." Lee finally died in 1977, when Ron was 17. Ron's mother is now remarried.

If you're reading this and some tears well up in your eyes, that's okay. But Ron doesn't want people feeling sorry for him because he doesn't feel sorry for himself. He tells his own story to a visitor openly, with no evidence of self-pity. In fact, one gets the impression that the whole experience was rewarding, in its way.

"Somebody might say his illness made us closer than we would have been, but I'd question that," says Ron. "He was my best friend. I could talk to him about anything. Most kids want to spend their time with their friends, but I just wanted to spend my time with him, even before he got sick. His being sick didn't

bring us together. We had always been close."

Setting up the farm must have been a difficult process, especially considering the lack of experience and labor, and the financial difficulties. Ron at first started milking Jerseys on a rented farm. Later he switched to Holsteins in the barn on the home farm.

Neighbors were a big help. Ron recalls with fondness the help of neighbors Earl Mayfield and Elmer Myskens. Avery Marshall, a farm training instructor at Richland Center, was "a tremendous help in the later years," he acknowledges.

Ron now owns his machinery and 24 grade Holstein cows. His mother holds title to the farm itself. Ron says he's striving to keep his debts down, while he hopes to make progress toward buying the land in a few years. Ron is engaged to Mary Homb, planning a Septem-

ber wedding, and remodeling the family house for his bride.

"In the last few years, since Dad died, everything I make I stick back into the farm. I don't make much spending money. Just the essentials have to do. I do everything myself, except I sometimes hire help with haying when I can afford it," Ron explains.

"Sometimes I get a little jealous of people who don't have to work all the time, but you get used to working alone. You know what you have to do and you know you can do it," Ron asserts. But Ron does admit that last year he went through a spell of "wondering if there isn't more to life than milking cows."

Ron considered leaving the farm to go to school to become a community health worker. But then he had second thoughts. "I think now that it was unrealistic to go to school. What would happen to the farm? I didn't

want Ma to sell it," Ron says. "Besides, I couldn't see being cooped up in a city all that time."

For his present goals, Ron hopes to boost his cow numbers to about 40 and buy the farm-land from his mother. He'd like to raise his herd average from his present 15,000 pounds per cow to more like 20,000 pounds. Other than that, he says he has no goals to get big. He says he doesn't need more than 40 cows.

Ron has a good credit rating with his local PCA and a Richland Center bank. He took out his first loan more than 11 years ago—when he was 12. "Dad had to cosign the loan, for \$10,000, but I paid it all off on my own," Ron recalls.

"If things come easy, you can't hack the hard times. You don't know what to do when you have it rough," Ron observes. "What we do in life is our own choice, and I'm glad everything happened the way it did, except for the loss of my dad. Other than that I wouldn't have changed a thing."

"We had a lot of fun, even though I had to work all the time," Ron concludes. "If I kicked off tomorrow, I'd feel good about everything I've done."



Responsibility Shouldered

Ron Ewing, a 23-year-old Richland County dairyman, was equal to the responsibility of operating a farm at an age when most boys are rousting about with their chums. At age 12, he took over for his father, who was struck with a degenerative disease. But Ron's childhood memories are all ones he cherishes.