

As published in



**Who:** Leon and Marleen Van Loon and their children Gert, Wouter, Tinne and Sanne

**What:** Mibelloon Dairy I and II, Redstone Dairy, Wheeler Dairy, Marloo Equipment, and Van Loon Farms

**Where:** St. Louis, MI and Breckenridge, MI

Until 15 years ago, folks living in the "Middle of the Mitten" had never met a family like the Van Loon family. Leon and Marleen Van Loon and their four kids emigrated to St. Louis, Michigan from Belgium where the family had operated two dairy farms.

During the 1990s in Belgium, under the European Union dairy quota system, the Van Loon family could find no effective way to grow their dairy business. Long a brake on dairy expansion, the quota system finally came to an end earlier this year.

The Van Loon family looked in many countries, but eventually they focused on the United States. After visiting many states, they chose Michigan, where Leon and his family had visited other dairy producers from Belgium and the Netherlands during 1996 through 2000. In May 2001, Leon, Marleen, and their teenage children moved to Michigan, where their extraordinary American odyssey began...

## Producer Spotlight

# Out of Belgium and into America, the Van Loon way



**2001:** Purchased small acreage near St. Louis, MI and began construction of a double-16 parlor, now known as Mibelloon Dairy I (MIB I), named by daughter Tinne (who combined parts of the names of Michigan, Belgium and Van Loon).

**2002:** Began milking 500 cows, increased to 800.

**2003:** Added second barn, milking 1,600 cows.

**2004:** Expanded parlor to a double-20.

**2005:** Constructed Mibelloon Dairy II (MIB II) with a 60-cow rotary parlor milking 2,500 cows with milking commencing in December 2005.

**2006:** Construction of second free stall barn completed in June. Built new bunker silo.

**2007:** Acquired cropland to establish Van Loon Farms (VLF).

**2008:** Constructed Redstone Dairy (RSD), a close-up dry cow and calving facility with 800-head capacity. Also, built a maintenance shop and commodity barn.

**2009:** In May, moved the first group of dry cows to RSD.

**2010:** Acquired additional land to continue growing own crops.

**2011:** Became a U.S. dealer for PEECON, maker of mixer wagons (Peeters Landbouwmachines from the Netherlands). Built a storage building, hay barn, and additional bunker silos.

**2012:** Built a 360-stall addition for RSD and installed a new scale at MIB I.

**2013:** Broke ground in June for Wheeler Dairy (WD), a 3,500 cow dairy with 90-cow rotary parlor. Commenced milking operations in December with 3,000 cows trucked in from Roswell, NM. Built an indoor feed center and a shop and also installed a scale at WD. Built addition to VLF shop and storage building at WD. Provided funding for road maintenance and paving for the public road WD is located on.

**2014:** Increased RSD to a 2,200 cow capacity with new calf barn for babies. Constructed indoor feed center for MIB I, MIB II and RSD.

**2015:** Commenced weekly shipments of week-old calves to specialized Idaho farm to be reared to springers and returned. Paved all driveways at Mibelloon site. Constructed new central office. Acquired additional 3,500 acres and installed irrigation pivots. Installed underground manure pumping system, which allows fertilizer to be pumped to fields up to 5 miles away and avoid over-usage of roads. Constructed sand containment area and wash bay at Mibelloon site. Provided funding for road maintenance and paving for public road Mibelloon site is located on.

It's no surprise that the rapid growth and large scale of the Van Loon family's dairy operations require extraordinary efforts to build and maintain good community relations. The Van Loon family hosts numerous farm tours, sponsors advertising in local newspapers, and supports young livestock producers at the Gratiot County Fair for Youth.

On August 15 this year, Wheeler Dairy hosted a Breakfast on the Farm event to allow local residents an opportunity to see a real working dairy farm in action.

"We want to be good neighbors," Marleen Van Loon says, "and work hard to make it so."

Diamond V Regional Sales Manager Bernie Eash first met the Van Loon family in 2001 and has watched in awe as the family continues to exemplify professional excellence in the dairy business.

Here are a few examples of how Diamond V has been part of the Van Loon success story...

**2012:** Leon and Marleen attended a Diamond V Solutions Conference and decided to begin using Original XP™ and Original XPC™ for all herds.

**2013:** Bernie videotaped Van Loon milking procedures to train new employees for WD and to retrain existing and new employees at MIB I and MIB II.

**2014:** Kristy Pagel (Regional Sales Manager) presented options for a dairy organizational structure. Don Martell, PAS (Dairy Field Technical Specialist) and Bernie conducted TMR Audits® at all three lactating dairies. Diamond V facilitated the launch of management meetings. A SWOT Analysis was conducted with managers at all four Van Loon dairy sites.

"The Van Loons have the capacity to recognize the opportunities and invest for the long run," Bernie says. "They start with a well-constructed plan and pursue it all the way to completion. It's a 'high ride' to work with them. I count it as a privilege."



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