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"Dairy tour a real cattle call"

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LIVING & LEISURE section -- Family Page

By Eric Sundquist/STAFF WRITER

A few years ago, the Cagle family was grappling with how to make its Cherokee County dairy farm more profitable. Expansion wasn't an option; with developers on the move, land was too expensive.

So the Cagles decided to open the farm to school groups and families. Now, with the tours in their fifth year, admission fees account for about a third of the farm's revenue. Nearly 30,000 people visited in the past year.

It's easy to see why the destination has become so popular. The Cagle's, who take a break from regular farm work to conduct the tours, are patient, well-organized hosts. They take visitors through much of the operation, from pasture to processing plant, and throw in a dog-herding demonstration for good measure. On a recent visit, the tour began with the dog. As Scott Cagle gave some introductory remarks--Cagle's, founded in 1951, was the first American dairy to test-market plastic bottles, he said--a border collie named Shep herded a pair of ducks around a yard.

From there, visitors boarded long, tractor-pulled wagons, which had been outfitted with roofs to shade the hay-bale seats. The tractors pulled the wagons past silos in the feed yard, and a guide passed around samples to show what the Cagles' cows eat in addition to hay: fermented fodder called 'silage', hominy, citrus pulp, cotton seed, brewer's grain and molasses.

Dairy cattle stood nearby under an unwallled structure. The guide described how the cows waste was treated to avoid pollution. The tractors chugged across the road to a pasture holding pregnant cows. Scott Cagle met the wagons with Shep, who dashed through a ravine and soon had the bovine mothersto-be headed in our direction. The guide told us a bit about cattle breeding--all the Cagle cows are artificially inseminated, we learned--as the dog brought his charges right up to the wagon.

Back across the road, visitors disembarked the wagon, fed goats and petted calves. All the while, the guides' informative nuggets continued: The calves are separated from their mothers and fed from bottles, because modern dairy cattle produce so much milk that they would make their calves sick.

The next stop was a shady, ceiling-fanned porch, where a milking machine showed its stuff on a plastic cow's udder. Continuing, visitors saw the real milking machines in the milking barn. The final stop on the tour was the processing plant, where another Cagle described how milk is homogenized, pasteurized and bottled. The tour exited through the cooler, where each person picked up a small bottle of milk, plain or chocolate.

The visit took a quick 1 ½ hours, which was just right. Any longer, and city slickers would have been overwhelmed with details, but any shorter and some interesting facets of the farm would have been missed.

Kelley Day of Atlanta was visiting with her 6-year-old son, Tyler, and 2-year-old daughter, Libby. She was enthusiastic about the tour, which gave her kids a close look at something they otherwise would see only Cagle's Dairy: An Educational Resource Farm

dimly. "We drive by cows all the time," she said. "But when you're right by them, you see how big they really are."

The Cagles say they try to keep things educational and real. "We never wanted to be a petting zoo," said Scott Cagle. So, though the tour is never unpleasant, visitors experience the nitty-gritty of the operation--even a bad small or two--not a prettified version. "I'll never lie to a child," Scott Cagle said. "If he asks what happens to a cow when I'm through with it, I tell him." [From the web-editor: It goes to cow-heaven.] From late September to early October, the Cagles will offer a variation on the dairy tour. The Heritage Harvest Days will provide a glimpse of what American farming used to be like. The program isn't final yet, but tours won't go though the milk-processing facility; instead, visitors might get a look at the outside of the circa-1830 farmhouse, plus pigs and other animals.