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## "Where the cows come home to — Dairy models small-farm life"

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by Diane R. Stepp/STAFF WRITER

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After nearly 10 years of showing suburban and city kids around his family's working dairy farm, Scott Cagle is still surprised by kids' questions.

He thought he'd heard them all until one youngster piped up during a recent tour, "How'd you get them shoes on those cows' feet?"

The child's confusion between hooves and Nikes underscores the family dairy's mission of educating children about farm life and the agriculture business.

"Many kids today don't even have pets. They've never been around animals," said Cagle, one of four family members who own and operate Cagle's Dairy in Cherokee County's Hickory Flat community. It's here that many Atlanta children come face to face with a cow for the first time. "The expression on their faces is worth seeing," said Cagle. "This makes them realize that milk doesn't just come from Kroger." The dairy has been in the family since 1959. Some of the land has been owned by Cagle's since 1936, when Scott's grandparents, Clayton and Estelle Cagle, settled there.

The only remaining dairy farm in Georgia to produce and process its own milk, the Cagle's' farm is unique, said state Agriculture Commissioner Tommy Irvin. And he'd like to see more like it.

The Cagle's' spread covers 125 acres on both sides of Stringer Road. There are a calf barn, a milking barn, a processing plant and an office area, two family homes, pastureland, a vegetable garden, a cornfield, a lake and a shaded picnic area. The pastureland on the farm is not large enough to support the dairy's 250-head herd of Holsteins, so some graze on leased pasture.

Three Cagle brothers --- David, Scott and Len --- and their father, Albert, and five employees run the dairy and its processing plant, Etowah Maid Dairies. The cows are milked twice each day, at 3 a.m. and 2 p.m. They produce about 237,250 gallons per year.

Cagle's Dairy milk can be found at some Kroger and Publix stores in Cherokee, as well as at smaller independent groceries and convenience stores in the area. In all, the dairy has about 50 accounts in Cherokee.

The Cagle's' thriving agri-tourism business drew about 70,000 visitors last year, accounting for about half of the farm's revenues. It's a model of diversification that can help keep small farms financially viable while supplying food, dairy products and other consumables to Georgia's market, said Irvin.

Irvin will be at the Cagle farm at 10 a.m. Friday to kick off Georgia's observance of National Dairy Month. He said he likes to focus attention on the innovative small dairy --- Cagle's Dairy and its processing plant, Etowah Maid Dairies Inc. --- as an example to other small farming and dairy operators. "We want to do everything we can to highlight their marketing expertise, showing how a small business in the dairy industry can be successful by diversification," said Irvin. Georgia produces about 1.59 billion pounds of milk each year.

Irvin said that in some summer months when cows produce less milk because of heat stress, Georgia consumes more milk than it produces, and milk has to be trucked in from as far away as Minnesota and New Mexico. "That's the reason we're pushing more milk production in our own region," he said.

He pointed out that the Cagle's' milk products are freshest because they are locally produced and consumed. "That's why the Cagle's have a marketing advantage over major processors who can't get their products to market as quickly," he said. The Cagle's are continually coming up with ideas to supplement their milk-producing operation.

Among the latest hits are the Saturday night hayrides and open-fire marshmallow roasts by the lake. One of the most popular attractions comes at fall harvest time, when the Cagle's cut a maze through a tall cornfield and invite visitors to lose themselves for an hour or so among the stalks, trying to exit the path. The annual maze is co-sponsored by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Now that school is out and there is a momentary lull from school tours before a flood of summer visitors arrive, the Cagle's are concentrating on catching up on the dairy operation, repairing pumps and handling the other chores that never end on a working farm. They're also looking at the possibility of introducing new products, such as cheese and butter, David Cagle said.