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Life Stories – Richard Wehrle and his cowboy boots

WW2 was into its 4th year when Richard Wehrle was born. The third boy born into a family that would eventually be 4 boys. His parents Ursula and Walter Wehrle were farmers in Canton Thurgau.

In 1938 Walter purchased a farm but the turbulent times of the 1930's depression continued and the milk prices fluctuated so much that he had to walk off the farm. However, his father was not put off from farming going on to lease a farm from a restaurant owner who also had a beer depot and instead of paying lease he delivered, by horse and cart, beer and ice (in blocks) 3 times a week to various restaurants.



Richard remembers his childhood fondly. Coming from a farming family who had horses, pigs, cows, chickens and an orchard that produced plums, apples, pears and cherries the hard-

working family was never short of food. As a child when pressed by his parents as to what he would like for his birthday he always asked for a banana or orange... exotic fruit for those days.

Kenzenau School was not a place he enjoyed, he was not scholarly like his brothers and was often inclined to be found cutting the school lawns with a scissors as another misdemeanour had occurred such as pinching the strawberries from the headmaster's garden.

As a child he spent a lot of time at the cheese factory next door and so it was no surprise to his parents that he wished to become a cheese maker, just like his 2 older brothers. However, on leaving school he was still too young to start an apprenticeship so spent a year as a forester cutting trees down and pulling them out with horses. These trees were processed into paper and building timber.

In 1960 he finally became a cheese maker's apprentice in Lanterswil Thurgau. One day a week he attended "Käsefachschule" (cheese apprenticeship tech) where he soon found out that he was the highest paid apprentice in his class. He was very proud of that and had a wonderful relationship with his boss. They made Tilsiter which weighed 4-5 kilos and Emmentaler which could weigh up to 95 kgs.

His job was to get up early and daily weigh the milk from the 36 farmers. Amounts varied from 9 litres from the smallest



farmer to 120 litres for the biggest farmer. Deliveries came by tractor, hand pushed carts or farmers attached the milk cans to their backs and biked to the cheese factory. The milk was sieved so that all foreign material such as grass, dirt etc was removed and any that passed through the sieve helped the fermentation process and brought cheese its flavour Richard reckoned.

He lodged in the attic of the building which housed both his boss's family and the cheese factory, a common occurrence in Switzerland's rural area. Although the house was well built, in the attic there was no heating in winter and it was not unusual for his pants to be frozen in the winter mornings. "Easy to get into" he remembers "you just stood them up and put them on and got to work!".

In 1963 Rekrutenschule (military school) beckoned. He went armed with his father's advice: do not stick out, do not answer back and always follow orders.



Richard found this easy to do as one did not need to think in the army as orders ("Tagesbefehl") were posted daily. The 17 weeks as a member of Infanterie Motorfahrer in Wangen a.d.Aare passed by very quickly. He thoroughly enjoyed his time as a truck driver and never lost his mischievous streak. He would throw Sugus (lollies) out of the army truck when passing children playing outside. While on kitchen duties, if he felt an arrogant officer was mishandling some of the new recruits, Richard would wash his own socks in the Gemela (eating utensil) of the offending officer.

While working at a large Molkerei (dairy factory) in Winterthur Richard heard about NZ. First when cheap NZ butter arrived to be mixed with Swiss butter to

make "Kochbutter" (cooking butter). They were not allowed to sell it as "Tafelbutter" (tablebutter) because it had overseas content. On and off during the year railway wagons with loads of NZ butter would appear in Milchverband Winterthur.

At the time Richard did not realise that he would end up living in the country from which the butter came.



Richard also remembers watching a film about NZ where horsemen were mustering sheep and cattle. In 1965 he heard from his brother about a young Swiss, Max Schwitzer, who had just returned

from a 3 year trip to New Zealand. They met up and a lifelong friendship began. Max flew back to NZ with Richard in tow. The one-way ticket to NZ cost 3190 CHF nearly 5 months of Richard's wages.

Before leaving Switzerland Richard purchased proper riding boots, like the ones he had seen in the film as he wanted to make sure he was equipped for mustering. Little did he know that these boots would never be used to muster sheep, instead they would spend endless hours in cow pats; for dairying was to be his NZ life.

On his first NZ farm job he was once again blessed with a good boss, a Pommie. On the kitchen table sat a German-English dictionary which helped with the challenges of learning a new language. Once when in a hurry he forgot to consult the dictionary when the boss's wife sent him to buy "lettuce" and he very proudly purchased a bunch of envelopes (letters) but was slightly aggrieved when she started laughing and said: with this I cannot make a lettuce salad. And so he had learnt another word!!!

Once Richard realised that dairy farming in NZ was his next challenge and that the



Waikato Area was the place to do it, he needed to make some serious money in order to be able to go sharemilking. As a 50% sharemilker he needed to supply the cows and the farm owner would supply the land and the proceeds and costs were to be shared by the two. Cows cost around \$100 each in 1970s (\$1,500-2,500 today).

So he went to work at Kinleith Pulp and Paper Mill near Tokoroa and learnt the art of "working slower" to union rules as well as learning all the English swear words. Richard loved working alongside his Maori colleagues whose sense of humour and approach to life made the tedious task of feeding the chipper machine more



enjoyable. It was all a means to an end. Richard had a wonderful time socialising with the Swiss and Kiwi communities. Amongst the Hamilton Swiss Club were 5 Arnold boys whose family had arrived in NZ in 1961. These lads soon befriended Richard and brought him to their home at Tahuna where their parents ran a dairy farm and in leisure time their father, Joe Arnold, was lead yodeller for the Hamilton Swiss Club.

Heidi the 13 year old daughter of Joe Arnold cast her eyes over 23 year old Richard and thought "he's a bit of alright!" But she was too young and he was too engrossed in making money to look her way.

Over the next few years the money was gathered, social life led and lasting friendships made. In 1970 Richard flew back to Switzerland accompanied by Heidi's brother Peter. Although it was lovely to catch up with family and friends the visit confirmed for Richard that even though he enjoyed beautiful Switzerland he felt more at home in New Zealand. Six months later he packed his few possessions into a large wooden chest and returned to NZ on the ship Angelina Lauro.

Once back in NZ the quest for a wife and a share milking job began in earnest. He fi-



nally looked Heidi's way and the now 17 year old appealed to him; as for her, her thought was "finally!!"

Cows were purchased, a wedding planned and by June 1972 Richard and Heidi were married and sharemilking at Kiwitahi. Richard's youngest brother Willi came to NZ to join them for the first year of farming.



Although milking machines were now the norm feeding out to cows was done by hand using a large hand held silage knife to slice another tranche of silage from the large silage stack, much like a knife is used for cutting a cake. The silage was then loaded by fork onto tractor trailers, transported to the cows and then with the same fork hurled off the trailer. No need for gym workouts and Health and Safety did not exist...bliss!!! Dairying was very much a community thing. The farmers all helped each other harvesting the hay, making the silage and generally helping each other whenever needed. Now much of this work is contracted out and the larger farms have a more itinerant workforce.

Richard's older brother Werner came with his wife Marianne to NZ in 1968 and became a farmer too.



In 1973 Belinda the first child was born and the first farm was purchased in the flatlands of Hungahunga, near Waharoa. The land was definitely easier to farm although wet winters challenged ones farming skills with herds needing to be removed from the paddocks so that they did not wreck the grass and its tender roots. Sawdust pads were invented where the cows were held while it rained.

The family grew to include a son Christian and another daughter Desiree. Richard

was his own boss, the milk was picked up daily and the cheques were banked regularly. Life had a steady rhythm. While Richard ran the farm Heidi ran the house, tending a large vegetable garden and preserving fruit. Heidi also learnt to artificially inseminate cows; a skill that would give added revenue during the 6-8 week season that the cows were on heat.

In 1980 Richard decided sell the farm at Hungahunga and buy a bigger farm at Wardville, a mere 5 minutes away. 1987 was a bit of a game changer for many in NZ. The sharemarket crashed and so did the cow prices, milk payouts dived while bank interest rates went up to 18-22%. To make ends meet many farmers wives went to find work off farm and Heidi was no exception spending a year selling insurances before finding her niche as a sales representative for LIC (Livestock Improvement Co-op)

This was also the era when dairying was changing with factories amalgamating and farming becoming more business based with words like dry matter, pasture growth, herd recording and herd testing entering the daily lexicon. Computers were now becoming mainstream as well. By 1995 much had changed since entering the dairy industry in 1972 and more changes were afoot.

In 2000 Richard and Heidi decided it was time to sell up and enjoy the fruits of their labour. They lived in Queenstown for 4 years before building a house at Karapiro where they are enjoying a leisurely lifestyle which includes time spent with family, friends, ceroc dancing, travelling and volunteer work with Lions and the Swiss Club. Looking back it feels like it all was a dream as the time seems to have passed so fast. The song "S'isch ja nur es chlieses träumli g'si." comes to mind. Now to see what the future has in store.

Compiled by Heidi and Richard Wehrle

