

Western Dairy PIONEERS

ELMIDO FARMS, THE AARTS FAMILY

Amanda Poelman

When John Aarts says, "I love farming—to me it's never been work," he's not speaking lightly. His words are rooted in a story that began decades before, a story that, like many in the dairy industry, began with immigrant parents moving to Canada to chase the dream of farming. Through hard work and perseverance, the Aarts family learned early that survival and success in dairy requires intentional communication and the willingness to adapt the business as needed. These principles have been the foundation for the farm's growth as they forge a path for future generations.



Bill & Dora Aarts, married nearly 60 years, emmigrated to Canada as newlyweds in 1947.

A Modest Start

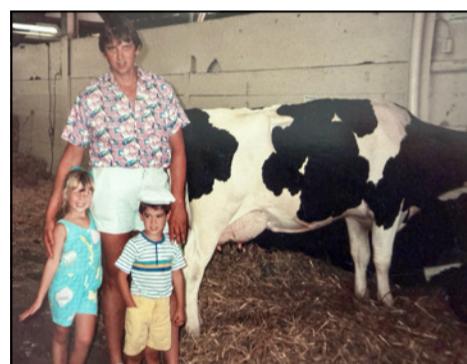
William (Bill) and Dora Aarts emigrated from the Netherlands in 1947, arriving in the Fraser Valley a year later after a short stint in Ontario. After taking a job on a Jersey farm in Sumas initially, Bill rented various farms in the area before purchasing 40 acres on Evans Road in 1959, where the family remains today. "There was nothing here at the time," says John, "Dad built the original barn in the summer, proud that he only spent \$8000 on it."

In the early 1950s, Bill's herd was a mix of Jerseys, Guernseys and Holsteins, but after purchasing his first registered Holstein at a sale in 1952, the focus became building a purebred herd. Bill joined the Holstein Association in 1954 and started the ELMIDO prefix, which used the first two letters of the names of his three oldest daughters: Ellie, Mickey (a nickname for Maryann) and Doreen. By the time the 70-cow herd moved into the new barn in 1959, Bill and Dora were raising six children in the small farmhouse. "My parents worked very hard to get the farm going," says John, "and my sisters and I all helped with the milking and chores as we got older."

After graduating high school in 1973, John returned to the farm fulltime to work

alongside his dad. The herd continued to expand through the '80s, reaching 120 head by the early '90s. Throughout that 20-year span, John adopted his father's love of purebred cattle and showing. "We traveled by train to Calgary, Red Deer and Edmonton," recalls John, "as well as attending shows locally." Touted for his keen eye in selecting cattle, Bill made some early purchases that laid a solid foundation for the Elmido herd, which eventually led to achieving his #1 goal: receiving a Master Breeder Shield (1984), only the seventh herd in BC to do so at the time.

John is quick to credit the purebred business for generating the funds needed for expansion. "We sold some red cows to put a down payment on another farm!" However, by the late '90s it was becoming harder to get money out of the purebred cattle business. "Showing became a professional game," says John, "Show cows had to be cared for in a certain way, so while showing was a definite thing we did – it was also a definite thing we quit doing in the end."

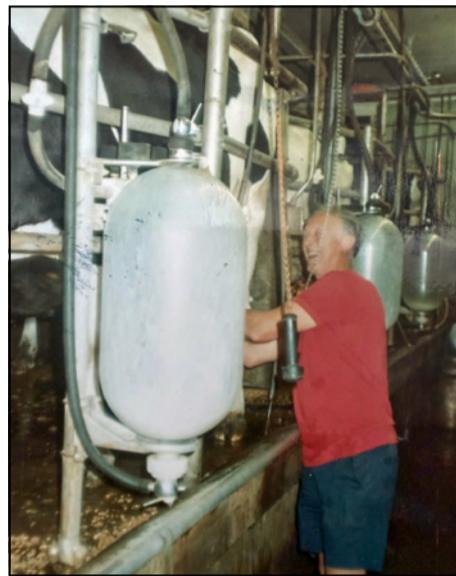


Showing cows at the PNE in 1986 – John with Jacqueline and Jonathan.

The Next Generation

John married Debbie in 1980, a small-town girl from Swan River, MB, who had moved with her family to the Fraser Valley, and finished up high school in Abbotsford. As they raised their young family, John continued the farm partnership with his dad, slowly buying shares until 1992, when the ownership transfer was completed.

John and Debbie have four children who were all finishing high school in the early 2000s. "Our rule was that you had to work off the farm for five years," says Debbie. "We wanted them to find their own path, even if that meant it might not be on the farm." All four kids attended Olds College in Alberta and then worked in various jobs. "I never dreamt they would all want to be in agriculture," says John, "or that they would all end up back at home!"



Bill in the parlour in 1980. He had a keen eye for picking out young stock that would develop into great cows and was very proud of his purebred herd.



Bill earned his Master Breeder Shield in 1984, only the 7th herd in BC to have received it. (Photo appeared in the May 1984 edition of the BC Holstein News).

Daughter Jacqueline is married to Richard Boer and works as the financial controller of Elmido Farms and Brightside Poultry – a new venture that began in 2003 via the BC Chicken New Entrant program. Richard spends the bulk of his time at the poultry barns, which now consist of specialty broilers, organic layers, and a retail locker market.

Jonathan, who is married to Amanda, takes care of all the fieldwork and feeding, both at the home farm and the surrounding properties. Jesse, married to Angela, is

the cow guy at Elmido and manages all aspects of the dairy, including herd health and mating decisions. Jacob, who is married to Nina, manages the heifer-raising facility in Merritt, a partnership with Cedarbrink Dairy that began in 2008.

Like Debbie, who was actively involved in the industry side of the dairy business on various boards, Jacqueline and Jonathan stay active on the AgriFoods and Mainland Milk Producers board respectively, while Jacob was appointed to the Canadian Agriculture Youth Council in 2024.



1989 Chilliwack Fair Grand Champion. (L-R) Judge Gene Wautier, Sheri Schwaerze (BC Holstein Princess), Don Lawley (sponsor), Jeff Kooyman, John with ELMIDO HELEN REVELATION, Tony DeGroot (UFVHC trophy presenter).

The development of Elmido Farms. 1959 – 1960 – 2017





Expansion Continues, Management Style Shifts

By 2002, the milking herd had expanded to 200 cows, a number that continued to grow as each of the kids returned to the farm. "We were fortunate to purchase neighbouring farms as they came available over the years," shares John, aware that this unfortunately meant, friends were leaving the industry.

In 2018, after milking cows at two separate locations for a time, the milk cows – now totalling 700 – returned home, while the dry cows and heifers were moved to nearby locations. The herd is currently milked 3x per day in a double-12 parlour, which, in a herd that size, means that the milk pump is running between 18-19 hours daily.

The increase in cow numbers forced a shift in breeding philosophy as well. "We originally bred for show type and angularity," says John, noting bulls like STARBUCK, RAIDER and CONQUEST, who got a lot of use initially. "Now we are breeding for strength, feet and legs, and production." The herd at Elmido is very young, which John says is completely on purpose. "We run 100,000 SCC and only culled 20 cows for mastitis in 2024," he shares, observing that having a young herd eliminates a lot of problems. "We rarely treat for mastitis, if a cow gets sick twice, she's out." The herd has been bedded on sand for the past 30 years, which has helped keep mastitis and SCC low.

Females have two chances to get pregnant with sexed semen before beef semen is used. The Aarts family also started genomic testing their heifers in the 2025, using beef semen on the lower end. While they will breed an older cow that is solid and trouble-free, John says, "The price of beef has really changed how we manage things. Getting cows beefed in good condition is important."



Jacqueline, John and Jacob finish up the last milking in the old parlour (2002).

When purchasing semen, Elmido has been with ABS exclusively for the past five years. "We really like the program they provide," says John, a program which lends itself to smaller cows. "We needed to get the size down from all the years of purebred breeding!" Bulls in their current roster include HOT ROD, MYSTERY, SHOUT, and COLTER.

Another major change in management style has been the move away from classification. "We don't classify because of milking times," says John, "With 700 cows and only 2 hours between milkings, classification just became too disruptive." However, John says that if classification moved away from the human factor and utilized camera equipment to score, he would consider going back to it, recognizing the benefits classifying has for corrective mating. Despite stopping with

registrations in 2024, a big change after 70 years, the Elmido herd remains on test and finished third in BC for Herd Performance Index at Lactanet.

Elmido's land base has climbed to 450 acres owned and an additional 200 acres rented. The land is mainly seeded in corn, but 100 acres of grass are grown, along with 800 acres of alfalfa and silage in Merritt. "We don't purchase any outside feed other than grains and chopped straw," John says. The cows are fed a diet that includes roasted soybeans and beet pulp, allowing the herd to maintain a high production average.

Intentional Communication

After painful speedbumps in their own succession planning journey, John and Debbie vowed they never wanted their kids to experience that. "We invested in a lot of professional communication coaching and business plan development very early as the kids were coming home," says Debbie. "25 years ago, no one was really doing that!" Regular family business meetings in the barn provide a "safe space" for each family member to share their opinions freely. While each of the Aarts siblings have a "lane" that they are responsible for, they also pitch in to help each other when needed. "We cannot stress the importance of open communication enough," says Debbie, "The investment in coaching was very intentional and really made the transition smoother. It's not always perfect, but it works." John adds, "If we were going to stay in the business and have our kids stay in as well, we needed to make a decision on how best to make it work for everyone."

Communication also includes the importance of knowing the financials of the business. "Banks will give you an umbrella when it's sunny and pull it away when it rains," says John, "That's why it's so important to keep costs under control and an eye on the debt level at all times." Debbie adds, "Things have to cash flow! We made sure that the kids understood the financials as we transitioned."



Bill creatively planted his snowdrops one spring to spell ELMIDO!

Thinking Outside the Box

A forward thinking perspective led John to partner with Alfred Vanden Brink of Cedarbrink Dairy on the purchase of a heifer-raising facility in Merritt in 2008. "Getting into business with an entirely different dairy operation was not something that was popular at the time," says John. The mutually beneficial partnership has expanded three times since its inception and is now multigenerational as well. The site is home to 1100 heifers, who reside there from six months of age to a month before calving, as well as a butcher shop.

Looking Ahead

Both John and Debbie are adamant that the driving force behind their success is undoubtedly their family. "We wouldn't be sitting here if we didn't have that," says Debbie. "We wanted to make sure that our kids had the opportunity to farm, and we've done that," adds John, who is now mostly retired from the day-to-day operations at Elmido.

Perhaps what is even more special is the interest their grandchildren are already taking in the farm. Two of the grandsons (ages 14 & 15) oversee 100 calves on their own, managing the barn tasks around their school schedule. "They take care of cleaning the barn and feeding; it's their responsibility and they love it," shares Debbie. Several of the older grandkids are also actively involved in harvesting and running equipment as well. Debbie recalls, "We were up in Merritt and harvesting the field closest to the house, the dads were all on the porch and the kids were running the harvest. I don't know who was prouder – us or them!"

With plans to break ground on a new barn and parlour later this spring, there is no doubt that expansion will continue at Elmido Farms as they prepare for future generations. For John and Debbie, success isn't measured solely on herd size or the number of acres; it's found in watching their children and grandchildren show the same passion for farming that took root with John's parents when they built the farm from the ground up. Being able to pass on the farm and seeing the next generation thrive in an industry they clearly love – and helped build – is the pride that makes every long day 100% worth it.



The Aarts Family (2024)

Photo credit: Urban Fig Photography

