

Spring/Summer 2025



Bill Reimers General Manager (952) 466-3721 billr@midcountycoop.com

A few years back, we exited the automotive repair business to focus on trucks. It was mostly due to not being able to hire qualified auto technicians who were trained in today's new car technology. The truck business has turned out to be much steadier throughout the year, and much easier to manage. And we have been very fortunate to have experienced and qualified staff to make it successful.

Energy

We were able to hire several people in this department within the last year, which has allowed us to step up our propane service pro-

talk about and ery custo plan for the secondly future, sometimes it is good find com to look back a propan at recent history to see how your decisions turned out. Truck Mid-Cou

Usually, we

Center

grams. The first priority is to make sure every customer's propane system is safe. And secondly, even with our low claims history, it is very difficult in today's environment to find companies that are interested in insuring a propane company.

Having a consistent service program has allowed us to add new customers on a timely basis, and still make sure our existing customer is well cared for. You may have noticed a Mid-County employee at your home surveying your propane tank and equipment. We are on a very focused campaign to routinely check all of our customers systems to make sure they are safe.

Agronomy

I have been asked many times if building the new fertilizer plant was a good decision. The answer is always an absolute yes. As a short-term decision, having the extra storage has been critical when dealing with today's volatile supplies and pricing. As a long-term decision. Even though we do have some urban sprawl, farmers will depend on us to be their local supplier for years to come. No other company has made this type of commitment to be here for the long term.

Convenience stores

Was it a good idea to franchise with Holiday? Again, I would say an absolute yes. With that being said, when Holiday (a family run business) sold out to a large cooperation (Circle K) with several thousand stores, things naturally change. Communications with a large company naturally become more difficult, but on the positive side, having the strength of a national brand on our side is an absolute must.

Remember, at Mid-County:

• You have a voice – you as a customer own Mid-County, and you are represented by local people

• You can still talk to a live person on the phone who is friendly and professional

• Equipment and facilities are modern and continuously updated – this helps maintain a high level of service

• The profits are returned to you in the form of dividends and stock

As always, I appreciate your comments to improve your coop.

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Residential propane gas system maintenance



Petroleum Operations (952) 466-3727 danh@midcountycoop.com

The gas system in and around your home is dependent upon a series of equipment that all need to work together to provide efficient and safe delivery into and throughout the home.

Our service department works hard to keep your gas system updated and working properly.

Mid-County Coop keeps detailed records of each propane tank and info related to each structure that tank feeds. As the owner or lessee named on the tank, you may receive communication from us regarding a number of different service milestones that need to be performed at the residence or on the tank itself.

• Leak Checks - Every 5 years (checks entire gas system from the tank to the end appliance)

• Flow & Lockup – Coincides with leak checks. This test is done inside the home and at the appliance to make sure regulators are adjusted correctly for maximum efficiency and appliance safety.

• **Regulator Replacement** – The propane industry has adopted a 20yr manufacturer suggested life span

on most regulators. Each home has at least 2 regulators working in the gas system. One is on the tank that reduces pressure coming from the tank, and one is on the structure reducing the pressure before entering the interior. Some homes may also have additional interior regulators that control pressures at each appliance.

• Propane tank maintenance – Each tank receives visual inspection every time the tank gets filled or any time service work is performed. Tanks are inspected for outdated or nonworking valves, excessive rust, dents, solid footing or any other notation that would require a closer look. If needed, we may choose to perform repairs on site, or we may exchange the tank with a different one. Our service department is equipped and trained to perform maintenance in and around your home with anything related to the propane gas system.

Our ask to homeowners:

• Call immediately if you smell propane gas. (952) 466-3720

• Let us know of any recent or planned gas appliance changes in the home.

• Let us know about any storm damage in the area where the tank is sitting.

• Communicate any questions or concerns you might have regarding the gas system in your home.

OVER STOCK ITEMS FOR SALE! MC Mid-County

Category	Brand	Item Description	Qty	Unit Size	Price Per Unit	Contact	Phone #
Grease	Mystic	JT6 #2 Multi Purpose Grease 10 pack tubes	20	10 Pack	\$27	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	80W90 Gear Lube (QT)	3	12 Qt Case	\$30	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	Snow Max TC-W3 2 Cycle Ashless Synthetic Blend (QT)	3	12 Qt Case	\$45	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	518 10W (2.5)	5	12 Qt Case	\$25	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	Vacuum Pump Oil (2.5)	1	5 Gal Case	\$50	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	518 10W (2.5)	1	5 Gal Case	\$35	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Serv Pro	75W140 Gear Oil (16)	2	16 Gal Drum	\$240	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	85W140 Gear Lube (2.5)	8	5 Gal Case	\$50	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Castrol	85W140 Gear Lube (2.5)	1	5 Gal Pail	\$35	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Cenex	Premium Ashless 2 Cycle Synthetic (1)	1	6 Gal Case	\$10	Dan	952-466-3720
Oil	Purus	50W T04 Trans (5)	1	5 Gal Pail	\$35	Dan	952-466-3720
Tanks		300 Gallon Stainless Steel Tote for Fuel	4		Call	Quay	952-466-3727
Tanks	ĺ	500 Gallon STEEL Tote for Fuel	2		Call	Quay	952-466-3727
Tanks		Split Tanks 500 + 500 = 1,000	1		Call	Quay	952-466-3727

TEAM MEMBER SPOTLICHT



A family tradition, reimagined: Dieball Dairy's transition to robotic milking

By Austen Neaton

Staff Writer

For just over two decades, Mid-County Coop Board Member Jim Dieball has owned and operated Dieball Dairy LLC, a family-owned operation near Green Isle that milks about 240 cows.

Nearly 10 years ago, Dieball made a move that would redefine the daily rhythms of the farm established by his grandparents many years prior: he transitioned to robotic milking.

Driven by rising labor costs and the desire for a more hands-off operation, the change allowed Dieball Dairy to blend high-tech solutions with generations of farming tradition.

Dieball is the third generation to run Dieball Dairy. He's spent most of his life on the farm, working alongside his family to care for cows and crops. He now lives across the street from his family's farm with his wife Wendy – who manages the operation's books – while his parents remain in the original farmhouse built in the late 1950s.

The Dieballs have two daughters in college, Alyson and Shelby. The farm's fourth generation grew up helping out with milking and other chores, and they continue to pitch in when they return home.

Jim took over Dieball Dairy's day-to-day operations in the early 2000s after graduating from Ridgewater College in Willmar and returning home. Along with dairy, Dieball farms about 1,600 acres of corn and soybeans, using some for feed.

How the robots work

Robotic milking systems, also known as automatic milking systems (AMS), are automated systems that replace humans in the milking process. They utilize robotic arms that attach to cows' teats, clean them, and milk them.

Farmers must still manage the systems and understand their capabilities while monitoring their cows' behavior, feed intake, and health.

There are several leading manufacturers in the robotic milking industry, and among them is Lely, a Netherlands-based company that many consider to be a pioneer. It first brought robotic milkers to the market in 1995 with the debut of its Lely Astronaut system, which revolutionized the industry.

Dieball uses five Lely Astronaut A4s, a newer



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Mid-County Co-op Boardmember and Dieball Dairy owner Jim Dieball stands on the interface side of one of his farm's Lely Astronaut robotic milkers. The system keeps a database of information on every cow in his herd and provides detailed reports of each one's milk production and overall health. Dieball must keep regular tabs on these reports.

model with more features than previous iterations, to milk his cows. It uses a hybrid arm driven by electric and pneumatic components to attach milking cups to each teat.

The arm is guided by a three-layer laser detection system and a 3D camera that ensures each cow's comfort and precision milking.

The system keeps a database of each cow's teat position once they have been milked. Every cow wears a collar that the AMS uses to identify which one is in it.

The collars also track cow activity, and using this information and the data gathered during milking, the Astronaut can track a cow's milk quality, udder health, and other factors related to milk production and cow health.

This helps to identify health issues in cows early.

"The collar tracks activity and rumination, and then when cows get milked the system tracks the temperature of the milk, so if the cows are off physically then it will alert us and give us a health report telling us she's not feeling good, or if they're in heat it will even tell us that it's time to breed them," Dieball said.

Once cows enter the Astronaut, it dispenses a grain mix rationed specifically for them. Rationing is determined by a cow's milk production and lactation phase.

The grain is the incentive for the animals to enter the system's milking area, and Dieball said that cows eventually learn to do so on their own several times per day. The systems also handle everything from cleaning the teats to storing the milk in bulk tanks.

Once milking is complete, cows can easily exit the Astronaut. The robots milk cows around the clock.

Each robot features an intuitive user interface that provides easy access to the machine's functions, settings, information, and reports.

Robotic milking systems should be housed in free-stall parlors that encourage free cow traffic, which lets cows decide when they eat, drink, lie down, and are milked. Dieball said this improves cows' well-being, maximizing milk production.

Dieball has three of his machines on one end of his parlor with the other two on the other end, which he said improves cow flow and reduces competition for the machines between higher and lower-ranking cows.

He uses sand for bedding in his parlor because it gives his cows a cool, comfortable spot to lay down.

"It can be hard for equipment, but it's the best for cows – sand is the gold standard for cow comfort," Dieball said.

Dieball Dairy typically offers tours of its facility; however, due to concerns over the avian flu, they have been put on hold.

To learn more about the family-owned operation or to see its robots in action, visit the farm's Facebook page.

More about the Lely Astronaut can be found at: www.lelyna.com.

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TEAM MEMBER SPOTLICHT

MC Mid-County

The switch to robotics

Dieball decided to invest in robotic milking systems about seven years ago. With the dairy industry facing labor shortages and rising expenses, he saw robotic milking as a way to replace variable labor costs with a set cost.

"When I talk about it with other dairymen, I always say that when I signed the dotted line for the robots years ago, our milking labor essentially became a fixed cost," Dieball said. "Imagine what labor costs were like back then and compare it to what it is today – our payments haven't changed, so we basically have an eight-year-old labor cost."

Agricultural labor costs have continued to rise in the time since, while shortages have become increasingly common in many areas, according to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The agency has also found that non-citizens from Mexico make up about half of the agricultural labor force in the US, and with the current political climate, a lot of farmers utilizing foreign workers through visa programs or other means are worried they may lose these employees.

Thanks to his robots, Dieball is not one of these farmers. His robotic milking systems have also provided several other benefits.

Before switching over, Dieball Dairy had about 100 to 120 heifers and cows. Following the transition, Dieball was able to double the size of his herd to about 240.

Each cow is producing more milk than before. When he was milking by hand, Dieball typically got two milkings per day from each cow. With his robots, most of his cows are milked three times per day, with some averaging closer to three-and-a-half milkings.

Dieball said that while his robots require less from him physically and allow him to be more hands-off, the trade-off is that they demand more from him mentally. Rather than having to milk more than 100 cows each day, he now has to keep tabs on the cow reports from the machine and maintain the robots.

The main chore on the farm now is guiding new cows close to going dry into the AMS twice a day. With the added flexibility the robots offer, Dieball can spend more time in the field overseeing his crops.

Making sure robots are the right fit

Dieball said that while switching to robotic milking has worked out great for his operation, it isn't a move that every dairy farmer should



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

One of Dieball Dairy's cows stands comfortably in one of the farm's Lely Astronaut robotic milking systems while the machine's hybrid arm milks the cow using four suction cups, one for each teat. The system replaces humans in the milking process, resulting in better efficiency, higher production, and higher milk quality. The robots dispense grain for the cow in them, which incentivizes the animals to enter the milking areas on their own.

make.

For starters, it required a huge financial investment from Dieball to both purchase the necessary equipment and construct a new, 20,000-plus square-feet free-stall parlor to house it. He initially installed three robots and added two more about a year ago.

The robots cost hundreds of thousands of dollars each, and while constructing a new parlor isn't always necessary, most farmers would at least need to renovate their parlors to accommodate the machines.

Dieball said that though the cost can be worth it, farmers purchasing robots should do their due diligence when looking at the scale they will need for their herds and the production they can realistically expect post-transition. If a farmer overestimates the production robots can provide, things can go downhill quickly.

"You've got to know what your break-even cost is on your current operation before you're even thinking about investing in robots," Dieball said. "It's the type of thing where if you don't know what your cost of production is today, then how can you plan to invest to do something tomorrow? You've got to know your numbers and be realistic with yourself about your management ability."



Shelby Dieball performs maintenance work on one of the farm's robotic milkers. While the systems replace humans in the milking process, each robot must be maintained by its owners.

Each machine has a capacity of about 50 to 60 cows per day, and pushing that limit can reduce the efficiency of the robots, resulting in lower milk production.

Dieball said those who want to make the switch must be open to new technologies and how they work.

"If you're afraid of technology, it might not be something for an individual that doesn't want to grasp it," he said.

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TEAM MEMBER SPOTLICHT

He added that Lely offers farmers a lot of help preparing their farms, installing the systems, and learning to operate and manage them. The company also offers preventive maintenance checks to catch potential defects early.

Dieball also said farmers should ignore those who say that robotic milking systems break down frequently.

"I talk very highly of them, they're very reliable – they have their days and things break, but they do their job and harvest a lot of milk," he said.

He added he may not still be in the dairy business without robotic milking.

"If we didn't have automation, I likely wouldn't have cows because of the workload and the labor you need," Dieball said. "When we made that decision I didn't really want to milk a whole bunch of cows; this way we get more production, and I didn't have to get grossly bigger."

"We're getting what we expected out of it and what our financial planning projected," he added. "I'm happy we did what we did."

The robots are also helping Dieball Dairy continue to compete against industrial dairy farms which are growing increasingly larger and putting smaller, family-owned operations out of business.

Mid-County man

Dieball has been a member of the Mid-County Co-op board of directors for more than a decade. He said he has enjoyed being a part of the co-op and watching it grow over the years.

"It's really neat to look at where the company



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Some of Dieball Dairy's cows poke their heads out of their stalls to eat. The farm's free-stall parlor was designed to encourage free cow traffic, allowing the cows to decide when they eat, drink, lie down, and are milked. This improves cows' well-being, maximizing milk production.

was at when I joined and see how it's grown to where it's at today," he said. "It's a very wellmanaged company that does a lot for farmers in

STOCK ITEMS FOR

the area, and it's fun to be on a board that has been successful."

MC Mid-County



Category	Brand	Item Description	Qty	Unit Size	Price Per Unit	Contact	Phone #
Tires	Michelin	Defender LTX M/S LT275/70R18 LRE 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$256.32	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Goodyear	Wrangler SR-A LT 265/60R20 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$199.09	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Hankook	Dynapro AT2 LT 245/75R17 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$159	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Mickey Thompson	BAJA BOSS AT LT285/65R18 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$298.32	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Firestone	Destination LE3 P235/65R18 Load Range SL 106T	4	Tire	\$187	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Firestone	All Season P235/70R16 Load Range SL 104T	4	Tire	\$131	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Hankook	Dynapro AT2 P245/75R17 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$159	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	NITTO	Dura Grappler HT LT275/70R18 10 PLY	4	Tire	\$188.48	Truck Center	952-466-3710
Tires	Firestone	Winter Force 2 P215/55R17 Load Range SL 94S	4	Tire	\$110	Truck Center	952-466-3710





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Open to find out what your Coop is up to!

Mid-County



Zach Koktavy - Custom Applicator

Zach Koktavy is from Northfield, Minnesota. He grew up on a 2000 acre farm and enjoyed farming so much that he pursued a career in the agronomy field. Zach started at Mid-County in March, just in time to learn the ropes and be ready for the busy planting season. He likes that Mid-County is dedicated to helping farmers, both

small and large. When Zach isn't working, he enjoys hiking, camping, down-hill skiing and working on cars. He finds abandoned vehicles, fixes them up and gets them running. He then looks for a buyer that will appreciate them and take good care of them.



Alex Klaustermeier- Custom Applicator

Alex has worked in the Agronomy Department since 2013. He grew up on his parent's, Mark and Nissa Klaustermeier, farm in rural Cologne bringing a great agriculture background with him. He also earned a degree in farm operations/management from Ridgewater College in Willmar. Alex started out as an intern doing crop scouting and soil sampling but soon was promoted

to a custom applicator. He also helps out delivering propane for our Petroleum Department which is an added bonus to Mid-County.

Alex still enjoys farming with his family raising cattle and crop farming, and spending time with his wife Katie and son Dalton.



Quay Zander- Energy Manager

Quay began his career with Mid-County on May 7, 2001 as a custom applicator in the Agronomy Department. He eventually moved into the Engery Department where he oversees the pricing, contracting, dispatching, and serving of Mid-County patrons.

Quay and his wife Nancy live on their family farm north of Waverly where he enjoys spending time with family and grand kids. He also has a passion for hunting, fishing, and collecting JI Case tractors and equipment.



Ryan Pawelk - Sales Agronomist

Ryan is one of our sales agronomists here at Mid-County. He grew up in Hollywood Township near New Germany and currently lives in Watertown. Ryan attended Ridgewater College in Willmar where he received his AAS degree in Agriculture Business. He then attended Southwest Minnesota State in Marshall and earned a Bachelor's degree in Crops, Soils, and Pest Management. He cur-

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rently has 25 years of experience in the industry and has held a Certified Crop Advisor license for 18 years.

What Ryan enjoys most about working at Mid-County is helping the farmers reach their yield goals by working with them on their input decisions and being in their fields keeping an eye on their crops. He also enjoys how variable the job is as it changes season to season.

Outside of work, Ryan enjoys relaxing by a campfire, barbeguing, being on an ocean beach and most of all spending time with his wife Bria, his 10-year-old son Peyton, his 4-year-old daughter Collins, and the rest of his family.

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