

Both Andy Norton and Rene Norton choose to go to Texas Tech University for different reasons. After starting his degree at Texarkana College, everyone expected Andy to finish his agricultural degree at Texas A&M University. And that expectation is the exact reason Andy opted to go to the only other university in Texas at the time offering an agricultural degree, Texas Tech. Rene started her college education at what was then Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos, but she was not happy there. At the time, girls could not attend Texas A&M University, and the University of Texas was “too hippie” for Rene. So she transferred to Texas Tech.

While in Lubbock pursuing their degrees, Andy and Rene met. Rene graduated before Andy and moved back to her native San Antonio, where she taught for a year before Andy moved her to his hometown of Texarkana. In June of 1971 the pair were married. Their family would grow to include first a set of twin boys, Scott and Paul, followed by another son, Eric. A few years later they welcomed their daughter, Sharon. The baby sister of the family, Karen, was the last to join the Norton clan.

But the Norton history in Texarkana dates back much farther than the union of Andy and Rene. In fact, the current group of Norton grandkids (Scarlett Stussy, Savannah Stussy, Ray Norton, Summer Stussy, Alex Norton, Emily Norton, Julia Norton, Brock Norton, Kaylee Norton, Carter Norton and Brett Norton) are the fifth generation of Nortons to call this area home.

Andy’s grandfather, Fred Norton, was originally from the Alabama area, but he moved to Texarkana looking for a better life. He found that life near what today is FM 989 in Texarkana, Texas, where he opened a dairy farm.

“My grandfather started milking cows because he couldn’t make a living raising cotton, and that was back in the days when they milked the cows by hand, and the milk was stored in cold water vats and carried to town every morning in milk cans like that right there,” Andy said as he pointed to a milk can sitting near the fire place in the family living room.

“His grandfather, I think this is interesting, brought the Holstein cow to Texarkana,” Rene added. “And he also brought electricity over here on (FM) 989.”

Fred was instrumental in another important part of Texarkana’s growth: shaping the development of King’s Highway.

“He was involved in a lot of community type stuff, and he was the type of fellow that could talk to people and explain to them the benefits of the road,” Andy said. “Not everyone bought into it, but he was able to get enough people to donate right-of-ways that the state took interest in buying what they had to buy. They knew they couldn’t come through and condemn right-of-way on both sides of the little dirt trail, so they got those that would give, and once they got enough to have a major start in it, the state began to petition for more right-of-way.”

Fred was married to Ruth, and they had six children who grew up milking cattle. In 1964, 10 years after Fred Norton died, Ruth sold the dairy farm.

Andy’s dad, Millege Norton, Sr., had a dairy farm of his own when Andy was born in 1947, and he ran that dairy for almost 20 years. By the time Andy returned from Texas Tech University with a degree in agriculture, Millege had closed the dairy and turned his business to growing row crops and raising cattle.

“After I got out of school, I worked for mom and daddy for a year as kind of a ‘I think I ought to type deal,’” Andy said. “I knew at the end of a year I would want to do something different.”

About nine months into his tenure working for his parents, Andy’s dad asked him what he wanted to do with his life.

“He knew that wasn’t what I wanted to do,” Andy said. “I said, ‘What I want to do is milk cows.’”

Andy's choice to run a dairy came because he knew of all the different types of agriculture and farming he had been involved with, dairy provided the most consistent income. But that consistency also required a lot more dedication and hard work than the other types of farming.

"You worked every day of the year," Andy said. "Of the 25-and-a-half years that we were in the dairy business, I missed probably 25 days out of seven days a week."

Those seven days a week included holidays, creating a truly unique Christmas family tradition. On Christmas mornings, Andy and the older boys would head out to milk the cows about 3:30 in the morning. The younger kids were not allowed to come into the family den to see what Santa had left until everyone had returned from the dairy and had taken showers.

"Santa Clause would come when the milking was done," Andy noted with a laugh. "We always tried to make Christmas, even though it was a 12 or 14 hours work day, still Christmas was a special time. There was just something special about feeding cows and milking cows on Christmas morning that people don't understand."

The Nortons sold their dairy in 1997 to the only other dairy farmer in Texarkana, Miller County Judge Roy John McNatt.

"We were close friends in the dairy business, and we had been talking about how one of us needed to buy the other one out," Andy said. "Just out of the clear blue he showed up at the dairy one morning while we were cleaning up and said he wanted to buy the cows. He had on a clean shirt and clean pants, and here we were with manure all over us, and I told him, 'Little boy, you can go take your little clean shirt and your little clean pants and get back to your little white car and take yourself back to Arkansas.'"

Andy thought McNatt was just joking about buying out the dairy, but McNatt was persistent and told him he was serious about the buyout. So Andy told him he wanted to think about it and would make him a deal before he went to bed that night.

"I didn't tell him what time I was going to bed," Andy said with a big grin on his face and a hefty laugh. "And when the 10 o'clock news went off, I was sitting here and she (Rene) was sitting there, and I looked at her and said, 'What do you think?'"

They decided to sell the dairy farm, but it was a tough decision.

"That was like selling the heart out of your body, but I called and threatened his life if he couldn't get the money. It was like false hope, the mother of all jokes if it was a joke," said Andy, alluding to the fact that he and McNatt had joked with each other for years on many different aspects of the dairy business.

It wasn't a joke and by noon the next day, McNatt had purchased all of the cattle, and Andy and Rene started a new life. Rene started teaching at Pleasant Grove High School and Andy took a job in sales at Miller Bowie Supply Company, but the 26 years of lessons learned from raising five kids on a dairy farm lived on to impact Texarkana in a great way.

"The greatest thing we both have is everyone we talk to, everyone we meet, has something great to say about our kids," Rene said.

Growing up on a dairy, the Norton kids learned the importance of hard work and honesty.

"It was a wonderful way to raise kids because it teaches them responsibility. It teaches them that life doesn't revolve around them, it revolves around the dairy," Rene said with a chuckle. "And it teaches them about life, so many kids don't know about life or death. They saw it with the cattle, and of course we had dogs and other animals out at the barns."

The lessons learned on the dairy helped make each member of the Norton family a valuable asset to the Texarkana community, where the Norton siblings are all doing their part to make positive impacts on the lives of others.

Scott Norton is currently the director of workforce development at Texarkana College and serves on the Texarkana Texas City Council. He is married to his wife, April, who he met at the 2009 American Heart Association Heart Ball through their friend, Robin Court. The two have six kids, ages six to fifteen. Like his parents, Scott also attended Texas Tech University, where he earned two bachelors degrees. In 2002 Scott earned a masters degree from Texas A&M University in Texarkana. Scott is involved in numerous civic organizations and continues to give back to the community.

Christmas time on the dairy is still a fond memory for Scott. His favorite Christmas memory was spending the night in the family's office and sneaking into the living room to see what Santa brought while his parents were out working the dairy (CHECK THIS FACT).

Paul Norton is the principal at Texas High School. He and his wife, Holly, are expecting their third child in March. The couple leads a community group at Fellowship Bible Church, and Paul is the chair of the American Cancer Society Golf Tournament. Paul is also a graduate of Texas Tech University, and he holds a master's degree from Texas A&M University Texarkana. For Paul, family ties are important, and he is grateful that all of his siblings and in-laws still live in Texarkana because their children get to spend holidays with their relatives.

Paul's favorite Christmas gift is the basketball goal that still sits at the end of his parent's driveway. His fondest memory of Christmas time is playing football in the front yard with his brothers.

"It was always Scott and I against Eric," Paul said.

Eric Norton is a science teacher at Texas High School (CHECK THIS FACT). Like his brothers, he too has a bachelor's degree from Texas Tech and a masters degree from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Eric has two kids and attends Fellowship Bible Church. He thinks the most unnoticed things about Texarkana during the holidays are the decorated neighborhoods he enjoys driving through with his children.

Eric's favorite Christmas memory was walking up and down the street he grew up on with his aunt singing Christmas carols at the top of his lungs and listening to the Christmas Chipmunks record as the family decorated the house. And like Paul, Eric enjoys playing football in the family's front yard on Christmas Day after everyone has finished opening their gifts.

Sharon (Norton) Holt used to teach third grade at Pleasant Grove I.S.D., but she now enjoys being a stay-at-home mom with her two children. She met her husband, Tim Holt, while exercising at St. Michael's Fitness Center. Sharon also holds a bachelor's degree from Texas Tech University and a master's degree from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. Sharon is a member of Pleasant Grove Christian Church and is active in the American Cancer Society Golf Tournament.

Sharon's favorite Christmas tradition was when all five kids lined up in the hallway after everyone was back from working on the dairy and then raced into the living room to search for Christmas gifts. The favorite gift Sharon ever received was a Cabbage-Patch Kids doll.

Karen Norton is the assistant band director at Texarkana I.S.D. Unlike her siblings, Karen did not attend Texas Tech University, but only because she had a full scholarship to Henderson State University, where she earned a bachelors in music education. Karen is a musician in the Texarkana Symphony Orchestra, a member of the Texarkana Community Band and attends Pleasant Grove Christian Church.

Karen fondly remembers the family's dairy Christmas tradition.

“We could not open gifts until the boys were home from the dairy. They would take forever to shower, and when they would finally be ready, they would take off down the hallway and drag me away from all the gifts. They found it hilarious,” she said.

In addition to giving back to the community, the Nortons are also there to support each other at important moments in their lives.

“These kids have always been real close,” Rene said. “Teachers would always comment, ‘These kids are happy to see each other.’ They always come whenever they’re needed.”

When Karen was nominated for homecoming queen at Henderson State University, only one member of her family was missing from the stands to watch as her name was announced as the 2007 homecoming queen. Paul was pulling duties as principal at Texas High School that same day for their homecoming, but his brother Scott called as soon as the announcement was made.

“Paul told Scott, I’ve never been so excited, and I’ve never been so sad,” Rene said as she recalled how her kids continue to be supportive of each other.

It is the family bond and deep family roots that continue to be a strong fiber in the community helping to tie Texarkana together.