**Got Milk?**

At one time, most cows lived in rural areas in small herds kept by families. It was the habit of farmers then to put the cows out in pastures to feed and to milk them twice a day. Milking was a laborious task. It was done by hand at first and eventually by machines, which still had to be attached to each cow by a human.

Today the majority of cow habitations are large operations involving hundreds or even thousands of cows living in barns. One of the major changes that is occurring in other countries, as well as in the United States, is that cows are being milked three or more times a day, by robots! Using this method, where cows also set their own schedules, has led to increased milk production by individual cows.

Cows begin to give milk after they give birth to their first calf, and then continue to produce for more than 300 days. They can be excellent producers for up to six cycles. With the robotic milking machines, cows are taught to enter the milking stalls when they decide they want to be milked. Each cow has an ear tag that signals the robot when she enters a stall and is ready to be milked. Laser scanners help guide the cups to attach to the cow. The milk that is pumped is then funneled into a large container. The whole process takes as little as six minutes per cow, including pre- and post-milking sanitation.

According to reports by manufacturers of the robotic machines, the decision by small farmers to use them has enabled them to keep their herds. The companies say that although the machines are expensive, they reduce labor costs and help cows excel at milk production. Many dairy farmers seem to agree.