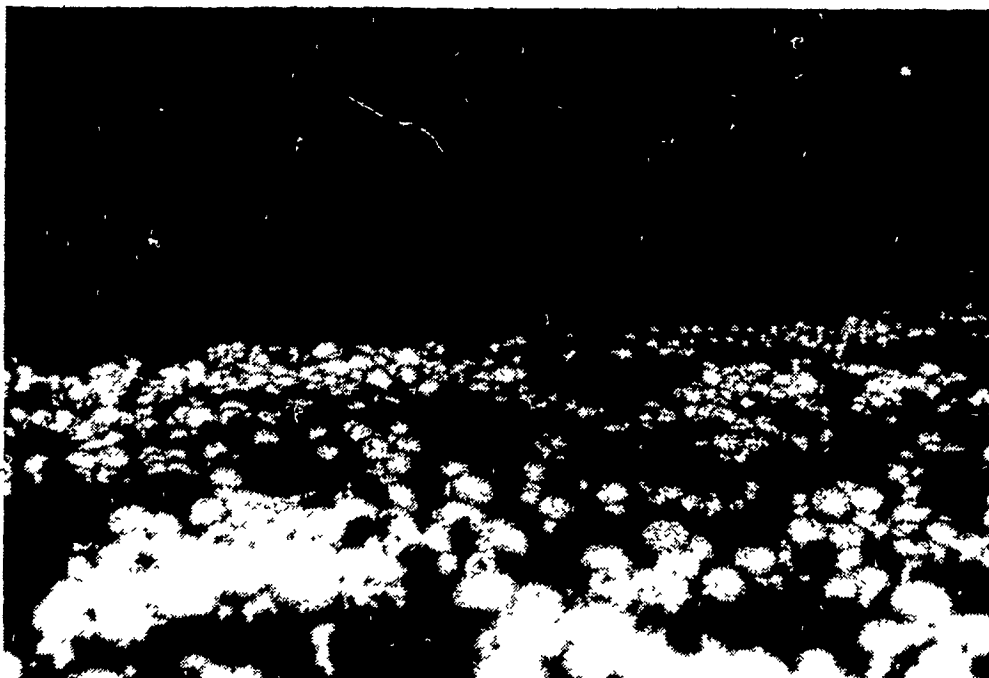


# She's glad when 'breaks' are over



Mrs. George Blevins, a helper. She is wearing gear for picking in the weighs a 10 pound basket of dark mushroom house. mushrooms which were just picked.



Mushrooms during a "break."



Spawn shown at the side of a bed section.

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Feature Writer

After spending three or four hours in the barn each morning, Jettie Mills heads to the house because there is a break, and the beds need attention. She is not going to the farmhouse for a leisurely cup of coffee and a chance to prop her feet up to watch TV or read a book. She is going to the mushroom house where a "break" refers to the crop in its peak of production when a solid white blanket of mushrooms pop up all over the 24, five-and-one-half-foot wide by 60-foot-long "beds".

"This mushroom business is just a side line for us," Mrs. Mills explains. With over 100 dairy animals and 173 acres to tend to, Frank and Jettie Mills, Nottingham, R1, grow the mushrooms for the cannery, rather than for the more involved cutting and packing operations. "There is too much labor involved in that kind of operation," Mrs. Mills adds. "We keep picking ours a lot longer than those who cut and pack for market."

The Mills start picking early in December and have big breaks usually until the end of January with four people picking every day for eight hours. Then, through April and May, two people pick steadily four or five hours each day.

Actually, the work on the mushroom crop, as with other farming ventures, begins long before harvest. Mushrooms don't appear on the beds until 60 days after the house is filled. The block house contains 24 beds each five-and-one-half feet wide and 60 feet long. Four rows, six beds high, constitute what is called a double house. The beds are built of wood and filled with 140 to 160 yards of mushroom compost specially prepared with a mixture of one-half manure and one-half synthetic materials. The synthetic materials are generally alfalfa or grass hay which has been rained on before being baled.

A conveyer system and a work crew bring the compost into the house and the beds. The day after the house is filled with the compost, it is steamed for six to eight hours by an oil-fired steamer brought on truck to the farm. The steam is pumped under pressure into the house through pipes so that a temperature of 140 to 145 degrees results. The temperature is held at that point for four hours then eased down to 120 to 135 degrees for a week to 10 days and finally allowed to drop to 80 degrees at the end of 14 days after steaming is done.

When the bed or soil temperature is 70 to 75 degrees, the spawn can be seeded. Mushroom spawn is broadcast by hand onto the beds by using millet or some other sterilized seed which has the mushroom spores or seeds coated on it. In a few days the spores grow into a fine cobweb appearance all over the dirt in the beds. Clear plastic is laid over the beds to hold the moisture, and the spawn is allowed to "run" or spread for two weeks.

After growing for these two weeks, the spawn is covered with a three-quarters of an inch deep layer of good top soil with a pH of 7.5 or 7.6. The top soil is taken from the farm itself and sterilized before putting it into the mushroom house. The process of covering the spawn with soil is called casing.

Frank Mills estimated that the amount of soil used is approximately 48 quarts to a section. Each section is four

feet by five and one-half feet in sections to a bed.

When the spawn starts coming through the dirt, watering begins. He uses a hose with a rose-head attachment which provides a fine spray. He waters every day, skipping now and then. He can water the beds in an hour or an hour and a half.

"A light spray is better than too much at one time," he explains. "The soil to be pretty wet for the mushrooms grow well."

The mushrooms are grown in the dark at a temperature of 58 degrees with daily watering to provide the needed moisture to develop the delicacies.

At harvest time the mushrooms are pulled out of the dark by hand and the roots are cut off into a container and mushrooms placed into plastic baskets which hold 10 pounds each. The baskets are weighed on scales checked by inspectors so that accurate weights are recorded. The baskets are taken to a truck daily to local canneries.

This year, according to Mills, the price has been high with 72 cents a pound paid for mushrooms on Dec. 1. The price has dropped 7 cents a pound to 65 cents this week. Last year the price averaged 52 cents with 40 cents being paid in February and 64 cents paid in May. After the New Year, the price drops with a drop in demand and

## Homestead

### Notes

abundance on the market. Mushrooms grow best at about 58 degrees, air-conditioning is necessary for warm weather resulting in high prices.

For the shopper to get the most out of the money she spends on mushrooms, Mrs. Mills suggests she choose those with the caps still attached against the stem.

"They are never very pretty in the store when you are used to seeing them fresh and white on the beds like they she laments as she shows them growing on the section beside her. "They are displayed in the stores in the light and light turns them brown. Really, they should be stored in a brown paper bag in the refrigerator and kept dry and used. Sunlight and water on them will ruin them," she emphasized.

To make creamed mushrooms, a recipe as distinctive to Chester County as chow-chow is to the Pennsylvania Dutch - wash mushrooms and drain. Place them in a pan with a tight-fitting lid and cook in their own liquid for 10 minutes. Add condensed milk, butter, salt and pepper to taste. Thicken with flour and milk, Mrs. Mills advises. "Never add water to mushrooms - they provide their own liquid."

"We really like breaded mushrooms even though they are tedious to make. Wash and drain them; dip into egg and milk mixture, roll in cracker crumbs and deep fry."

When a break means eight hours a day pulling mushrooms, besides the seven or seven hours spent in the barn, Mrs. Mills is more than glad when her break is over!