

# Meet the man who created the cartoon

## 'Rural Route'

### thrives on farm humor



"Little Luke," the farmer who regularly stars in "Rural Route," was created five or six years ago by Tom Armstrong. Up until March of last year Armstrong kept the little fellow strictly within the family on greeting

cards. "Little Luke" himself is an extension of his creator, while many of the ideas are based on Armstrong's own experiences in agriculture and agribusiness.

By DIETER KRIEG  
SELLERSVILLE, Pa. — For more than a year now readers of Lancaster Farming have been laughing with and at a little farmer known as "Little Luke." He's the main character of the cartoon strip "Rural Route", which appears weekly and exclusively within the pages of this newspaper. "Rural Route's" creator is free-lance artist Tom Armstrong who lives near this Montgomery town with his wife and two sons, Keith 18, and Scott 13.

When Armstrong introduced himself and his cartoon to Lancaster Farming's editor last year, the idea was an instant hit which spread quickly throughout the staff. After all, who could resist laughing at a little fellow who finds himself before a judge saying "No your honor, I did not know the milk inspector was behind me when I engaged the manure spreader."

More recently, the innovative little character allowed for ten acres of coffee trees in his cropping program.

Week after week, he treats his audiences with laughs. Armstrong is a 1955 graduate of Penn State University with a degree in animal science. He was a member of the livestock judging team and had at one time been herdsman of one of the largest purebred Angus herds in the East. Then eight years in agricultural business with a farm machinery dealer brought him in direct contact with many farmers. Those ties have never been broken and are a source of many of the ideas Armstrong puts down on paper in the form of witty cartoons.

"I'll never run out of ideas for "Rural Route" as long as there is life." Armstrong assured this writer recently during a visit at his home, studio, and mini-farm. Yes,

Armstrong still maintains a strong interest in the land and keeps several sheep in his old Montgomery County barn. That probably does not come as a surprise to most followers of "Rural Route" since "Little Luke" tells it pretty much the way it is. Some examples follow:

Standing by his workbench attempting to fix some unrecognizable contraption, "Little Luke" loses patience with himself, exclaiming "This is the last time I wait 'till Spring to put together something I took apart in the Fall."

In another strip, "Little Luke" made new hex signs for his barn — one for fertilizing, one for crop abundance, and one for the milk inspector. The latter showed the prongs of a pitchfork.

Then there's the one about the knotter on a baler which was giving him trouble. The baler had just finished making a super long bale

when "Luke" voiced his irritation.

On another occasion the busy little farmer came into the house completely bushed and was ready to relax for hours. "Ahhhh... does this chair feel good," he sighed. "It would take World War III to move me now," he says while settling down to complete comfort. Just then his son opens the door and hollers "Hey Dad!!, You'd better come out to the barn. We got some ewes gonna lamb."

Armstrong creates his cartoons in three stages, a process which takes approximately 1½ hours per strip. First he plans things mentally. He always has a notepad at his side, and jots down ideas as they enter his mind. Aside from visualizing the ideas themselves, Armstrong must also decide how the story can best be told. That determines the number of panels a particular strip will have.

The next step is to make a pencil sketch of the cartoon, along with the wording. Finally, he does the complete drawing in ink, with grammar being checked for accuracy by his wife.

"The ideas come from my experiences," Armstrong said, who now earns his living by working as a free-lance artist. The cartoon is just more or less a hobby. The bread and butter career involves putting his artistic talents to work for advertising agencies.

"I've always pictured "Little Luke" as myself," Armstrong continued. "I created the little fellow about five or six years ago." He evolved on home-made Christmas cards, and Armstrong never dreamed of having him appear in a newspaper. "Nobody in the family ever gets a commercially produced greeting card," the cartoonist said with a note of self satisfaction. He creates his own cards and sent one of them to Lancaster Farming for Christmas last year.

Armstrong says he has been drawing since he was a kid, becoming a professional in 1961 when he joined an advertising agency as art director. For the past three years he has been working as a free-lancer.

"Rural Route's" creator describes the main character as "an honest, hard working man with perhaps an above average dislike for bureaucracy, red tape, and the interferences by others in his chosen profession."

The whole idea behind "Little Luke and Rural Route" is humor. Armstrong explained that some things may not seem funny at the moment they happen, — like the knotter which is turning out extra long bales — but it's funny afterwards and we should all be able to laugh at our problems and frustrations. "If there's no humor, you miss a lot in



"Rural Route" creator Tom Armstrong has his roots on the farm and spends some of his spare time with his sheep. "As long as there is life, I'll never run out of ideas for the cartoon

strip," says Armstrong, who has been contributing the popular weekly cartoon to Lancaster Farming for more than a year

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