

Organic farming is a way of life

By DIETER KRIEG

PENNS CREEK, Pa.—Organic farming isn't easy, nor is it a cost-saving venture which leaves the farmer with greater profits. Rather, to be a true organic farmer, it means having greater expenses, in comparison with the yields coming forth from the fields and prices received. While commercial fertilizer and chemical costs are eliminated entirely, expenses are incurred by such practices as only cultivating two-thirds of the land at a time, while letting the rest lay idle, and hiring people to pull weeds.

Paul Keene, who owns a 500-acre organic farm near this northern Snyder County community, is one individual who takes organic farming very seriously. To him, it's a way of life, not just a business, and it's something to which he professes total dedication. His story, he says, is one of a never-ending love affair with life.

In this, the second article in a series on organic farming, Keene tells of his philosophy and how he got started with his now 31-year old business.

A graduate of Lebanon Valley College and Yale University, Keene spent five years teaching and was within reach of his doctorate degree when he suddenly experienced the urge to live a more simple life.

The turning point in Keene's life came in India, where he spent nearly two years on a leave of absence from his position as head of the department of mathematics at a small New Jersey college. He spent some time at a rural school run by Mahatma Gandhi and became very much interested in agriculture, rural living, and nutrition. While in India, Keene met his wife, the former Betty Morgan.

When he returned from India, Keene was no longer satisfied with his chosen career. A two-year stay at the School of Living near Suffern, N.Y. followed, where he helped in the teaching of "a kind of decentralized, self-sufficient, back-to-the-soil, do-it-yourself homesteading."

Next in a series of steps which led Keene to become one of the world's foremost organic farmers, was his involvement with the Kimberton Farms School near Philadelphia. It was the only organic farm school in the country at that time and was headed by Dr. Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, world-famous authority on organic farming who came to this country from Switzerland.

It was with this kind of a background that Keene, then 35, and his wife purchased a secluded, hilly, and rocky farm in early 1946.

Despite all their learning and varied experiences, they found out that farming was tougher than they realized.

Keene recalls the early years:

"Sometimes the going was really hard, even for a young family, and it took more endurance and faith than we thought we could muster. Fortunately, there was more on the bright side than on the dark. We can see now the baby sleeping at the edge of the corn field as we hand-husked the quarter-mile rows of golden grain on a heavenly autumn day. One day of that made up for all the anguish a whole month could produce."

"Our concern in those days was several-fold. We were practically destitute and had to make a living for a growing family.

The Keenes began farming convinced that the organic route was the one to take and they worked towards that end. To their knowledge, their acreage had never been treated with chemicals and they were determined to keep it that way. It was this attitude which opened the door to a thriving business.

News of their farming principles got around, and in time

people requested the Keenes to sell them—some of their home-made old-fashioned apple butter. "Next came easily shipped products, such as 'potatoes, carrots, beets, eggs, chickens,'" Keene recollected. As demand for their products grew, so did the size of the operation. The family purchased its first stone mill in 1949 and has been building new facilities every couple of years. Their business now circles the globe with an average of more than 3½ tons of food being shipped out daily.

"Organic farming isn't for everyone," Keene told Lancaster Farming in a recent interview. It requires a lot of work and dedication, and he admits that some of today's profit and production pressures would make it nearly impossible for many farmers to get into it. Prices of machinery, land, and production could all be prohibitive in comparison to the return a farmer gets for his products. One of the reasons organic farming is working for Keene is that land was still cheap when he purchased the farm. Nevertheless, he and his wife started with just \$200 and "a few sticks of furniture."

The economic squeeze faced by farmers in general can get Keene to take on a somewhat bitter tone of voice. Critical of the priorities many individuals have chosen for their lifestyle, he asks: "What makes us think that the only thing that really matters in the ongoing of our physical bodies — that we can get the best food for the least money?"

This is what agriculture has been driven to, Keene claims. Pressures are always on the farmer to produce

more for less, while consumers and politicians keep the vicious cycle going. He is abhorred by the idea of raising anything in cages or increasing production by means of chemicals, yet he understands how today's farming community has had to go that direction in order to meet demands of society.

Whiel sympathetic to the problem, he doesn't agree with the trend, and believes a day of reckoning will follow at some point in the future.


"The basic thing that mankind must be concerned with is the preservation of the soil in a healthy state," the grandfatherly, yet vigorous Keene explained. "Nothing else matters as much as that, and if food is going to cost more because of it than it now costs to preserve the soil, then it's got to cost more — you don't question it," he continued. "We have to build our lives, society, and far-

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