

# Farm and Home Center

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He recalls, "There were about a dozen people who really thought it should go through."

The Board was organized in 1960 and plans were made to go ahead but the process came to a grinding halt when the Internal Revenue Service refused to grant a tax-exempt status to the Foundation or to rule that gifts were tax deductible. It was several years before the ruling could be changed and the project continued.

Willis was personally involved with travel to Washington, D.C. to work with the IRS in establishing the non-profit status for the Foundation. He called the process "sort of normal."

"There are so many people who want tax-exemptions," he pointed out.

Once the ruling was favorable Esbenshade recalls, "We got things going. And after we showed them the building, that really got them interested."

In retrospect, Esbenshade now says, "The Center is a good thing, and the buildings were well planned. It is now well patronized."

Larry Skroome, retired vice president of engineering at Sperry New Holland and co-chairman of the initial fund raising campaign, remembers that acquiring the money to get started was not easy. "It was tough. At one point we were short \$100,000 but we went ahead. It was a new idea, a new concept," he states.

He agrees with Esbenshade about the importance of the favorable IRS ruling, saying, "Getting the IRS ruling was critical."

Skromme gives a great deal of credit to County Extension Agent Max Smith, Levi Brubaker, Elmer Esbenshade and Conestoga National Bank for keeping the project alive and getting it off the ground.

"We got generally good support from industry and from farmers, but it was hard. We tackled a big job. It

took a lot more effort than we thought it would and it took longer than we thought it would."

Melvin Stoltzfus, fourth president of the Board and currently a Board member, agrees with Skromme about the difficulty of getting funds.

"It was hard to get," he states. He explained that many people could not understand moving from rent-free offices at the old Post Office building in downtown Lancaster to new buildings which would cost nearly a half million dollars.

"But there was no division on the Board," Stoltzfus recalls. "We were quite enthused."

Stoltzfus called Skromme "a driving force," and gave his opinion that without the support of Sperry New Holland, the project might never have come to completion.

There was a lot of support for the office portion of the building, but not for the auditorium, which it was felt would not have sufficient revenue. The decision to go ahead with both parts of the

building was a hard one, but Stoltzfus says, "We had to have faith that the money would come in."

B. Snively Garber, the Foundation's second president, also expressed strong feelings about the support of agri-businesses.

"If it hadn't been for the support of Eshleman Feeds, Sperry New Holland and the Poultry Association we might not have made it. They had more vision than we did."

Nevertheless, Garber felt there was good support for the idea. "A lot of people thought it was time to get the Extension office down on the level rather than up those steps at the Post Office building. A lot of people also thought that 4-H clubs were worthy of good facilities. But no ordinary farmer could afford to give much."

Getting money was difficult, Garber said. "With their conservative background, farmers wouldn't put down what they could give over three years." Garber credits the

persistence of Levi Brubaker and Max Smith with keeping the interest in the project, and says it was Skromme's engineering background which convinced them to add the basement.

"We're fortunate we had the foresight we did," Garber states.

Garber traveled to New York State with John Herr, the third president of the Board, Willis Esbenshade and Alex Gerhart to look at centers established there.

While they had not been built with local funds as was planned in Lancaster County, they were serving the function of providing offices and meeting space to the extension office and other agricultural agencies. Garber says, "We really got our eyes opened and knew that this could be accomplished."

Eventually interest grew and the project got underway. Garber says, "More and more people got interested. Farmers couldn't do it alone. We needed others. It was the small donations that took us over the top."

Over \$260,000 was realized from the first campaign which was organized in

January, 1965 under the guidance of Richard Pontz and Associates. But it was necessary to have a "completion fund campaign" in 1967 to raise additional money and that campaign met with a cool reception. One current board member recalls that farmers couldn't understand why they were being asked again when they had given the first time.

Allen K. Risser remembers the beginning of the concept, long before the donation of land made it practical to consider building a Farm and Home Center. He says the rural youth organization had discussed the possibility of central facilities as early as 1941. "We thought it would be nice to have one."

He and his brother Bill took action to gather about seven agricultural leaders and their wives to discuss the idea of a central meeting place, and over a corn roast in Risser's meadow in 1953 these leaders reviewed the possibility.

Risser states, "It was not something for immediate action. It was something to keep in mind if the opportunity presented itself. A lot of people wondered how it

could be set up to be financially feasible. Nothing really happened. We just talked it around a little."

Looking back he says, "I hope that meeting had some influence."

After much delay, groundbreaking for both the office section and the auditorium took place on November 30, 1966. Completion of the building came in February, 1968.

Despite the turmoil and the long years of doubting, most of the early leaders agree that the building they built has served its purpose well. They also accomplished their stated goal of building the Center without the help of state or federal monies, and created a Farm and Home Center which was a first in the state.

Larry Skromme expresses the opinion of nearly everyone connected with the project when he states with a smile, "It's a roaring success."

Current President Jay Landis points out, however, that the Board of Directors will carry on the work of the Foundation, developing more educational programs and providing scholarships to young people.

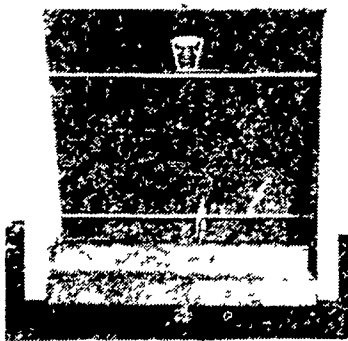
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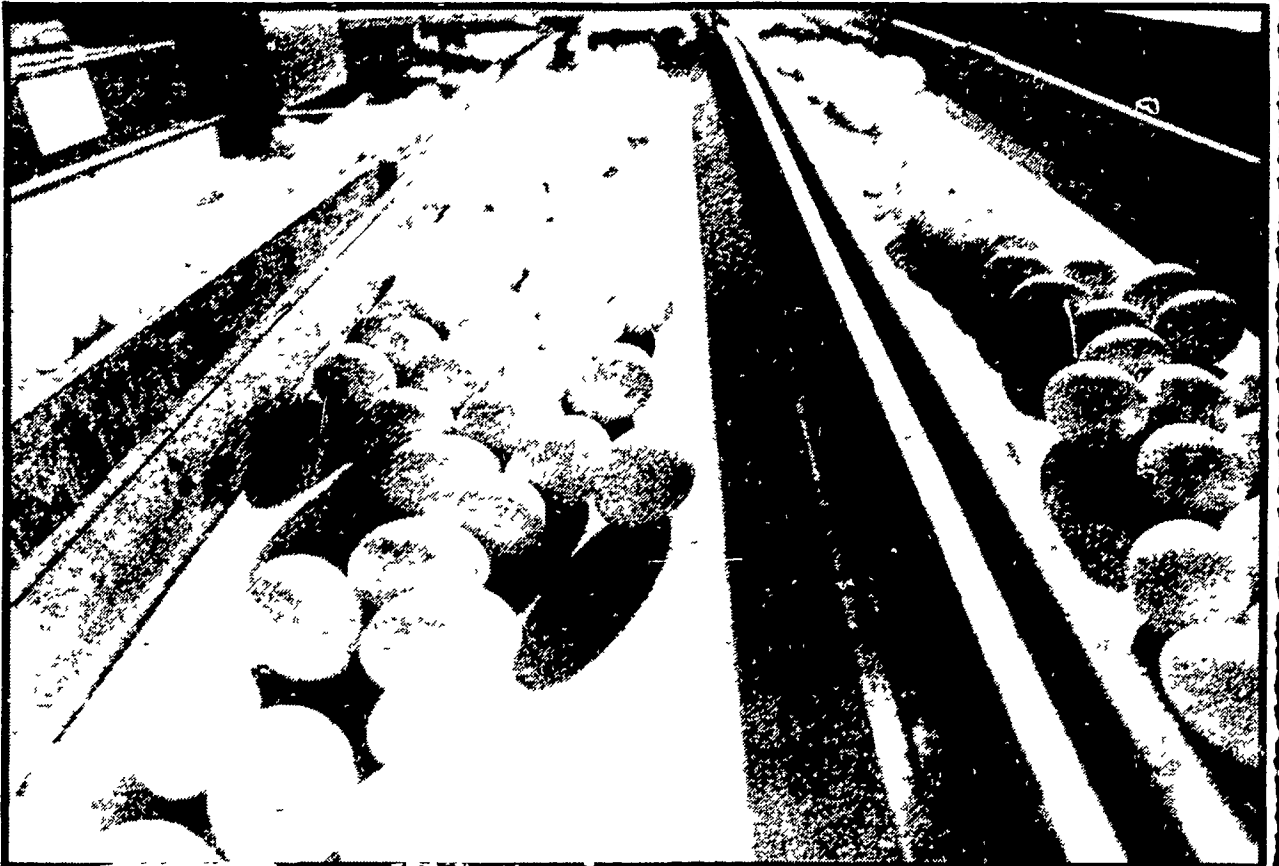
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