

Quality & service mark Tom Kirk's FFA award

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN

SUPLEE — The achievement of 19-year-old Tom Kirk, graduate of the Twin Valley FFA program, in being named the top Future Farmer of America in the proficiency area of agricultural processing can be summed up in two words: "quality and service."

These two words also personify the retail philosophy of the family's on-farm Tobi Hill meat and speciality store, to which Tom's national award can be initially traced.

For ever since the youthful Chester Countian was old enough to carefully handle eggs and pack them in cartons he's been increasingly involved in the Tobi Hill store, located a few miles northeast of Honey Brook not too far from the Lancaster County line.

"When customers come through this door, they know that they'll get quality of product and service," Tom explains.

"If a customer wants a dozen pork chops, each an inch thick and individually wrapped, we don't ask any questions.

"We'll cut up a whole quarter to get to an eye roast. It's a lot of work, but we'll do it.

"The whole purpose of the store right here on the farm is to give the customer exactly what he or she wants."

With an inborn philosophy, such as that, it's easy to see why the judges at the national FFA convention gave the top award in ag processing to the Twin Valley grad.

And Tom's father, Robert, who laid the groundwork for the family's retail philosophy, stresses that the survival of farming lies in such a belief.

"The farmer must be better able to control his product and its production from the time it's grown or raised until the time it is sold to the consumer," the elder Kirk said.

"By exercising this control, our

family is able to provide the quality and service that the customer wants."

Tom is involved in all phases of the Tobi Hill farm operation from the time the corn seed is dropped into the soil until it's marketed as a steak or roast through the retail store.

"I help with the farming, but brother, Bill, does most of that," Tom said.

"I break down the beef and cut it into roasts and speciality items."

And there are many miscellaneous jobs that Tom and other members of the family perform.

For example, Tobi Hill mails out some 3,000 illustrated monthly newsletters to customers, outlining freezer specials, gift ideas, holiday specials and recipes.

The family is now in the process of getting a press and folder to print their own newsletters.

Speciality meat items can range from boneless pork party roasts filled with either bread stuffing or sauerkraut to two Delmonico steaks trimmed in the shape of a heart for Valentine's Day.

Gift boxes can contain lobster tails with New York strip steaks or filet mignon cuts mixed with small jars of jams or jellies.

While the store's speciality items are now primarily in the meat line—beef, pork, veal, lamb and poultry—plans are underway to expand into other areas.

"We're now constructing a new section, which will contain another cooler, cutting room, loading dock, storage room and kitchen.

"Then, we'll be able to offer speciality items, such as more homemade breads, soups or stocks for soups, baked stuffed potatoes or baked apples," Tom said.

Thus, the Kirk family will carry their retail philosophy of planting to consumer marketing one step further—utilizing trims to make such things as homemade soups or soup stocks.



Tom Kirk, who won National FFA Proficiency Award in Ag Processing, in his family's on-farm meat and speciality store in Chester County near Honey Brook.

The Tobi Hill farm store is just 14 years old, but its brief history has been filled with progress. (Tobi was formed from the two sons' names—Tom and Bill.)

It started out when the elder Kirk was still working as a carpenter and feeding beef on the side. The animals were sent out for cutting and the family sold halves.

Then, they brought the butchering, cutting and retailing under their own wing to better control the quality. They hired a meat cutter at the time.

And, just before one Thanksgiving, their meat cutter left and another task faced the family.

"Well, we've watched the meat being cut," the elder Kirk said.

"So, let's get busy and cut."

With such initiative mixed with devotion to a retail philosophy that many of us merely recall from years back, it's no wonder that Tobi Hill draws customers from a wide radius to its rural Chester County location.

And, it's no wonder that Tom Kirk went on to be named the best in his FFA field in the nation.

It's a real FFA family 'happening'

BY DICK ANGLESTEIN

MYERSTOWN — It was a real "family happening" in the ELCO Middle School Monday night.

As the family of Carl and Margaret Wenger, Myerstown, continues to rewrite FFA history, Monday's happening centered on son, David, who recently was honored as Eastern Region Star Agribusinessman — one of four top FFA'ers throughout the nation.

And as his vo-ag teacher and FFA advisor, Gerald Strickler, of ELCO, commented at the recognition dinner:

"When you're one of four out of 490,000 FFA'ers throughout the

nation, that's quite an accomplishment."

Monday's surprise recognition dinner for David, who serves as main purchaser in the family farm equipment business, was attended by some 250 friends, neighbors and well-wishers.

Principal speaker for the evening was J. Lynn Leavenworth, pastor of the Ambler Church of the Brethren, who drew a very inspirational correlation between David's outstanding accomplishment as Eastern Star Agribusinessman and another David, whose "star" was also in the East.

"As David, the shepherd, moved

into the management of a country; so now our David here is moving into the ranks of those who support agriculture," Leavenworth said.

The speaker also paid tribute to the many in the audience who either farm or support those in agriculture.

"Those who stake out their role in agriculture hold the future of the world in their hands," he said.

"Mankind's primary calling is the meeting of essential human needs. And you're helping to meet such needs with a humility that knows you have been put in charge of some of the gifts of God."

Younger brother, Glenn Wenger, served as emcee for the

recognition program. Brothers Lloyd and Larry, who preceded David into FFA's American Farmer ranks, also participated in various presentations.

In one of these, the Wenger family turned the tables a bit and presented a plaque of appreciation to FFA Advisor Strickler, who has guided three national FFA "stars", four state stars and some 21 Keystone Farmers.

Also taking part in the program were the Rev. Glenn O. Hassinger, pastor, Myerstown Church of the Brethren; Doug Hershberger, State FFA president; Todd Propst, president, Lebanon County FFA; Patti Heilinger, president, ELCO

Chapter; Kenneth R. Good, ELCO superintendent; Lee Saunders, president of ELCO School Board.

Also, James C. Fink, retired State FFA Advisor; Harvey Smith, regional FFA advisor; and representatives of State Sen. Clarence Manbeck and Congressman Robert Walker, who couldn't attend because of the urgent press of legislative business in Harrisburg and Washington.

"This really was a surprise," David Wenger told the audience.

In closing, he paid tribute to his entire family, Advisor Strickler and everyone who has helped him, including those who gathered to share in his honor.



David Wenger, who was honored Monday night for being named Eastern Regional Star Agribusinessman by National FFA, embraces his parents, Carl and Margaret Wenger.



Wenger family, of Myerstown, present plaque to Gerald Strickler, vo-ag teacher and advisor at ELCO High School, for his continuing FFA guidance. Family, from the left, includes Lloyd, Carl, Larry, David, Margaret and Glenn.