

Weigh station is last straw for Berks dairy family

BY SHEILA MILLER

STRAUSSTOWN — How does it feel to be sailing on top of the world one day and to be hit by a tidal wave the next?

Although many farmers will feel they could answer that question easily these days, no one could probably answer it better than a Berks County dairyman by the name of Robert Deisaman. This unfortunate farmer has been dealt the final blow this month by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation who informed him of their plans to construct a weigh station on what remains of his once-productive farm.

This is not the first time Penn DOT has gotten in touch with Deisaman, but it is probably the last. Deisaman, who has been farming since Nov. 30, 1940, exclaimed, "This time it's different. Now we're finished."

Forty-two years ago, Robert Deisaman and his wife Grace purchased the small 58-acre farm in Upper Tulpehocken Township, Berks County. It was a rural area, and the farm was strategically located between two small towns — Strausstown and Shartlesville.

Deisaman helped support his newly acquired farm through his work as a florist and grounds keeper at the state hospital in nearby Wernersville. With his income and the money earned by Grace who taught school, Deisaman said they "had enough money to allow him to farm full-time by 1947."

Things were going well for the young farm family. The land was cared for and fertilized and produced enough feed for Deisaman's growing herd of dairy cattle.

Then in 1952 a 'dark cloud' rolled over the prospering dairy farm and the 'storm' that followed swept 7½ acres of cropland and pasture from the farm.

Although this was not a storm in the natural sense, its damage was permanent. The Deisamans recalled this was their first encounter with Penn DOT and the powers of eminent domain. They recounted how the state condemned their farmland in 1952 and completed a four-lane highway two years later.

Even before the state had paid the family for the land they had taken already, the highway employees returned and took additional land several years later to create a limited access highway and a fenced right-of-way. Then, when the Deisamans were still without financial compensation for their acreage loss, the state added insult to injury by making the northern side of the farm only

accessible by a way of a 3-mile round-trip.

"Finally in 1960," Deisaman said, as he shuffled through his file of papers, "the state paid us \$6,600 for the acreage."

"We had to take the money they offered," stated Grace.

Deisaman commented that even though he received the \$6,600 for 7½ acres in 1960, it was never a "paying proposition."

"If I had farmed those 7½ acres for the past 30 years, I would have had a lot more from them than \$6,600," he exclaimed. "Why, the resale value of the land today would be a lot more."

As a result of his acreage reduction, Deisaman recalled the farm operation was forced into buying considerable amounts of hay to feed the livestock.

After the settlement with the state for the highway land, the Deisamans said they put their file on Penn DOT away, storing many of the documents on their attic. But then in 1970 the nightmare started all over again.

That year they received another letter from the highway department stating their intentions of 'buying' additional land to construct a rest area along the four-lane Interstate 78. This would slice an additional 6½ acres from the Deisaman farm.

The land the state condemned for the rest area has remained idle since the acquisition, Deisaman said — left to grow up in brush and trees. And because of the way the land was split off, about 1¼ acres of land still owned by Deisaman on the north side of the highway has suffered a similar fate.

"When the state did their preliminary grading of the site, they spoiled the drainage in the area," Deisaman claimed. "Now this small piece of land that used to produce good pasture for our cows is growing up like the rest of the land over on that side of the highway."

When the rest area condemnation actions were proceeding, Deisaman said he decided to hire an attorney to fight the land loss.

"That just meant extra money out of my pocket," he explained. "I had to pay the lawyer's retaining fee and 40 percent of any additional monies received over and above what the state was offering."

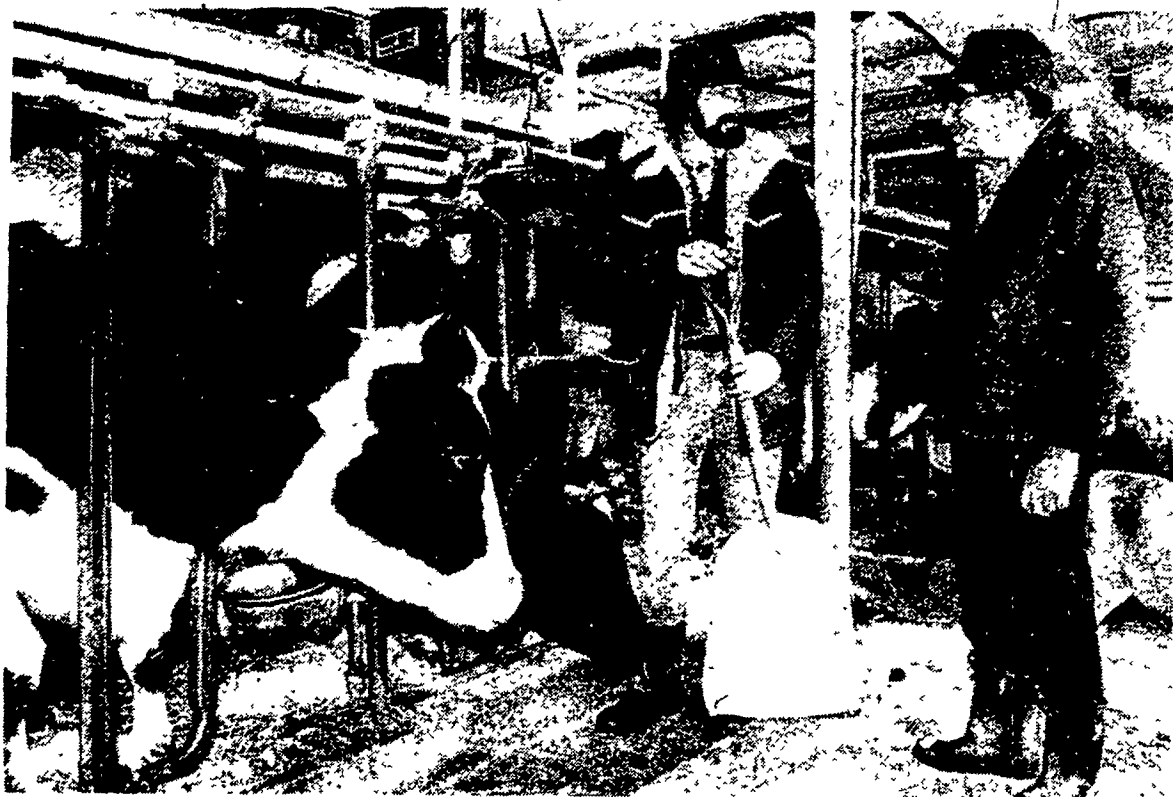
It took about another 10 years for the Deisamans to receive reimbursement for their land from Penn DOT. But unlike the first time when no interest was paid on the 10-year payment wait, this time the state was required by law

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Robert and Grace Deisaman, R1 Bernville, have spent the past 10 years building their Berks County farm into a productive, picturesque operation. Just this month they

learned the details of a proposed Penn DOT weigh station that will strip about 16 acres of land from their already dissected farm.



Robert Deisaman, right, talks with son Stanley about the future of keeping dairy cattle on their farm if the weigh station should become reality. "We no longer could keep the

cows here," exclaimed Deisaman. "There'd be no more pasture and we already have to buy hay to feed them."

Farmers hear state's proposals for truck inspection station

STRAUSSTOWN — A small group of Berks County farmers braved the storm that dropped

several inches of snow on the area last Tuesday evening to gather in the Strausstown Elementary School for a public hearing on the Interstate 78 truck weigh and safety inspection stations.

Called by the state's Department of Transportation, the hearing was designed to inform the public about the intended weigh station, the selected sites and alternatives.

Penn DOT's Steve Caruano explained the Department's objective in building the weigh station along I-78, both eastbound and westbound, "is to develop a program for the enforcement of Pennsylvania's size and weight laws."

He pointed out the total program would improve highway safety and provide adequate protection for the state's highway and bridge system. "Highway pavement life is affected by many factors, of which the volume and weight of trucks are probably the most important."

Citing the need for a weigh station, the Penn DOT engineer eluded to an existing station constructed in Clarion County along Interstate 80. There, they said, the parking lot sometimes overflows with violator's trucks.

In selecting a site for a weigh

station along I-78, the Department spokesman explained, 13 areas located between Fogelsville and Frystown were studied for suitability. Meeting the design criteria of 25 acres of relatively flat to rolling undeveloped land, away from residential or commercial development, was an eliminating factor for 5 of the sites.

The prospective sites also had to meet the design specifications of: acceptable vertical and horizontal relationships between station site and highway; acceptable vertical and horizontal distance; no major structures or interchanges within the one-mile frontage along the highway; relatively flat for the weigh-in-motion or sorting scale; and good natural drainage with the potential for a water supply and sewerage system.

Penn DOT told the group that "after evaluating and re-evaluating all the potential sites for the truck weigh and safety inspection stations, it is recommended that opposite sites be constructed at the existing westbound roadside rest area.

"This will necessitate purchasing farmland for the eastbound site. Opposite sites instead of staggered sites are preferred

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If the state's plans to construct a two-directional weigh station along Interstate 78 is carried out, the Deisamans will be gazing at a paved parking lot and traffic tower that will

come close to where the shadows of their filled corn bins end. This productive farmland will be added to the acreage Deisaman has already lost to the highway.