

Poultry farm family beats the odds and raises

Can't compete with big business

BY DONNA McCONAUGHEY
PUNXSUTAWNEY — A poultry farmer turned produce farmer? Located in Western Pennsylvania where they worry about frost as early as August 25 and as late as Memorial Day?

Despite these unusual conditions (or perhaps because of the challenge they present), Elbel's Produce Farm has developed over the years into a successful family farm operation.

Dorothy and Glenn Elbel were poultry farmers for 24 years and had built their business up to 22,000 layers. They retailed most of their eggs to local supermarkets and packaged and sold all of their eggs

under their own farm name. Why did they quit the poultry business when they were doing so well?

"We couldn't compete with big business. We were only a family farm," says Glenn. A local company (from whom the Elbel's bought their feed) came to town and offered their retail customers eggs at a lower price. "We tried to compete with them for three years," says Glenn. "Finally we gave up."

There was also a fire on the farm which destroyed one of the two chicken housing facilities Elbel owned near the same time. That was the final blow that forced the

decision to leave the poultry business behind.

However, Glenn was not about to give up farming. A few years earlier Dorothy decided she "wouldn't mind having a few strawberries around." Glenn's brother had a small patch a few miles away and was able to market all of the strawberries his family didn't use.

The "few strawberries" they started with were 200 plants for Glenn and Dorothy and 200 plants for their oldest daughter Margie who decided they would be a good first 4-H project. Eventually Dad bought the young 4-H'ers share and the spark of a new farming venture

Listen to customers

was started. Every year the Elbel's doubled the number of plants until they reached the current 20 acres of strawberries. Their strawberries are marketed entirely as "pick-your-own".

Elbel's Produce Farm is one of very few such operations in Western Pennsylvania. There are several people who market extra produce from their gardens, but Glenn and Dorothy's entire farm income comes from the produce they raise.

Customer satisfaction certainly is evidenced in the fact that they

have customers who drive more than 100 miles every year for "pick-your-own" strawberries. The nearest total produce farm the Elbel's are aware of is in Clarion county.

The Elbel family can not make their entire living from strawberries and as a result have become more and more diversified over the years. They currently raise 26 different products ranging from several types of berries to eggplant. (This does not take into account the various varieties of a

specific product available.)

Dorothy says, "It's we have everything | carrots, and beets Dorothy didn't really many different kinds they offer until a refer to name them all.

Sweet corn was also earliest items for sale farm. The first field small one and corn was the farm in a small they also marketed c from the poultry ope presently plant 25 ac corn.



Glenn Elbel looks over some of his crops. He is standing in a cantaloupe field. A newly planted strawberry field is on the left and sweet corn fields are found on the right. Newly renovated strawberry fields can be seen in the background, all planted on hillsides.



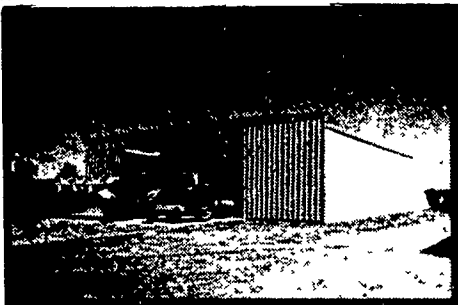
Blueberry bushes are just waiting to be unloaded of lush, sweet berries. These are planted on a very steep hillside that can not be used for many other crops.



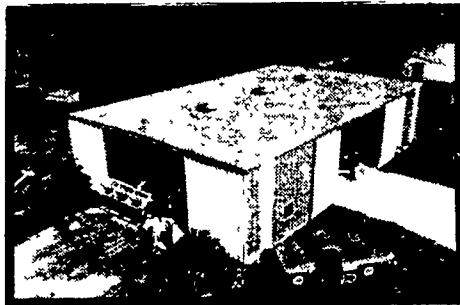
Dorothy, left, DuBois Farmer

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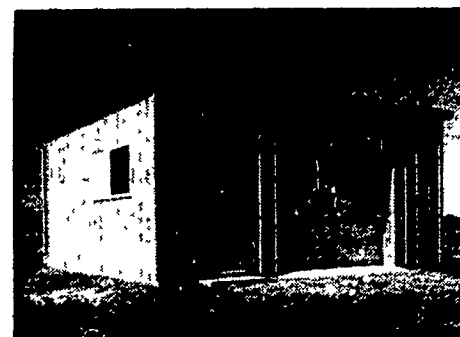
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