

"Boring details" put the McPhersons

BY JOYCE BUPP
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NEW PARK — Not everyone might call successful farming a matter of attending to "boring details."

But according to New Park grain and fruit grower, Paul McPherson, paying attention to miniscule management decisions will make the difference between red or black ink on the books at the end of the year.

Farm Futures magazine agrees with McPherson's view, and recently selected him one of four runners-up in their national best managed farm contest. In three years of being nominated for the honor, McPherson has finished in the top 100, and then in the 25 finalists, before his most recent recognition.

He's the lone winner in the Northeast, in a competition heavily weighted with entries from the Midwest, as well as being the only fruit grower, and sole finalist into the direct marketing business.

The contest is based primarily on records-keeping and management skills, to determine if entrants "know what they're doing - and why." The majority of this year's 25 finalists are grain and/or livestock producers, with average assets of \$5.2 million, and showing gross sales of \$2.09 for every dollar of expenses.

McPherson and his wife Gail own Maple Lawn Farms, with nearly a thousand acres owned and rented, cropped to corn and fruits. Along with those commodities, they operate a country elevator and fertilizer business, and run a successful and innovative retail market located 30 miles from the nearest major population center.

He's quick to turn thumbs-down on the notion that agriculture is totally unique from other business enterprises.

"A business is a business," McPherson figures. And, his management decisions are made by solidly adhering to that policy. It's an approach that sent him

cutting back in size when most of agriculture was still expanding.

After five years of poor peach crops due to continuing adverse weather from drought and unseasonal frosts, McPherson stepped back in 1979 for a serious look at where he was, and where he wanted to go from there. What he saw was that neither the fruit end of the business, heavily oriented to peach production, or the grain cropping, was proving profitable.

"Fruit production is one of the few kinds of agriculture in which you may have to go through a whole year of growing, knowing already early in the season that there won't be a crop," he says.

Labor problems, with intensifying regulations aimed at employers of migrant labor, also contributed to McPherson's decision to rethink his direction.

Costs on fruit production are basically fixed, he adds, at somewhere in the \$1500 to \$2,000 per acre range. Reduced acreage, with higher yields, seemed a logical step toward McPherson's 1979 goal of making every operation at Maple Lawn Farms pay its way.

Along with reduced acreage, the New Park grower opted to renovate the approximately 200 acres that would stay. That meant bulldozing out old established varieties and replanting with newer types which began ripening earlier, and others geared toward later harvest. Extending the harvest season, would stretch out the workload so that it could be handled by a crew of local employees. Plantings were intensified, with trees set closer together, and trickle irrigation equipment added as a hedge against drought.

Pick-your-own has long been a part of McPherson marketing techniques. Because the bulk of customers come a distance, from York or the Baltimore-Washington area, a heavy schedule of newspaper advertising, plus newsletters designed and written by Gail, began to play a large part

in a class by themselves



Grain bins and retail market are a harmonious blend of commodities in a picturesque orchard setting at the Maple Lawn operation. Not afraid to buck trends, the McPhersons were sizing down their business when most of agriculture was still expanding.

in customer relations.

More diverse crops for their customers were needed as well, McPherson decided. So along with the replanting of peach acreage came additions of strawberries, and blueberries, as well as cherries, nectarines, and semi-dwarf apples more easily handled by U-pick customers and farm crew.

While McPherson saw yields of 200-250 bushels per acre of peaches before the renovation plan, which is scheduled for completion in 1987, his goal is to take 500-600 bushels per acre off 120-130 acres of peach plantings.

"That's better than having 300 acres at 200 bushels," says McPherson, "and it enables us to produce much higher quality fruit."

Along with orchard renovation has come remodeling of a portion of the packing house into a cypress-fronted, two story retail sales market and office facility.

Designed by the McPhersons, the market is in the final stages of being readied for summer customers, with plenty of space for display and sales of seasonal produce.

Expansion is planned in the wholesaling division as well and an apple grader is the latest addition to the sales and packing area.

Less labor intensive, but equally important in the overall Maple Lawn picture, has been the corn cropping program. When McPherson scrutinized that part of the operation at that 1979 business crossroads, he was dissatisfied with yields and returns, especially on some of the rented ground.

"I wasn't making money on rented grain ground. We farm rented ground the same way we farm our own land, and we were putting more into it than we were getting out," he relates.

Initially, he set aside a budgeted \$3 per acre of land for the best soil testing he could get, to fine tune production and inputs. Attention to these details were aimed at an increase of 10 bushel to the acre.

Already by 1981, results were proving out. Maple Lawn Farms carted off the state's three-year average high corn yield honors - again in a stretch of dry seasons.

Another goal was to shift from intensive no-till on corn ground to a more conservation-type tillage, aimed at increasing the land's holding capacity for water. And estimating that he was losing several feet of potential production along the field edges were trees had grown out, McPherson put his

men to work over the winters, trimming back creeping woods and capitalizing on it as firewood.

Now, the former 1000 acres in corn has been sliced to 650, but with yields per-acre upped by 30 bushels.

"That makes it more profitable to farm our present 650 acres than the previous acreages," affirms McPherson.

Closely tied to the grain production enterprise is the family's country elevator. In this business, the McPherson's continuing computerization of their farm operations is a real bonus for customers. They've worked with developing programs from available general commercial softwares, which simplify tracking the handling, storing, testing, drying and marketing of their crops and customer transactions.

One of the first farms in the area to integrate a computer into daily farm activities, they've converted tedious hand-recording, double-entry accounting and payroll records into a few-hours-per-month keyboard task. Using their

Apple and software they've adapted, they can also key input and yield data on every individual grain field, for quick comparisons of profitability.

And, McPherson points back again to those "boring details."

"A computer is good for details," he emphasizes. "You can tell if growing, or handling, a grain crop is making you money."

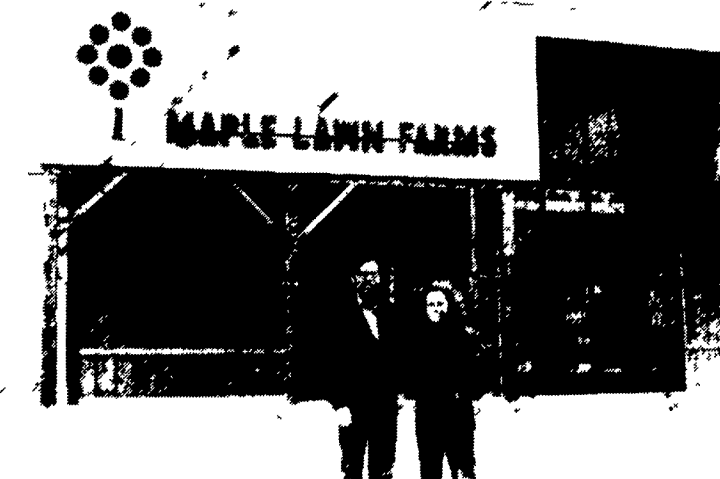
What a computer won't do, he notes, is forecast the future. That takes paying attention to trends, talking to other farmers, following market and futures prices, and staying abreast of, not just agriculture happenings, but the world economic situation.

"Boring details" some people might call them. But McPherson would be the first to agree: profit is never boring.

And Paul and Gail McPherson are determined to do everything they possibly can, from resetting the trickle irrigation at a fruit tree, or pruning a branch, to experimenting with business software programs, to assure that profit is the bottom-line harvest at Maple Lawn Farms



Like most of the operators of the "best managed" farms in Farm Futures contest, Paul and Gail McPherson are savvy users of their computer. It's an irreplaceable tool for handling payroll, accounting and customer transactions in their New Park grain, fruit, elevator and fertilizer business.



The newly-remodeled retail market at Maple Lawn Farms is stylized with cypress-wood front, ample display and sales space, and office space on the second floor. It's part of Paul and Gail McPherson's continuing renovation of assets in their long-range farm plan.

Dairymen asked to sign

ADA/DC's "positive letter"

WILLIAMSPORT — During the months of April and May, Federal Order 2 dairy producers will have the opportunity to continue funding their local milk promotion organization by supporting the American Dairy Association and Dairy Council's positive letter Producers will receive the letter from their handlers.

Dairy farmers nationwide are currently mandated, as a result of federal legislation, to contribute 15 cents per cwt towards milk promotion. Producers can direct 10 cents of this deduction to promote dairy products in their local market, and this is the reason for the positive letter.

By supporting the positive letter, Federal Order 2 dairymen will be able to direct the majority of their promotion funds to advertise dairy products in their local markets. ADA/DC places media advertising and promotion programs in the areas where the majority of Federal Order 2 milk is sold, such as New York City, Scranton/Wilkes-Barre, and other metropolitan areas.

Seventy percent of ADA/DC's budget is invested in local market media advertising. This advertising complements the national media buys being made by the National Dairy Board (NDB). The NDB uses the same product ads as ADA/DC bringing consumers one unified message.

Media advertising is supported through a variety of promotional programs designed to reach consumers at the point of purchase. ADA/DC places promotional materials in supermarkets, restaurants, and cafeterias reminding consumers to purchase dairy products.

ADA/DC has an office in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. The staff is available to make presentations or answer any questions pertaining to the positive letter and milk promotions. You can reach the office by calling 717-323-2552, or call tollfree 800-HOT-MILK.

ADA/DC is a producer directed and funded milk promotion agency serving Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey.