

Holiday season marks busy time for Musser Farms

BY JOYCE BUPP
Staff Correspondent

MANCHESTER — The neat sign announcing the entrance to Musser Farms might catch a first-time visitor by surprise. Located in a row of neat, brick ranch-style homes on the edge of Manchester borough, the smoothly-paved lane could almost be just another urban driveway leading off the road.

Although the northern York County town reaches nearly to its doorstep, Musser Farms leaves no doubt that it is a hard working agricultural operation. Fattening pigs and a feed lot of steers are busy eating in adjoining barnyards, ducks with downy yellow babies waddle toward safety, a combine waits near the sprawling barn, and the distant chatter of chickens and turkey flocks soon implant the impression that this busy operation is also a diversified one.

While life at Musser Farms is seldom slow, the fall holiday season stirs this farm's activities to a harried peak. For Paul and Helen Musser do what few farm families attempt any longer—they process and retail fresh-dressed poultry at their on-farm processing and sales facility.

From October through the first of the year, the Mussers and a part-time crew of relatives, neighbors and friends process some 1,500 turkeys, 250 ducks, 300 capons and 250 fryers. The

schedule they keep is a tight one, with birds processed shortly before pickup each week for customers who call or stop by with their orders.

Advertising is minimal, just a small classified run seasonally in local papers.

New customers are generated by the most successful form of advertising, word-of-mouth from satisfied, loyal buyers of the Mussers' products.

Poultry has long been a standby commodity on the Musser family farm. Chris and Anna Musser, Paul's parents, kept the standard flock of chickens, along with a dairy herd and general livestock, when they began operating his home farm in the 1930's.

"We started with four cows, four mules, fifty chickens and a couple of hogs," says Chris Musser. At age ninety, Chris still works on the farm, including doing some field work when needed. He and Anna live in a new home where town and farm meet, and both are part of the family poultry processing crew.

Many of their earlier neighbors had tended turkey flocks; and in 1938, Chris put in two hundred of the big birds to help boost what today's lenders label "cash flow." The turkeys were marketed at the family's Central Market stand, along with a variety of other farm products.

"We didn't have plastic bags for wrapping the processed turkeys,

or anything like that," he recalls. "And, there were no flats for eggs; you just packed them in paper bags when you sold them."

In addition to their own diversified farm, the Mussers cropped extra land around the neighborhood, so there were always plenty of chores for the couple and their seven children. Chris was long recognized as one of the area's more progressive farmers and in 1938 purchased the first combine in York County, a McCormick-Deering pull type.

Paul is the only one of the Musser children to full-time farm as a career. He and Helen, who grew up on her Gerber family's farm near Dover, married in 1953. Except for two years he served in the military, most on an Alaskan Army base, Paul has continued the family tradition of farm operation diversity.

Dairying ceased to exist "when tanks came in," as Chris Musser puts it. And Helen, not brought up in a market-tending family, was reluctant to continue the hectic market schedule. Instead, she and Paul chose to take the gamble on retailing the farm's poultry products from their front door.

After several years of processing birds through a sort of make-do facility, Paul and Helen in 1960 invested in the on-farm slaughterhouse. The roomy building features walk-in coolers, a retailing area and plenty of space for poultry processing by the cheerful, joking crew which assembles every Thursday, October through December. A state-approved operation, the farm's processing area is regularly inspected by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

"If we didn't have a lot of good in-laws and friends, it just wouldn't all get done," says Helen of the fresh-dressed poultry business. Some weeks, just prior to Thanksgiving and Christmas, as many as 300 turkeys are readied for holiday feasts.



Helen and Paul Musser take a moment to confer over a list of turkey orders.



Chris Musser, who personifies the phrase "90 years young," fills in wherever needed on the family farm, from sharpening knives to driving tractor.

Year-round customers stop by on a regular basis for supplies of eggs from the flock of 1,300 Leghorn laying hens. Custom slaughtering is still another sideline to keep the processing facility busy during the winter months, after turkey season wanes.

Musser Farms is now becoming known for a more unusual poultry product, smoked turkeys. What began as an experiment is now a popular speciality item, with about 350 turkeys smoked each holiday season.

"We had a lady who was visiting in the area from Tennessee come in one day some years ago, and ask for a smoked turkey," related Paul. "So we did some experimenting with preparing them like hams. The first ones were a little salty, until we got the technique down."

To smoke a turkey, he puts a handful of commercial sugar-cure product in the cavity of the dressed bird. Extra heavy toms get an additional light rubbing of the curing product on the breast meat. Prepared birds are kept packed in ice for a curing period of about one week. Light smoking, about six or seven hours, with green apple

wood turns the finished product a light chestnut color with the distinctive, ham-like flavor.

"They'll keep for up to a year in the freezer," says Paul of the smoked product.

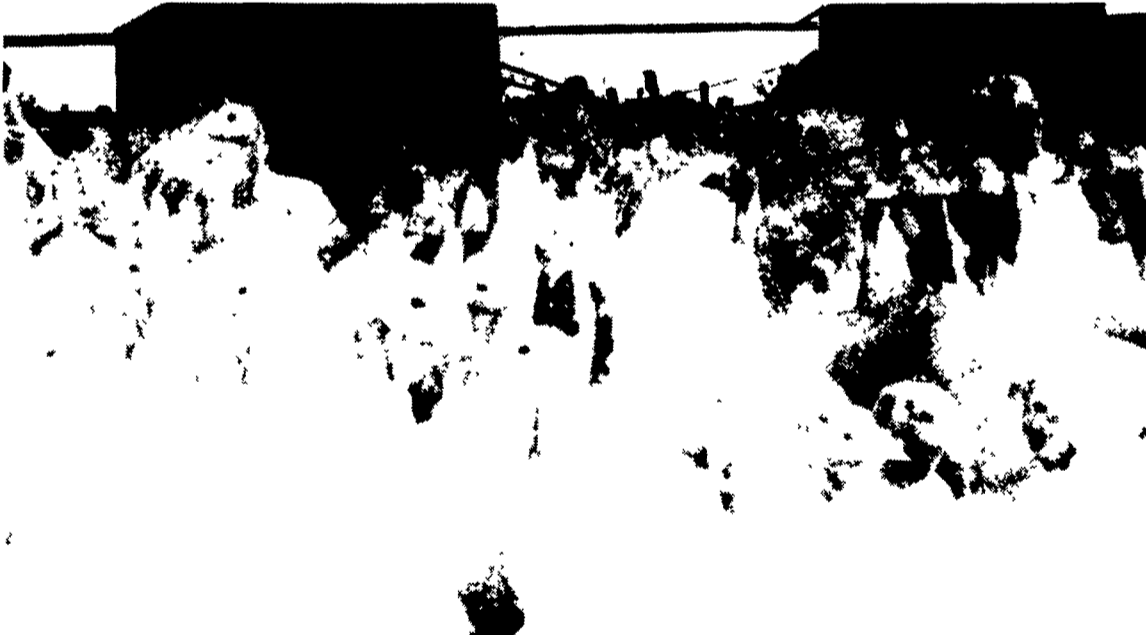
Crop production includes two hundred acres of corn, plus another 100 in oats, wheat and barley. Some goes for feed for the 75 fattening hogs and 60 steers, and for the laying flock. Turkeys, though, get commercially prepared feeds, since their nutrition requirements are "touchy."

Another eight acres is planted in sweet corn, a favorite commodity of the urban neighborhood nearby. Silver Queen is the preferred variety, with irrigation turned on the crop as needed via the Musser's own unique pumping system: a 1946 Dodge fire engine.

This season, Paul added a somewhat different crop, a 40-acre planting of popcorn. Since the popcorn matured fairly early, Musser was able to get in some early season harvesting, with the truckloads of the favorite snack item marketed to Reist Seed Company at Mt. Joy.

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Homestead Notes



From pen to pan, the personal touch keeps customers coming back for plump turkeys like these in the Musser Farm pens.



Relatives, neighbors and friends are among the part-time crew which prepares Mussers' fresh-dressed poultry products.



An attractive farm sign directs customers to the almost-urban entrance to Musser Farms' retailing market.