

Linda DuBois jumps into farming...and comes out a winner

BY RITA SHADE
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ELMER, NJ — The first experience Linda DuBois had on a farm made her see green. Literally.

"I was a city girl. The only thing I knew about tractors was that they held up traffic," she says. "But, I was dating Stephen, and he was a vegetable grower. One day, he had spinach to load, so he took me and his sister and put us in the back of the trailer. All of a sudden, all this spinach started falling on top of us by the bucketfuls. He told us to start stomping. and did we ever!"

That chuckling scene, reminiscent of the famous "I Love Lucy" wine-stomping episode, has been repeated often since that day nearly eight years ago. Now married to Steve, who is in partnership with his brother Henry, Linda and the DuBois brothers farm 2,000 acres near Elmer in Salem County, and they are one of a few spinach growers in South Jersey.

"I'm a veteran spinach grower and a pinch hitter during plowing and planting," she says.

Today, she talks easily about the "right angle whine of the central pivot," and she's just as knowledgeable about pesticide legislation, water allocation and other major issues facing farmers in the Garden State and in Salem County.

In fact, having jumped with both feet into agriculture, Linda, with impressive style, quickly won an appointment on the Salem County Board of Agriculture.

"I was active in the Farm Bureau's Women's Committee at the time, and one day some members asked if women could serve on county boards. I said I didn't think women were allowed," she explains. "The next night just happened to be a county board meeting, so I asked. They told me to submit a letter, and I did. The next vacancy coming up was Stephen's brother's seat. They debated the matter, and elected me."

A year later, the Salem County Board of Agriculture voted to send Linda to Trenton as its representative on the New Jersey Farm Bureau Board of Directors. And, while there are now several other women on County Boards of Agriculture around the state since her selection six years ago, Linda is the only woman director at the New Jersey Farm Bureau, where she is serving her fifth year.

In describing herself, Linda says she is neither a strident feminist nor a harmless "little lady" on the two boards. Rather, she has demonstrated herself to be issue-oriented and a respected voice at policy meetings and conventions.

"The issues facing farmers are tremendous. We're already burdened with increasing paperwork and regulations. We've always farmed here in South Jersey and in Salem County, figuring nobody would bother us, because we're so isolated," Linda says.

"Now, we are finding ourselves in the middle of a number of issues pushed by special interest groups, primarily from North Jersey. Unfortunately, many of these people are three generations removed from the farm. They've never stepped foot on a farm and certainly do not realize the demands of making a livelihood in agriculture. We've already suffered from their overwhelming dominance of politicians with the leg-hold trap legislation," Linda explains.

The law banning all types of leg hold traps is a very emotional issue in Salem County, which is known as the muskrat capitol of the world. The million-dollar-plus trapping industry provides an income to help defray college educations and other family expenses, and also is an effective way of controlling destructive muskrat.

"Another major issue we have been confronting is cumbersome, restrictive anti-pesticide legislation promoted by environmental groups. We're also faced with a strong effort to organize farm labor."

The two DuBois families hedge unpredictable markets and weather by growing nearly a dozen crops. They double crop, starting off with spinach, mustard, kale, collards and turnip greens in the spring, followed by green beans, peas, lima beans, soybeans, field corn, hay — and spinach once again.

"Before the seed goes in the ground, it has a home," Linda says.

The two families, in partnership under the name H&S DuBois, contract with processors and then divvy up the acreage for the various crops. The harvest is sold to nearby Seabrook, Tri-Co Foods in Lancaster County, Pa., and to Birdseye in N.Y.

Steve, now 34, and Linda, 32, believe they are the last "new, young farmers" to start an operation in the Elmer area who did not take over a family farm.

"Steve's dad and grandfather were dairy farmers. But the family realized the future of the dairy industry was not strong enough to support another family," Linda explains.

So, Steve, who was only 18, and his brother, just five years older, struck out on their own with a few rented acres.

"They decided it was enough of a risk to go into farming, so they opted to avoid the fresh-market and to grow under contract," Linda says. "Steve's grandfather taught us that the more eggs you have in the different basket, the better off you are. And he was right."

Steve and Henry's approach turned out to be a good one.

H&S DuBois is now one of the largest farms in the county, having acquired or leased its land within a convenient 10 mile radius of the family homestead. It has been able to buy a coveted "PixAll Bean Stalker" and other equipment to allow all crops to be harvested by machine. And, it has diversified and developed into an art the ability to grow spinach, the mainstay crop which can be troublesome.

"I swear the only thing H&S sees during the growing season is green," she jokes. "If I turned into spinach, I think they might notice me."

She says there is an increase in competition in the production of spinach for processing, but a number of people who would like to start growing it have been reluctant to make the commitment.

"Spinach is not an easy crop to grow," Linda says. "When it's warm, spinach has to be cut when the sun goes down. I've seen many times when the night shift meets



Linda DuBois, right, has learned a lot about farming since she started dating Steve eight years ago.

the morning shift. Steve is out there all night long on the tractor, then comes in and goes back out to plow another field. He may forget to sleep for a couple of days."

H&S DuBois employs seven full-time, year-round workers, and brings on several additional part-timers during the growing season. Work begins in March and goes through Dec. 15. From December until March, the crew maintains equipment, Steve trucks grain to market, and backhauls fertilizer.

Henry manages the office, while Steve prefers to be out in the fields. Linda says she's part of the "reserve crew." She moves trucks and equipment, runs for spare or broken parts, and fills in where needed during growing and harvesting.

"And, of course, before the boys, I stomped."

The "boys" are Steven Jr., now 6½ and Michael, 3½.

A full-time secretary spares Linda bookkeeping chores and allows her to spend more time with the children and devote energies to serving on agricultural and civic boards. With Steven in school and Michael attending a pre-school program, Linda also has been able to return to substitute teaching.

A recent incident in the classroom underscored the need for agricultural education in the classroom, a program she directs as head of the county's women's committee.

"I asked the kids where milk comes from. They told me it comes from the store from a truck," she says. "Only two of the 25 kids had ever seen a cow."

Now, that does sound strange for a rural school in a farm community. But Salem County, like other counties in New Jersey, is experiencing an influx of city people. Both blue collar and professionals have been moving into the area to work at the Hope Creek nuclear generating station.

The mix of people creates divergent opinions regarding the traditional ways of farming.

"We had someone move into a house near one of our fields and complain about the noise from irrigation. We irrigate around the clock during growing season, and he was annoyed. We put up a

building around the power generator, and he still complained about the whine of the right angle drive."

Through the picture window in Linda's living room you can see several new houses built by "cityslickers."

"I don't want to see things change. I don't see why they do have to change. But we can't live in a bubble," she says. "It's now important for farm families to stay abreast of what's going on in their county, state, and on a national level."

Linda points out that there are only about 5,000 farm families in the Garden State — twice the number if you use the criteria of the state census.

"Yet, we are the foundation for New Jersey's third largest industry. We must be heard, if we are to remain viable."

For Linda, she plans to be heard, and remain viable.

She was elected to serve another year as chairman of the Legislative Committee and the Promotion Committee for the Salem County Board of Agriculture.

And, she is gearing up for another year of chairing the Salem County Women's Committee, a year which will embrace farm women from neighboring Cumberland County who would like to join the only such program in Southern New Jersey.

On the agenda for this year, special dairy promotions, an "Ag Awareness Day," an agricultural tour for school superintendents, an agricultural breakfast for farmers and other area businessmen, a special meeting for farm wives to brief them on topical concerns, a coloring book contest for Ag in the Classroom, and a farm visit program for students in New York's Harlem.

In a few years, both of her boys will be in school, and she will have more time to devote to policy work.

What's her aim? President of the New Jersey Farm Bureau is an enticing goal.

"Look out Trenton!" she smiles. "Maybe then, they'll be ready for a woman president."

Homestead Notes



Linda and Steve have two sons, Michael, left, and Steve Jr., right.