

U-Pick Operation Stabilizes Farm Income on Lee's Turkey Farm

BY RITA SHADE

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HIGHTSTOWN, N.J. — You can talk turkey with Dick and Ruth Lee. You can also talk peaches, pears, apples, pumpkins, snow peas, cabbage, snap beans and another 40 fruits and vegetables.

Raising more than 5,000 pullets for holiday tables provide the bread and butter for Lee's Turkey Farm in Mercer County, N.J. But their innovative U-Pick operation — one of the first in the state — stabilizes farm income.

The Lee operation is a carefully merchandized haberdashery of U-Pick crops, rented garden plots, a "driveway" sales stand, freshly dressed and freezer-sales turkeys and custom-cooked turkeys with all the trimmings. Their business of farming is approached with a waste-not philosophy (a healthy dose of dollar-free marketing and creative controls to counter theft.)

Their 55 acres on Hickory Corner Road has been in the Lee family since 1868. Before the advent of supermarkets, Dick's father, an entrepreneur himself, operated some 40 "corner stores" in the city of Trenton, trucking in whatever produce was in season.

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Today, housing developments have replaced the farm fields in this central New Jersey county, and manicured backyards have crept up to the edges of the Lee homestead. But rather than fight or flee the growing suburbs, the Lees decided in the mid-60's to cultivate the city folk as their core market for stand sales and a U-Pick enterprise.

"Dick wasn't happy with the prices at the auction market, and the people picking our fruit were making more money than we were," said Ruth Lee. "We could see the handwriting on the wall."

The Lees were amazed with their success with the cherries, and decided to do it with other items. So, what started out as allowing people to pick the apples that dropped under the tree led to a selection of strawberries, peaches, pears, nectarines, plums, sweet and sour cherries, raspberries, spinach, red and green swiss chard, regular and snow peas, green string beans and yellow wax beans, peppers, a small amount of beets, yellow squash, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli and more.

"It took three to four years to build up clients, and then we kissed the auction market goodbye," she says. Ruth honed in on operating the roadside stand and U-Pick, while children Ronny and Donna backed her up. Dick attended to raising the turkeys and diversifying crops — roles they still play today.

Clients were built on several good breaks and not very many blunders. A popular New York City talk show on WOR aired a letter from a listener who had moved to Central New Jersey and discovered the fledgling Lee U-Pick operation. The Lee's soon became the darlings of the Long Island weekend jaunters, and word-of-mouth brought in local trade from the ever-increasing housing developments.

Blunders fell into the categories of over-producing, pricing, and customer relations.

Zucchini and onions were cheaper at the stores. Sweet corn and beets never worked out. Potatoes don't lend themselves to U-Pick. Garden plots are still rented, but they're slowly being phased out. And rules had to be developed to insure proper picking, and to halt damage and

shoplifting.

Early on, a mixup over which apples were to be picked resulted in a group of customers demanding the cheaper price set for MacIntosh even though they had picked the more-expensive Delicious.

From that point on, rules were set. One person in each group — no matter how small the group — is designated the leader and is responsible for the group adhering to picking rules.

When a person arrives at the Lee Farm, he fills out a sign-up card at the stand, pays \$1, gets a map, set of rules, a picking card, and a bolo tie. This enables them to pick at the Lee Farm for the entire year.

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Anyone wearing a bolo tie is assumed to have read the rules, and allows scouts in the fields to single out "interlopers." (The color of the ties varies and changes every fourth year.) At the end of the picking season, a customer can exchange the bolo tie for \$1, although many keep them for their children.

The sign-up cards are used for a mailing list and to help determine where the Lees should use their advertising dollars.

"We know what the trouble is in raising a crop, and what price it's fetching, but if we produce too many apples, it doesn't do any good to let them rot in the field. If we have too many apples, I'd rather make the customer happy. Everything is priced to move," says Dick.

Merchandising and cutting out the middleman is Dick's forte. Past president of the Mercer County Board of Agriculture, former director of the New Jersey Farm Bureau and now serving a third term as president of the New Jersey Turkey Association, Dick Lee is also a founding father of a newly-formed statewide Direct Marketing Association.

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"We all know New Jersey is a deficit fruit producing state. There is a lot more room for direct marketing without getting into each other's way," says Dick. "Merchandising is extremely important. You can't just hang out a sign. You have to learn it, you have to fine tune it and adjust to the times and what the customers want. There's a psychology to going to a farm to buy something. A Pick-Your-Own is like an outing, a leisurely visit to a farm," Dick continues.

"A chain store can be selling the same fresh commodity, but people will come to the farm for the wholesome food, atmosphere and psychological uplift. How long a U-Pick operation lasts depends on what the farm has to offer."

Lee's farm offers a potpourri. Farm tours in the autumn help move pumpkins and apples. Throughout the year, school children guided by enthusiastic neighbors from the developments are ushered through the farm.

Visitors get to see the National Weather Service's Observer Station on the farm, the pumpkin patch, vegetable plots and fruits. They might see what strawberries look like when in blossom, watch the turkeys being fed, visit a

second-hand shop in a spare room behind the roadside stand, and watch the corn sheller or whatever piece of equipment is in operation that day. As a "souvenir" those on the tour get to pick up an "apple drop" under a tree for the trip home.

Although the U-Pick operation gobbles up most of the Lee's time, it does not shortchange their profitable and energetic turkey operation. The Lee's turkeys come fresh, frozen and already-cooked, served up whole, sliced or diced for sales, with or without stuffing. You can even buy juices for turkey gravy at 50 cents a styrofoam cup. Ruth used to cook 500 turkeys a year for customers, but now has her home-cooked turkeys down to several hundred.

The Lee turkeys are unique in that they are "organically raised" without medications.

"I don't know of any other commercial grower that does this," says Lee. "It's almost customary to feed preventative medication because of the investment. We can personally look after our birds several times a day and develop some degree of standardized procedures."

Thousands of pullets are ordered soon after Christmas, with a mix of medium and heavy breeds to please the Lee's lengthy list of perennial retail buyers, who prefer finished birds between 11 and 30 pounds.

Recipes From Mrs. Lee's Kitchen

Corn Fritters

These fritters make use of 2 cups of leftover corn and are cooked just like small (3-inch) pancakes.

In a blender, put 3 eggs, 1 cup leftover corn, 2 tablespoons sugar, 5 tablespoons flour, ½ teaspoon salt and ½ teaspoon baking powder. Mix well in a blender. Add another cup of corn, blend slightly, making sure pieces of corn are still visible. Grease grill or pan with oleo, cook just like small pancakes. When bubbles appear topside, flip over.

Hot Fudge Sauce

This recipe has nothing to do with the farm, Ruth says, but it's the one that gets used the most.

1 cup real chocolate semi-sweet bits
1 cup miniature marshmallows
½ cup milk

Mix in heavy pan over low heat until melted. (If too thick, add water; if too thin, add more marshmallow.) Serve over ice cream.

The first starter lot of pullets arrives in May, the next in June, another in July and the final lot in August.

"The idea is to grow them fast," Dick says. "Medium hens are processed on the farm at 17 weeks, most others before 22 weeks, and Toms take 28 weeks. If you take any longer than that, they'll eat you out of house and home."

The Lees have developed into an art the skills of rotating freezer space, packing potholders into turkey boxes and cooking many,

many turkeys in the oven before having to clean it.

Ever conscious of merchandising, the Lees developed a pricing system as an incentive to move more fresh-frozen birds and smooth out work pressures. Still, they process 1,600 birds in five days at Thanksgiving time.

Of course, with the aroma of fresh cooking turkeys wafting through the air just about any day of the week, it seems like Thanksgiving year-round at the Lee Farm.

Homestead Notes

USDA Study Supports School Lunch Program

WASHINGTON — A U.S. Department of Agriculture study released recently supports the current system of providing government commodities through the National School Lunch Program to over 23 million children who participate each year.

"The commodity program now in place works better than the alternatives Congress asked us to test. No change in this basic system is warranted," said John W. Bode, assistant secretary for food and consumer services.

Schools presently receive about 15 percent, or \$460 million, of their guaranteed federal subsidies in the form of commodities. The remainder is provided in cash.

Two alternatives to the commodity assistance were tested in the nationally representative study: giving school systems cash instead of commodities, and issuing letters of credit, which are vouchers that may be redeemed only for certain types of foods, such as peaches, beef or green beans.

According to Bode, the study found that, compared to the alternatives, the present commodity program:

— provides significantly more

food to the School Lunch Program, — provides foods that are not as highly processed and, therefore, tend to have less salt, and — provides greater assistance to farmers.

However, Bode said, schools that tested the alternative systems found them appealing because of increased flexibility in food purchasing. "Schools enjoyed complete control over packaging, delivery times and choice of vendor under the alternative systems. That caused some reduced storage and handling costs," he said.

Bode said, "While the commodity distribution program means more work at the school level, it is worth it. On balance, the commodity distribution program provides the National School Lunch Program with as much as \$100 million in greater food value than the alternative systems.

"This is not a surprise," he said. "By using the large volume purchasing power of USDA, most policy officials have felt that depressed agricultural markets could be stabilized to the benefit of farmers. At the same time, bargain purchases could be made for the lunch program. Now, a major research effort has proved that this common sense approach

is working.

"This system is also relied upon to provide surplus commodities for other distribution activities. Presently, cheese, butter, nonfat dry milk, rice and honey, held by USDA's Commodity Credit Corporation, are distributed free of charge to schools, needy households, charitable institutions such as public hospitals and orphanages, food banks, and soup kitchens. This system is part of our emergency feeding activities to quickly provide food to victims of natural disasters," Bode said.

"While the commodity system we have is the soundest approach, we must work to continue improvements that have been made over the last several years," he said. "We are committed to working with schools, food companies and agricultural producers to make this good system better."

The study, which began in 1981, tested the different commodity systems in 96 school districts in 29 states. Thirty-three school districts used cash, 31 used vouchers and 32 used the ongoing program of federally donated foods.

Federally donated foods are provided to schools for lunches that meet USDA requirements.