

"Pick-Your-Own" Business Started From A Youth Project

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LaRue Sutliff of Shickshinny R.D. #3 was nine years old in 1944. He grew a small patch of tomatoes on his Dad's farm and made enough to buy a Farmall "A" tractor. The following year he expanded enough to buy a Farmall Super "C."

By the time he graduated from high school, his tomato profits financed a truck and car. That was 1954 when shipping prices were up and growing costs were down — at least compared to present day economy.

The 19 year old, already in business ten years, had his eye on a 120 acre neighboring farm. The soil was good and well suited to tomatoes. The buildings, however, were in bad shape. The house needed a roof just to make it habitable.

Undaunted by the negatives, he bought the farm in 1958, and along with new wife Katie, proceeded to make a home. They did most of the work themselves.

The Sutliffs put out a tomato crop, even expanded acreage, and added strawberries as a second crop. Both harvests were shipped.

LaRue's Dad, Willard, was and still is a "green pack" tomato packer and broker. So, the tomatoes had a ready and handy market.

The next 14 years were good enough to Sutliffs that they were comfortable with the tomato business. They had a girl and two boys, Terry, Robert and Timmy.

Then, in 1972, hurricane Agnes created a tomato growers nightmare. Sutliff lost most of his crop. He decided right then that a one large crop operation was not wise. He needed staggered crops. He also figured that if he could eliminate the labor of picking, he could strengthen his investment in two areas.

He launched into (what was then) a relatively new marketing method, a pick-your-own vegetable business. Strawberries and other low growing fruit had been popular by this method, but pick-your-own vegetables were rare.

Sutliff worked his operation into nearly a dozen small and staggered plantings. He continued growing small acreage of tomatoes and strawberries and added snap beans, limas, corn, peas, cauliflower, broccoli, cabbage,



LaRue bought his first tractor when he was nine years old (see first tractor). A Farmall "A", he still uses it every day even though he has added to his tractor power with other models. His equipment is kept in good repair, repainted when needed, both of which contribute to his overall economy.

potatoes and pumpkins. He soon discovered he could get a good return on his investment and the customer provided the labor in return for fresh and reasonably priced produce.

Although he has cut back this year, he says there were times when the strawberry patch drew 1,000 people per day. He figures a 5,000 quart per acre yield is a good strawberry crop.

LaRue says all but about ten percent of his yield is harvested by customers. The balance is picked with the help of neighboring children and marketed locally.

Additional acreage is rented running from 40 to 80 acres. Individual plantings run from 1½ to 3 acres with five acres of potatoes being the exception.

Staggered plantings extend the harvest season and provide LaRue control over the demand. Strawberries run from June 1 to the second week of July.

Peas and beans run from late June into August. Corn begins in August with the cabbage family from late summer to early fall. Potatoes and pumpkins come last extending to frost. LaRue avoids early varieties because of killing frosts and customer canning habits.

Sutliff finds a 3 or 4 year rotation works best for his plantings. After a crop is finished, he seeds with oats and alfalfa the following year. The second year, the plot is seeded with just alfalfa. (These two crops

are harvested and sold.) The fourth year its ready for the vegetable, but not the same one that immediately preceded the rotation. The only exception to every year rotation is the strawberry crop which is left stand 3 or 4 years.

LaRue is proud to admit that the 22 year old Farmall "A" is still run every day. Although he has added three additional tractors over the years to those first two which he bought as a young boy, he would find it difficult to get along without the "A." It's small and maneuvers well in vegetable rows.

He says his machinery is not new, but he keeps it in good repair, protects it with paint and doesn't abuse it.

The Sutliffs stress equipment maintenance as a primary economy measure. With the exception of an occasional major overhaul, LaRue does all mechanical repairs. Fiberglass bodies completed the maintenance on two Jeeps — a 1946 and a 1964. These are valuable vehicles when traveling to supervise pickers in various patches. They are small and move easily over rough terrain.

Other cost cutting measures are practiced in domestic heat and hot water. Sutliff is in the process of erecting a solar panel to heat water during summer months. During the winter, heat and hot water are provided by a wood burning furnace. With a backup oil furnace, LaRue estimates that 99 percent of his winter needs are met by wood.

LaRue and Katie feel our country could go a long way to satisfy its fuel needs and eliminate emission pollution if more effort was put forth in clean fuel production. Several years ago they experimented with alcohol production, a clean efficient fuel which, under more extensive conditions, could be produced cheaply. With their small distiller, they can turn out five gallons an hour at about \$1.50 per gallon. They found the easily grown fodder (or sugar) beet ideal. These beets grow to the size of footballs (10 to 12 lbs.) and have the necessary sugar content to make good fuel. The beet does not require cooking for the distilling process as some other grains do. Sutliffs have also used corn and potatoes with good results.

Katie feels with the many, many acres of land laying idle, such production would give the land owner a profitable crop and our pollution problem would be greatly reduced. Carbon dioxide and water result from spent alcohol.

Sutliffs have used this fuel in small motors on the farm with success. However, the present price of gasoline doesn't justify

their small fuel operation.

A half acre pond in front of the house reflects the lovely restored farm buildings. Migrating birds occasionally make a stop-over, but the domestic ducks discourage the intruders. Most of the farm is situated on gently rolling hills. On a day when temperatures reached 90 degrees, there was a pleasant breeze sweeping up from surrounding woodland.

LaRue purchased an irrigation system (the year he graduated) for \$7,000. A six acre pond provides water for the extensive irrigation system. Watering is done at night for the pickers protection and for better plant protection and absorption. Irrigation is vital when frost threatens the strawberries. When irrigation is necessary, LaRue can count on a 24 hour job. During the day, he sets up for the following night in addition to his other work of spraying, cultivating, customers, etc. The Sutliff children are grown and live off the farm, but they lend a hand when LaRue and Katie can't handle an overload.

The Sutliffs have seen a drop in the pick-your-own popularity in the last few years. Several factors could contribute to this decline. One, which may have discouraged many people from venturing into the outdoors for such activities as food gathering, is the pesky gnat (or Black Fly) which has been increasing in numbers with each passing year. This year for the first, DER has treated the Susquehanna River where the gnat hatches.

These bi-weekly treatments have provided startling relief from this pest which drove many people indoors. It's possible that old habits can be relearned and former pickers will again find pleasure and satisfaction in picking their own vegetables and fruits.

Another factor which LaRue has observed is that most pickers drawn to this type of marketing are older people — the depression generation — while the younger population is more accustomed to pre-packaged foods. This changing generation may mean a changing market. The next few years will determine the value of this type of business.

In the meantime, Sutliff feels all farmers should cut back production and continue to cut back to where demand provides a satisfactory return for investment. He says if you can't make money on 50 acres, there's less to be made on 100 acres — and here is where many farmers get into trouble. Money is borrowed to expand a borderline operation only to add to the glut already on the market. The end result, no one gets an acceptable return on effort and investment.



Katie and LaRue Sutliff stand in front of a lush blossoming potato field.



A half acre pond in front of the Sutliff house reflects the lovely setting of the restored farm house. When Sutliff bought the farm in 1958, at age 19, the buildings were badly in need of repair, but the soil on the 120 acre farm is just what he was looking for to grow tomatoes.