

Lehman's Farm Market Provides Local Customers With Fresh Produce

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PALMYRA — The cars come steadily all morning, turning in the gravel driveway and bringing the customers who frequent Lehman's Farm Market. In its 34th summer, this market operated by Earl and Edith Lehman is a popular spot for a wide local clientele who have come to rely upon their fresh produce.

Edith explains that the market started because of their conviction that it would be a good experience for their children. She says, "We had seven children and they all grew up in the market. We thought it would be a good way for them to earn money."

The market started modestly on a card table in the front yard of their home along North Railroad Street outside of Palmyra. Eventually, they sold the chickens and moved the market to the chicken house.

Then they sold certified raw milk for 15 years and when they gave up dairying, they moved into the building where they sold the milk. There are two rooms and a storage room, and in August the building is filled with fresh produce, most of it raised on the 25 acres they devote to vegetables. They also raise about 70 steers.

By far their most popular item is sweet corn. Earl raises 15 acres of sweet corn and Edith says, "He picks it all by hand." They feature silver queen, golden queen and bi-queen as well as several other varieties. But it is silver queen that is the most popular, according to Edith.

Earl says they average about 1,000 dozen ears of corn a week, which means a lot of corn picking!

He also notes, "This is one of the finest corn crops we've had. There are very few worms. I use very few insecticides." Although they began the summer with a dry period, Edith says the rains in July and August have all the produce looking good. "Things are growing pretty nice," she says, "but it is muddy in the fields."

August is the busiest month, when there is always a wide variety of produce, including cantalopes, string and lima beans, tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, cucumbers, squash and others. Fruit is also available at the market, but Edith says they do not raise their own. It is purchased both from local producers and Adams County growers.

For about 10 years the Lehman's have had a thriving pick-your-own business, including strawberries, sugar peas, hull peas and beans. "I think people like it," Edith says.

One aspect of the market which customers like and Edith thinks is important is picking the produce as fresh as possible. She said they like picking it early in the day, so the market doesn't open until 10 a.m.

The Lehman's believe in giving personal service, and every customer is given attention. Edith says she doesn't like going into stores and being ignored by sales people, and so she wants her customers to know they are important. "It's important to ask to help and to say hello!"

She adds, "We have nice customers. Mostly they are repeat." Her husband agrees, "We have a good relationship with customers."

Both admit that their customers are changing through the 34 years



Waiting on customers quickly and efficiently is important to Edith, who likes to give everyone individual attention.

of business. Edith says the increased number of working mothers affects their business, and Earl says the number of families eating in restaurants also affects markets such as theirs. "It is an altogether different customer than 30 years ago."

Edith remarks, "People were canning and freezing more than they do today. It is a new generation."

However, for the young people going back to canning and freezing, Edith is ready with advice, recipes and other printed information. "I try to have recipes for things we have."

When her daughters were home they helped with both the cooking and the canning. Now Edith says she tries to make time in the evenings to do some preserving. However, she pointed out that with her youngest child 21, she doesn't need to can in the large quantities she did when the children were growing up.

A common problem with market owners is charging enough money to make a good profit. Earl, vice president of the Lebanon County Farmers Association, admits that the profit margin is simply not there. "You can't turn a profit."

Edith notes, "Our expenses are higher but the prices are not that much higher." She said people work hard for their money and don't make that much, so they spend it carefully. Nevertheless, she has strong feelings about the benefits which American con-



The Lehman Farm Market is now operating in its 34th summer, after humble beginnings as a card table in the yard. It's now open for business from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., six days a week.

sumers have in the food marketplace. "American people are lucky. They spend just 17 percent of their money on food. In most countries it is much higher."

Although the market is open daily for only about four months, the work of operating a market stretches over a much longer time. The first planting begins in early April with potatoes, followed by sugar peas and hull peas. How much planning goes into the system? Edith says, "After doing it for so many years, my husband knows what he needs." Most of the crops remain the same over the years, although Edith notes, "People are eating more squash now."

Edith helps with most of the field work until the market opens in the spring, but then spends her days there, beginning at 8:30 a.m. Her mornings are spent filling the shelves, sorting the fresh produce, and sweeping the floors. By the time customers begin arriving, often as early as 9:45, Edith is ready to greet them. If there are eager customers, she may open early.

Once inside the store, the customer is treated not only to a beautiful and bountiful array of vegetables, but also to a wide variety of Edith's favorite philosophical tidbits, neatly lettered on signs on the walls. Some

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Amy, 12, waits on a customer after helping her choose what she wanted.



Amy Lehman, 12, left, and Marcy Lehman, 16, each lift a basket of corn to take in to eager customers. Marcy, came from Wyalusing to help, while Amy lives locally. They enjoy lending a hand to their grandmother.

Homestead Notes