

# Behind The Scenes With Tom Turkey

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**YORK** — By Thursday, Thanksgiving Day, Clair "Skip" Fitz, Jr. will be especially thankful.

What he'll be thankful for, in addition to the blessings of life, will be a day of solid sleep.

Beginning this weekend, and continuing through December, sleep is a scarce commodity at Fitz's Meadowbrook Turkey Farms on Camp Betty Washington Road.

What is plentiful at Meadowbrook is turkey. From Thanksgiving week through Christmas, nearly 12,000 home-raised turkeys will be hand-dressed, quick-cooled, and placed in the hands of loyal customers. On the busiest pickup days, as many as 50 customers at a time may be waiting in line at the farm's processing room, with a security guard hired to manage the traffic congestion on the winding rural road.

Turkey has been a specialty at Meadowbrook since Skip's grandfather, William Fitz, introduced the fresh-dressed, home-grown big

birds at the York farmers' markets in the early 1900's. A five-generation farm through Skip's two children, Meadowbrook originally came into the family's ownership in 1865, when Isaac Fitz purchased the property.

Clair Sr. and Gladys Fitz continued the farm's poultry production and farmers' market retailing when they took over the business, about 1947. By the early 1960's, as many as 18,000 turkeys were raised, dressed and retailed annually, along with production of feed on the farm's 150 acres of cropland.

In August of 1963, a fall from a silo left Clair Fitz, Sr. paralyzed. Skip, then age 11, was well acquainted with all phases of the turkey production, dressing and retailing, having helped from when he was old enough to fold packing boxes. Sisters Donna, then 12, and Cindy, 9, were also familiar with the family business.

"From the time he was injured, through the holidays, I had to assume the responsibilities of an adult. But I was mostly worried

about my father, and didn't really think about having to carry the responsibility," Fitz recalls.

Through the efforts of family and friends, the Fitz youngsters, and Gladys, who visited Clair daily at the Philadelphia hospital where he was treated for many months, thousands of customers were not disappointed through the holiday season.

"I'm amazed at what she did, looking back," Fitz says admiringly of his mother and her capable handling of those hectic and uncertain months.

Still, three youngsters "grew up" quickly, he adds, although they remained active in school activities while assisting at home. The year following Clair's accident, turkey production was cut to about half, a flock size that could be handled by the family with the assistance of one employee.

Acquiring an associate degree in food service from Penn State, Fitz worked in the restaurant industry for a period, including a stint in management. But the lure of the farm was strong. Clair Sr. died in 1971, and his son made the choice to return home to carry on the family farming tradition. In 1985, Fitz purchased the Meadowbrook business and a portion of the farm.

Focus of operations have changed through the last decade. Contract production, once part of the turkey program, has been phased out in favor of total farm processing and retailing of the 12,000 birds. And, a hog production enterprise, also operated by Fitz through the 70's, was eliminated.

"I scaled back to what I could handle myself," Fitz decided. No feed is grown, and the land rented to other producers, so full attention can be given to the turkey production and retailing.

While giant commercial turkey production firms dress and freeze weeks ahead of holiday peak demand, the premium market for fresh-dressed birds continues to be Meadowbrook's specialty. The local clientele also favors a heavier bird.

"We specialize in larger turkeys; hens go in the 15-20 pound range, and toms about 25-30 pounds," Fitz explains. "Turkeys have an optimum weight level, and then feed conversion efficiency drops off. We spend the money and the time to raise heavier than the optimum efficiency weight, for our customers."

"In a heavier hen, there's a little



Youngsters - and adults - visiting Meadowbrook during Fitz's pre-Thanksgiving week of children's group tours never fail to be fascinated when he "rocks a turkey to sleep." Tucking the bird's head beneath its wing, and then gently rocking it for a minute or two, while the children remain very quiet, nearly always results in a snoozing turkey.



Reach out and touch...a turkey. This hands-on opportunity at Meadowbrook is a highlight of the trip for children visiting Skip Fitz's turkey production operation.

more fat, and a larger breast. That makes the meat more juicy and tender," he explains.

Although dressing begins on a limited scale in September, the processing room and refrigeration areas run in high gear from the Saturday before Thanksgiving through the day before Christmas. In the three days prior to Thanksgiving, up to 5,000 turkeys are dressed. Maximum number ever dressed in one memorable, marathon, workday was 1,900.

"That means working almost straight through some days, and going on four hours sleep," Fitz admits. Days off are a rarity through the year, and virtually impossible after dressing of the turkeys begins in the fall.

Processing is handled by a well-experienced crew of up to 25, and heavily concentrated on weekends when their time is more available.

"There are many who help, not for the money, but, as friends," adds Fitz. Dressed turkeys are immediately plunged into ice water for about two hours, the time needed to cool the body cavity temperature to the ideal mid-30-degrees. Packaging is in "shrink" plastic tags, which mold to the carcass shape when the pack is plunged in hot water. The tightly-fit wrap eliminates air from around the dressed bird, better pre-

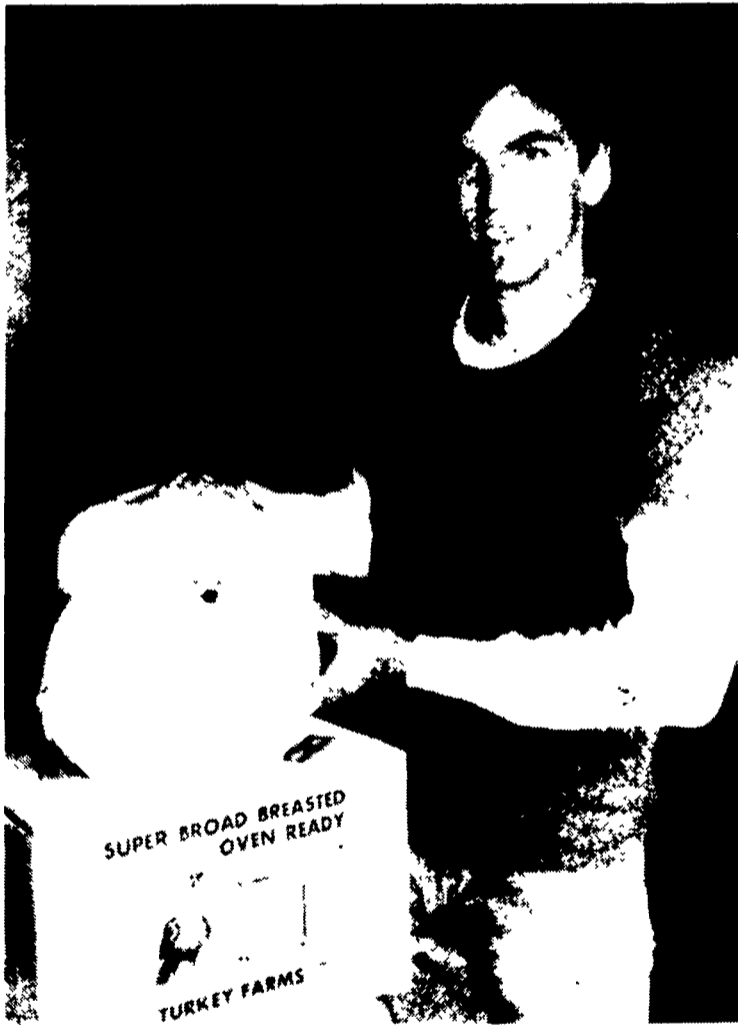
serving the moisture and tenderness of the meat. From refrigeration until delivery time usually is less than two days, and some turkeys even go direct from ice water bath to the customers' hands.

More than half of Fitz's sales are to local firms which provide holiday gift turkeys to employees. Many companies prefer frozen birds, which Meadow Brook also handles on site to serve that market. Social clubs and fundraising groups also utilize Meadow Brook turkey gift certificates for prizes in contests and drawings.

Gift-pack turkeys go into attractive, sturdy cardboard boxes bearing the farm's logo. Just shaping the 6,000-plus boxes needed each year is a chore. Fitz's children, Katy, 9, and Dusty, 6, lend a hand with this same job that initiated their father into turkey retailing. And, Gladys, now employed in real estate, still assists during the heaviest days of the holiday seasons.

Meadow Brook has no formal media advertising program for their turkey retailing. Satisfied customers who return yearly — and bring their friends — have held demand to fairly steady levels. And, a full week of tours for nursery-kindergarten children's groups offers a different angle of

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Three to five-year-olds from the parents' participation nursery at Lutheran Memorial Church, York, take home turkey-feather quill pens after their tour of Meadowbrook Farms.

## Homestead Notes