

# Funk Dedicates Lifetime To Conservation, Preservation, Ag Promotion

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MILLERSVILLE (Lancaster Co.) — Most 80-year-olds retire from everyday labor. But Amos Funk and his wife, Esta, are not the average 80-year-olds.

"Why, I work all the time," Esta exclaimed. Dubbed the "Midnight Manager" by her son, Esta tallies up the day's receipts from Funk's Farm Market and takes care of late business at the store.

Her husband Amos is well-known for his conservation and preservation efforts for which he has received 35 awards nationally, locally, and regionally.

The Funks live in their century farmhouse, which has been in the family since 1848. It borders the rambling Funk's Farm Market and its 22 greenhouses, located at South Duke Street, Millersville.

In 1975, Amos turned the market over to his son, Fred. Although the responsibility no longer belongs to Amos, he still plays an active role in the management and keeps detailed records of planting through harvesting costs.

Fred said, "It's hard to replace Dad with all his knowledge. He's a hard worker and it's difficult to get someone else to fill his place."

When one considers that the Funks adapted a small chicken house into a roadside stand in 1963, which has expanded to include three farms, 22 greenhouses, a store with more than \$2 million in sales last year, and with 150 employees during its peak season, it looks like success has come easy to Funk.

But Amos gives a more realistic evaluation of the business expansion: "It's been an uphill climb the whole way."

Over the years, the Funks have suffered big crop failures from hail and drought.

But in typical dry humor, Funk said, "After you live a certain amount of time, you get used to rolling with the punches."

The produce business, he said, especially in Lancaster County is extremely competitive. Despite the challenges, it is still possible to be successful, according to Amos.

"You should start out small," he said. "You'll go broke if you start out too big and with new equipment. In this business, you can start with 10 acres."

Even if you have the land and equipment, Amos cautioned, "Don't try the produce business unless you love vegetable growing because it's a lot of work."

"Today the challenges are greater in produce marketing. The costs are higher, but you can make it," Funk said. "I wouldn't go back

to the good old days even with all the problems we face."

And while many lament the tough economical times of today, Amos said, "People don't know what a Depression is. There is nothing like it now."

He views the future with optimism by saying, "I don't think things (economy) will ever get that bad (as the Depression)."

Although Funk's father was a dairy farmer and had a milk route with a horse and wagon, Funk preferred working with poultry and vegetables. His first crop was asparagus and he planted raspberries, which he sold at an "itty bitty" Central Market stand managed by his mother who sold, chickens, eggs, and a few vegetables.

Funk's leadership skills surfaced early. While a junior in high school, he was elected as captain of the basketball team and when he went to Penn State, he was elected captain of the basketball team although he was only a freshman.

Funk only attended one year of college because at that time there were no student loans or scholarships available. He spent a summer in the Peace Corps in Africa, teaching farming practices.

In 1936, he married Esta. Even before they married, Esta got a glimpse of what life would be like as a farm wife when Amos was one hour late for their first date because he wanted to pick all the beans before a predicted frost.

"She's a very tolerant person and the reason we get along so well; otherwise I couldn't do as many things as I do," Funk said. After their marriage, Esta tended chickens, butchered and dressed them for marketing.

As early as 1938, Amos experimented with farm terraces and contour strips. Only a few other farms did so at that time.

Amos, who took the biblical admonition seriously to be a good steward of the land, became an ardent supporter of conservation although it took a while for neighboring farmers to become convinced of contour farming practices.

The couple purchased the family farm in 1950. Because Amos loved to watch things grow, he got rid of all but one cow and gradually planted more and more vegetables and fruit. At first, Funks sold their produce at farmers' markets. At one time, they went to 13 different markets. After the roadside stand became successful, they gradually eliminated farmers' markets except for Root's Country Market, Manheim, and Central Market, Lancaster.

In 1951, Funk became part of



Although Amos and Esta Funk sold Funk's Farm Market to their son, right, the parents continue to put many hours into the business, which started out as a small roadside stand and last year had sales of more than \$2 million.

the Conservation District Board. In 1959, Funks purchased a Marticville farm and in 1969 he purchased a Pequea Township farm, which he had previously rented. Although the farms are not neighboring, one is 2 1/2 miles and the other eight miles from the main farm, Funk said that it is more important to him that all three farms have access to a creek, which is important for irrigation. They use a traveler irrigation system, which they believe is the least labor intensive. They have three miles of underground irrigation pipe.

On the 240 acres, crops are rotated. The 125-acres are farmed with sustainable agricultural practice. Amos said that they had a 50 percent increase in the sweet corn yield after the field had been planted with rye grass for two years.

"We couldn't afford to grow things we do now without the use of herbicides, but we can use less per acre. We try to find a balance between no fertilizer and too much of it," he said. "We find when we rotate corn, we don't have as many problems with root worm and other corn funguses."

Currently Funks plant 20 acres of peaches and nectarines, seven acres of red and black raspberries, five acres of strawberries, and 1 to 10 acres of corn with 12 plantings.

Labor is very intensive. Amos likes to keep detailed records of costs, labor, and income. Sometimes figures show that certain crops are not profitable to raise, but that does not mean that the crop will be dropped from the program.

Amos said, "We had six crops that were not profitable. We changed our planting and managing practices and two of those are now our most profitable crops."

One of the crops to which adjustments was made is sugar peas. For 130 bushels of sugar peas, figures showed that it took 155 labor hours to plant, grow, and harvest. That was too labor intensive for the prices charged. Funks can purchase sugar peas from neighboring farms at lower prices than it costs to raise them. Now, Funks raise only 1/4-acre of sugar peas, which they plant early under plastic in order to get premium prices for the early crop.

When Funk first started farming, he hired high school youngsters to help in the fields, but today



A forerunner of agriculture conservation and preservation, Amos Funk has been awarded more than 35 plaques for his work locally and nationally.

students are too busy with other things, Funk said. For the past 17 years, the market provides airline tickets for Puerto Rican laborers who come from March through October and are housed on the farm. The government has recognized Funks for their superior labor conditions.

During the Funk's years in business, they have noticed a difference in consumers.

"Customer loyalty is not as strong as it used to be. You must work week by week to get customers to return. You must give people a good product that is a bit different than supermarkets," Amos said.

Some of the different products that the Funks have offered to customers are cherry pudding with milk, stuffed sweet peppers, spiced bell peppers, watermelon rind, corn relish, chow chow, and home-

baked items.

Funks are always on the lookout for innovative marketing ideas. They advertise corn roasts, craft fairs, pumpkinland, open houses, mushroom week, plant auctions, and spring garden weekends. Some of these promotions are not cost effective and others are extremely profitable. For example, Funks sell approximately 100 pounds of fresh mushrooms weekly, but during their mushroom promotion, they sold 1,000 pounds. Pumpkinland increased pumpkin sales 61 percent in one year.

Homemade soups and fresh fruit salads have proven to be popular. Funks make 16 varieties of soup.

Attractive displays are a prime requirement for the food area that has 8,000 square feet and for the 12,000 square feet of garden items.



Esta and Amos Funk continue to live on the farm that has been in the family since 1848.