

# Making Ends Meet And Corn Grow

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**MERTZTOWN** (Berks Co.) — A small mountain of shelled corn was piled high inside a Hollywood-style storage building on a farm in Long Swamp township, in Berks County. It represented part of the annual income for Robert and Melinda Tercha.

Robert "Bobby" Tercha spent a Friday morning talking with a broker about timing and price, trying to set a deal for selling about 10,000 bushel. No good. The price wasn't right.

It made Tercha a little nervous, he said, waiting out the weekend. Even though he didn't have to sell the corn immediately, he wanted to lock in on the best price he could.

In the detached reality which is the Chicago Board of Trade, upon which local prices are compared, weekend rumors or new official predictions could drop corn prices dramatically.

Or they could skyrocket. Meanwhile, Melinda Tercha, wife of Robert, was working around the house. It has taken her years to forge a grass yard in the 3.5-acre wooded lot in which they built their home 10 years ago.

Poison ivy, which had choked the black cherry, oak and maple trees in the uninhabited woodlot, took years to control. It has finally subsided in returning, she said, though it was persistent and required constant work to remove.

Robert came home for lunch, it

was raining lightly all day, but all the planting on the 500-acre, father-son, cash-crop operation was pretty well finished.

What remained, was to feed the dozen Angus bulls the couple raises for food and market and make some phone calls.

In the kitchen, obsolete and antique butchering tools hang from a main beam. The tools are a decorative statement. The statement is, "We are farmers. We know how to live off the land. We butcher and use almost every part of the animal. We make our own food."

The farm is more of an agribusiness than a typical southeastern Pennsylvania farm.

Income comes from diversified endeavors — rentals, crop sales, animal sales, and, until recently, Melinda's job.

The arrangement allows the couple to be able to pay off the property which they are slowly buying from Robert's father, Stanley. Over the past 6 years, they have paid for 115 acres.

The father-son arrangement is an extension of a working relationship the two have held since Robert was a teenager and started paying for half of all new equipment purchases.

The two own a batch drier, which is efficient and makes it easier to store the corn. And they have enough room to store almost everything produced.

They also grow alfalfa which is baled, then fed to the steers and extra sold. A few feeder pigs are finished out for the family's use and market. The feeders are bought from Daniel Hartman, who rents one of the barns on the property and has a small farrowing operation.

The Tercha's also grow wheat and soybeans. About 75 to 80 percent of the acreage is put in corn, though they do rotate fields as much as possible.

The life-style is rural, the location less and less rural. Commuters who work in New Jersey have been buying up residential development homes to escape New Jersey and its problems.

And they bring some of their own.

Allentown is close by. Traffic on Rt. 222 gets heavier and heavier.

Melinda, who was recently recognized by the Pennsylvania State Grange for being awarded the national "Female Agriculturalist of the Year," complained about the increase in garbage thrown into their road-frontage fields.

She said that the bottles and cans and garbage bags and tires make for a lot of work. Monthly collections result in several bags of trash. Luckily, the township hauls away the roadside trash.

Tires have become more of a problem because most places won't take them for free. Rather than pay the extra money to leave old tires at the auto shop, more and more people are keeping them and ditching them along back roads.

Glass in the fields can slice tractor tires, expensive enough, but also filled with fluid which isn't great for the soil if it spills out.

The problem lies in educating the non-agriculturist, Melinda said.

Currently, she doesn't have a lot of time to devote to that. Since the company with whom she worked for 17 years closed down, she has gone back to school to get to a 2-year associate degree in elementary education that will enable her to work in a pre-school nursery. But that doesn't mean the mes-



Robert and Melinda Tercha stand in front of one of their tractors, stored in an equipment shed. Bob and his father Stanley farm in partnership and own their own equipment.



Robert and Melinda Tercha raise corn as a cash crop on more than 500 acres in eastern Berks County and also raise Angus bulls and some hogs for sale and for their own consumption. They store shelled corn and sell it through a broker, when the market price is right.



This Angus bull is one of a dozen the Terchas raise for meat and market. The Terchas said they prefer the texture and flavor of the young bull meat over steer meat.



Robert Tercha talks on the kitchen phone to a commodities broker. Decorating the kitchen are old and antique butchering tools and utensils Melinda has collected. They are part of the family tradition of butchering, she said.

sage doesn't get out. Every year at the Kutztown Folk Festival, which is also nearby, Robert performs a complete from start to finish butchering. People from the city come back year after year to watch.

The Terchas have been butchering for themselves for years. It started with Robert's grandfather and has been kept alive by the interest of Stanley, Robert and Melinda and others.