

An Extension Agent's Life: Family, Friends, Farming



Father and son, Ken Winebark and Brandon lead Brandon's Simmental heifer up pasture.

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MYERSTOWN (Lebanon Co.) — Almost everyone in Lebanon County who has a farm or a child in 4-H has probably heard of or met Kenneth Winebark, county livestock extension agent.

But especially in the past year and a half, his reputation has grown, even among many outside of agriculture and in other counties of the state.

Through doing what he considered was routine obligation of his job, knowledge of Winebark also has spread.

He put together an information pamphlet, "Please, Don't Kill My Cow," to help with farm-city relations.

The pamphlet was the result of two things: an accidental killing of seven cows from eating yew (a residential ornamental bush) cuttings which had been dumped in a pasture by a neighbor; and because a farmer's wife asked for information to give to city neighbors living on the edge of their pasture, so the neighbors would know better.

First printed in the fall of 1991 for Farm-City Week, the pamphlet has become very much in demand.

In fact, he is to be a guest on the Penn State University produced, public television program, "Panorama," on Dec. 7.

"The urban-rural interface is tighter, tighter and tighter," he said. "Houses are next to pastures. Developments are peopled with

residents with no agricultural background. There are wrong assumptions made that yard trimmings are safe, but it takes education to allow people to act intelligently."

Distributing information has potential drawbacks — it can be used for ill will.

But while the potential for someone to deliberately poison a farmer's herd is real, Winebark said that the benefits of neighbors knowing what can kill a cow outweighs the fear of destructive acts.

"There's more of a risk involved of not knowing what plants are toxic," Winebark said. "And, the general public health standpoint, it's a lot better for them to know, because most of these plants are toxic to humans also."

It also speaks to basic fundamentals of American civil rights — fear of potential evil acts should not hamper or discourage the freedom of information to Americans. An educated citizenship is the foundation of democracy and the key to its success.

"This is Penn State Extension. We're about education, not suppressing information. And we're charged with providing the best information available to all clientele, not just farmers," he said.

Furthermore, those now-knowledgeable neighbors may be able to spot dangerous debris dumped in a field and call the farmer to let him know.

Winebark said that, although the

information published in the pamphlet is contained in numerous text and reference books, it is not widely disseminated.

"You don't know how these things really do hit, until it happens," he said.

Accidental poisonings of livestock is something that concerns farmers and animal owners because when it happens, an ani-

mal suffers, someone has to pay the bill, and if we keep that from occurring, that's also our job," Winebark said.

But there's more to the blond, curly-haired man who doesn't shy from taking gentle control of a large crowd.

And though his face may be familiar to many because of his judging livestock shows in Pennsylvania, Maryland, etc., many aren't familiar with the background of this 35-year-old livestock specialist.

It was early March 1984 when Ken Winebark and his wife Janet, holding their 9-day-old baby girl, drove into the Lebanon Valley for the first time.

Winebark, fresh out of college with a master's degree was seeking his first assignment as an Penn State Extension agent and he had two positions from which to choose.

One job was in Washington County, an area similar to his childhood home in Indiana County. The other job was in Lebanon County.

Ken said the drive to Lebanon was esthetically appetizing with the rolling fertile farmland, its well-kept farms, the rivers and trees and the open valleys.

When they got to Lebanon, a 4-H leader, Donna McConaughy, met them and put them up for the night. He said it was the first sign of the gregariousness of the Lebanon agriculture community and its interest in agriculture's continuance.

The next morning, with flakes from the start of an unusually late snowstorm falling, the 4-H leader drove Ken, Janet and the baby, nicknamed G.G., to the farm of the late Cyrus Bomberger, to meet with some of the people in Lebanon agriculture.

In a rarity of weather for early March, 8 inches of snow forced Winebarks to stay the night at McConaughy's house.

But the Winebarks were certain where they wanted to live.

"I was hooked," Winebark said recently at his north Myerstown farmette. "You visit a farm like that and it makes you want to work in the area."

The Bomberger farm is a farm calander photo farm. It is picturesque from any angle, any season, a tribute to the efforts of Cyrus and his interest in perserving and honoring the family century farm.

Especially with a heavy blanket of fresh snow erasing any possible blemishes.

A long, neatly manicured perfect gravel lane leads from a pastoral bend in Rt. 241 back to the farm.

The lane gently cuts through a low protective ridge and opens up to reveal, on the left, a several-acre pond with a pier.

Just beyond the pond, a large white bank barn and freestall sit on a slowly rising southern-exposure slope. Behind the barn and freestall are distinct symetrical blue silos stacked side-by-side, right to left, shortest to tallest.

The farmhouse is a big old structure and provides a counterbalance to the scene.

With carefully pruned maple trees at the house, and small patches of sky-reaching black walnut trees in the pastures, the farm is perfect enough to be shrunk down and put on a model train layout.

But Winebark said it was not only the beauty of the Lebanon area and its strong agriculture and agricultural support industry that made the area an attractive place to work. It was the people, Winebark said.

"Without question, this was for me. Driving in on (Route) 322 was beautiful and I knew some folks around here that I met through livestock shows which made me feel at home."

Fresh on the job with a very young baby, the Winebarks set up house first in a farmhouse they shared with a Mennonite couple, Gerald and Mary Jane Martin.

Ken said it was his first experience with followers of the Mennonite faith, he had heard and read about their plain ways, and the two couples became best of friends.

They still are today, even though the Martins have since moved to upstate New York.

"We played softball, went shopping and picking strawberries together, those kinds of things," Ken said.

Eventually, Ken and Janet moved to a farmette north of Myerstown.

It is a small farmette, that sits

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Homestead Notes



A family that grooms together . . . Janet and Ken Winebark with son Brandon and daughter Janine take the curry brushes to Brandon's Simmental heifer.