

New Farm Emerges In Sussex

SUSSEX, N.J. — Morning at Space Farms begins like any typical farm day — cattle are stirring, hay fields are waiting to be cut, and chickens mill about.

In the distance, a fox eyes the fowl with interest. The Spaces arise like any typical farm family . . . regretting the early hour, but fiercely proud of the lifestyle that just doesn't allow eight hours sleep.

There is work to be done. A 1936 New Idea hayloader awaits restoration, a pair of Kodiak bears need to be moved, and a baby jaguar is scheduled to visit the vet. And don't forget, somebody has to feed that fox.

If this sounds rather unlike the typical family farm, that's just the beginning. At Space Farms, the cattle herd is comprised of Texas Longhorn, Zebu, Yak, and Bison. The hay is being cut for mouflon and aoudad, and the egg production is mainly a hobby.

While it is indeed a 500-acre working farm with close to 1,000 animals, Space Farms depends mostly on tourists for its income. People know the complex as "Space Farms Zoo & Museum," with little resemblance to the typical family farm. The story of Space Farms evolution from working dairy farm to tourist attraction is an unusual one, especially considering that most northern New Jersey dairy operations have been sold for development.

Interestingly enough, Space Farms started not as a farm but as a general store, repair garage, and zoo. Ralph and Elizabeth Space, together with their young children Loretta, Edna and Fred, bought a two-room bungalow in the village of Beemerville in 1927 with little money and plenty of ambition. Elizabeth, now in her 90th year and referred to by all as "Grandma," opened the general store in a shack next to the family home just as the Great Depression began.

"Times were hard," said Elizabeth. "I hoped I'd sell something in the morning so I could pay the bread man when he delivered in the afternoon."

To help support his young family, Ralph Space contracted with the state to trap predatory animals on local farms. Rather than destroy the animals, he kept them behind

the store in cages, waiting for winter months when their pelts would be prime and more valuable. Word spread that you could see a number of wild animals at the small store. Soon, people were making the trip to buy a few items and wander among the animal cages.

Elizabeth recounts how the menagerie became a zoo: "A fellow suggested that he charge admission, so Ralph took off his hat and the fellow put a dime in."

It was also during the 1930's that the "museum" at Space Farms had its origins. As some families in the rural community fell on hard times, they began to charge items at Elizabeth's store, leaving antique rifles, old tools, and other treasures as collateral. The items were placed on the wall of the store, and became almost as big a curiosity as the wild animals. As better times returned and accounts were settled, many people opted to leave their antiques at the store, enjoying the idea that others could see and appreciate them.

In the meantime, the family began its farming business with a foray into raising silver foxes. While not typical, the venture was just like any other family farm in one respect: "All I can remember is work, work, work," said Loretta Space, "and it didn't hurt us a bit." Silver fox gave way to mink as styles changed, and the fur farm remained a sizeable operation until the 1980s.

Among the jobs Loretta and her siblings had was picking up dead dairy cows at neighboring farms, which were processed into fox and mink feed. In 1939, one such call came from the adjacent N.J. State Experimental Agricultural Station, which asked young Fred Space to pick up two calves. These calves, however, were quite healthy — and the Space family dairy business began.

Having been raised on a nearby farm, the move delighted Elizabeth Space. The family matriarch, who was by then running a sizeable grocery store, fondly recalls buying the large farm across the street: "I loved farming. Ralph was never really interested in it . . . he preferred mechanical things. But I was happy to have a real farm again."

Ultimately, the dairy operation



Longhorns and other breeds have replaced the dairy herd at Space Farms. Unlike their ancestors, these head won't be making an Amarillo to Kansas City run any time soon. . . .

grew to more than 100 head. More than 300 acres of corn, alfalfa, and hay were under cultivation, and the mink farm produced more than 20,000 mink annually. As the family's prosperity increased, Ralph began collecting more and more antiques, and son Fred's interest in wild and unusual animals increased. So as the farm expanded through the 1940s, the Space zoo and museum grew as well.

By the early 1960s, Beemerville was a bustling farming community. A few thousand annual visitors supported the zoo and the local economy. The Spaces had donated land and helped to establish a volunteer fire department, and the grocery store evolved into a restaurant, gift shop, and full-fledged museum. Elizabeth Space became "Grandma" many times over, and the farm was in its heyday.

But like everyone else in the business, changing times impacted the Spaces. In 1972, unable to find workers, the family sold off the dairy herd. The same problem eventually took its toll on the fur farm.

While the dairy and fur farming were winding down, the zoo and museum continued to grow. Ralph continued to collect anything and everything, and Fred increased the variety and size of the zoo. A brown bear, named Goliath by the family, arrived at Space Farms as a cub in 1967 and grew to be the largest bear in the world. Large African cats were added, and the number of visitors increased every year.

In the 1980s, when the neighboring State Agricultural Station was closed, the family arranged to exchange land adjacent to a State Park for the Ag Station property and buildings. The facility became the new home for Ralph's burgeoning collection, which by then totalled more than 50,000 pieces. He continued to collect antiques until his death in 1986 at age 84.

Ultimately, the museum grew to fill 11 buildings. Three buildings are exclusively dedicated to farming equipment from the past 200 years, including dozens of tractors, harvesting equipment, hand tools, corn huskers, and the like. Many rare and unusual items are on display, including a dog-powered,



Ralph Space, left, and son Fred demonstrate an 1898 foot-powered milking machine at the opening of Space Farms' farming museums in 1979.

treadmill-operated churn. The balance of the museum contains hundreds of antique cars, carriages, wagons, and thousands of smaller items that present an interesting history of life in a small farming village.

The museum offers other insights on farm life. Fred said, "When we were kids it was always a great thrill to find arrowheads and other Indian artifacts as we worked the fields . . . after fifty years of farming, you find quite a few." So many, in fact, that the American Indian exhibits fill dozens of display cases.

For the time being, Space Farms remains a working farm, with close to 400 acres under cultivation for animal feed. The Space Farms the public sees, however, is a zoo and museum. "Our goal is to present the public with a better understanding of life in a rural community during simpler times, and a better understanding of mankind's relationship with nature,"

said Fred. The current family scion said that "but really, we're still farmers."

Grandma Space remembers a time when her father was dead set against having a modern silo, and she has witnessed her own family farm evolve from small business to dairy farm to a tourist attraction that draws nearly 100,000 visitors yearly. "It's so different now, I can't believe it."

Fortunately, the history of that way of life has been preserved. Granted, the traditional aspects of farm life have been relegated to a museum. But with 100 different species — totalling close to 1,000 animals — needing daily care, the work ethic and lifestyle are very much alive.

Space Farms Zoo & Museum is located in Sussex, New Jersey, and is an interesting and educational day-trip destination. For more information, contact Space Farms at (201) 875-5800.



Life in a rural farm community is preserved for visitors of all ages at Space Farms.