

81-Year-Old McCullough Hook Continues Farming

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WOLMESDORF (Berks Co.)
— McCullough Hook remembers the days when he was featured in newspapers and national magazines for hosting 23,000 children on tours of his farm.

Although Hook is now 81 years old, he isn't sitting in a rocking chair simply remembering the good, old days. Instead this energetic octogenarian puts in 15- to 17-hour days working on the family farm, cooking, canning, cleaning, and taking care of his wife Anna who is disabled from Parkinson's disease, which is a chronic progressive nervous disorder of later life that is marked by tremor and weakness of resting muscles.

"Annie and I always stuck together and we always will," Hook says when asked why he doesn't rely upon nursing care for his wife.

"She helped make me what I am today. We are still partners regardless of the condition she's in," he said.

That care often requires Hook to arise seven to 11 times during the night to assist Annie.

But Hook is not complaining. He said, "Sitting around makes you stiff. As long as I move around, I can't get stiff."

Hook learned responsibility early. When he was 13 years old, his father died. As the oldest child,

Hook felt the responsibility of helping to keep the family, which included an 8-year-old sister, a 2½-year-old brother, and a six week-old baby.

Some people discouraged his mother from trying to keep the children and suggested she let others adopt the children, and return to her childhood home in Virginia. Hook remembers the event as clear as if it were today.

He recalled, "My mother put her arm around me and said, 'I want our family to stay together. I don't want a split family.'"

Hook vowed to do his part. He had learned to plow with horses when he was only eight years old. That was when, the plow hit slate and the plow handles bounced up and knocked out several of his teeth.

"From then on, I knew the right way to hold a plow," Hook said.

Fortunately, his mother was no novice to farming. She grew up on a farm, her husband had not, so she always said that she had taught him everything he learned about farming.

With the help of neighbors and friends, the family managed to stay together and keep the farm in Wolmesdorf on which Hook still farms today.

When Hook brought his girlfriend (whom he later married) to the family farm, she was afraid of the cows and ran and hid until the cows were tied in their stalls.

Hook's mother told her, "If you want to go with him, bring some old clothes along next time, and I'll teach you to milk."

Annie bravely took her advice. "Soon she could outmilk my mother and me," Hook said of the girl he soon married.

"When we married, we didn't have much money. My wife made flapjacks to sell and milked 28 cows by hand while I worked in the brickyards at night," he said.

During the day, Hook hauled school children to school in the car and helped do the morning milking and field work. The couple purchased few groceries — only sugar, salt, and safety matches — everything else was raised on the farm.

After two years of working in the brickyard, Hook was able to go into full-time farming. The couple rented an adjoining farm to their mother's.

"Back then, all you needed to get a loan from the bank was ambition and a reputation to do what you promised," Hook said.

Loans were repaid not by set payment fees and dates but by how much you could afford when you sold your crop.

Later, the couple moved to Bernville and rented a large farm there for 37 years.

"I was the first guy in the area in 1940 to lay the farm in contour strips. This is my pride and joy," Hook said as he showed a colored



Hook takes a break from his duties. Although he is 81-years-old, he continues to put in long days doing the field work on the 118-acre farm and the additional 120 acres that are rented.

photograph that clearly depicts the contour farming techniques.

Bernville was also the place where Hook began to hold farm tours long before they became popular.

"It started with the FFA boys. Soon I was getting requests from schools and Girl and Cub Scouts located as far away as Allentown and Harrisburg."

Hook limited the tours to Berks County where every school but one participated. The tours included hay rides and chocolate milk, which Clover Farm Dairies provided.

Hook still has thousands of letters received from the children who visited the farm.

The Hooks themselves had five children and now have 12 grandchildren.

While Hook was farming in Bernville, he continued to help his mother on her farm until 1980, when he made sale of the Bernville livestock and equipment and moved back to the family farm, where he built a house on the

acres. He laid the block and brick himself. He had learned to do that when fire destroyed his Bernville barn and he helped to rebuild it. He also built several structures on the Wolmesdorf farm and added to the two houses on the farm. Installing block glass windows is also one of his skills and one which he used in the barn. He is quite proud that the barn is so well lighted from installation of the block glass on two sides.

From 1985 to 1987, Hook also kept his mother who in her final years had Alzheimer's disease.

"My wife and my mother sat all day long in facing chairs," said Hook who believes home care is the best care that can be given to family members.

Hook had taken over cooking duties in 1980.

My wife was an excellent cook, but this Parkinson Disease just didn't let her continue," he said.

Some days Annie is able to walk gingerly by herself and other days she can barely move even with

(Turn to Page B3)



Hook grew up on this 118-acre farm on which he continues to work. He said, "Best land you want to find here on this farm. We can match crops here with Lancaster County."



This is the crew that keeps the Hook farm going. From left: Jim Hook, Garrion Shaw, hired man; McCullough, Debble, and Loretta Hook. Loretta is in charge of the 80 cows since her husband died of cancer in 1991. Daughter Debble takes care of the calves and about 40 head of replacements. Jim helps milk and do field work. McCullough is responsible for field work, equipment repair, and managing the farm.

Homestead Notes



Hook holds a can of cookies he baked. His wife Anna has Parkinson disease and is unable to do household chores so Hook cooks, bakes, and cans food in addition to working on the farm.