

# Ag Gives Perspective On Life Says Gail McPherson

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NEW PARK (York Co.) — Old McDonald used to feed three or four people; today's farmer grows enough food and fiber for 129 people," says Gail McPherson.

That was just one of the interesting facts about agriculture Gail McPherson told the fourth graders at Fawn Grove Elementary School, when she visited their classes recently during National Agriculture Week.

McPherson and her husband Paul own Maple Lawn Farms, in southeast York County. In addition to cropping several hundred acres of grain, Maple Lawn Farms is well-known for its extensive plantings of peaches, apples, and smaller fruits like blueberries. Along with wholesale and retail marketing, Maple Lawn has a loyal following of pick-your-own customers who come regularly in-season to harvest their own fruit fresh from the orchards.

Though not raised on a farm, Gail quickly became a partner with Paul in the business, with key responsibilities in their extensive recordkeeping systems and personnel management. But she also saw that agriculture was in need of caring, knowledgeable people to speak out in public relations efforts. Her background in education and communications, plus an enthusiastic and outgoing personality, gave Gail a unique combination of skills to become an ag-advocate volunteer.

One of Gail's early activities was a slide show she photographed and coordinated for the then York County Farmers' Association, now the Farm Bureau. "Seasons In The Sun" was shared with numerous non-farm audiences, part of a public ag-education outreach which later expanded to include an annual, free, farm tour.

In the mid-1970s, Gail was instrumental in helping to found American Agri-Women (AAW), and in October 1977, helped put together the state affiliate, Penn's Agri-Women (PAW). From the beginning, Agri-Women was established as a volunteer, public relations arm of the agriculture industry and a training effort for women involved in those leadership and spokesperson roles.

Gail credits the former Ethel Groff of Manchester, York County, affectionately remembered as the "mother" of Penn's Agri-Women, for her leadership role in helping organize the network. Agri-Women now includes thousands of members in state affiliates across the country.

"Ethel had a vision for agriculture that was way ahead of many

people of her generation," Gail recalls fondly. "She also tried to work for Agri-Women within every other group that she was a part of."

"AAW is a sisterhood, a group of nationwide friends; that's been one of the highlights of my involvement in it," adds Gail. "Networking with women from all over the country, in every discipline of agriculture, we have learned so much about each other. We've been able to identify the things we can agree on and are able to present a united voice on those issues."

"And it's a total volunteer organization, so 'we are it,'" she said with a smile. "Our members are recognized for their integrity, their credibility, their knowledge. They're believable."

"As women in agriculture, we're fighting for our homes, and our hearths, which people can relate to and identify with. That makes us especially effective as spokespersons. We always try to present a very positive image of agriculture."

Gail also sees the Agri-Women programs and networking as an ongoing higher education for those involved.

"It's battery-charging for me," she relates. "The speakers we hear are outstanding, often better than a college course. That's continuing education, with information that is applicable to our businesses and



Gail McPherson, front, and Carol Ann Gregg arrange trays of food for the Ag Day buffet luncheon hosted by Penn's Agri-Women in the Capitol's East Wing Rotunda.

the Leaven Award. Ethel Gross was also a former Leaven Award winner, along with Carol Ann Gregg, Grove City, former AAW national officer and current PAW secretary.

A few years ago, Gail was invited to participate in Foodwatch, a focus program of the Agriculture Council of America. The major thrust of Foodwatch is carrying to

The record cold winter of 1994, which virtually destroyed the entire peach crop in the Middle Atlantic region, wiped out Maple Lawn's production along with that of other orchards. But Gail found a personal benefit in that she had none of the carpal tunnel syndrome pain in her hands and wrists from sorting peaches that had caused her considerable discom-

but I still have to go-fer," quips Gail of her changing role as a mother, wife, and farm business partner.

Gretchen is a senior majoring in fine arts at the Disney School of Arts in California and was only 10 miles from the epicenter of that state's most recent major earthquake. Hugh, a sophomore at Penn State, is studying agriculture



## HOMESTEAD NOTES

the environment in which we work."

Agri-Women, in addition to information sharing, networking, and lobbying on legislative issues, works with far-reaching programs that include National Ag Day and Ag In The Classroom. At the state level, Penn's Agri-Women hosts and organizes the popular Ag Day Buffet at the Capitol in Harrisburg, a luncheon for legislators, staffers and guests which features the wealth of Pennsylvania-produced foods.

For her involvement, Gail has received AAW's highest honor,

the public and the media the message that the American food supply is safe and that the products that keep it safe and plentiful must remain available for production use.

As a Foodwatch program participant, Gail is one of a few dozen farmer-laymen who have been trained in the most effective ways to speak out for food safety and respond to consumer concerns. In that capacity, she testified last year at a United States Department of Agriculture hearing in Philadelphia relating to food safety issues which should be addressed in the 1995 Farm Bill.

That media training has not only helped make her a more effective spokesperson, according to Gail, but it has also helped to "mellow" her response to attacks on agriculture, rather than reply heatedly to unfounded or unreasonable accusations.

Two decades of involvement in hands-on farming have also had a "mellowing" effect, Gail adds. "You learn to accept crops failing from droughts and hail damage and to believe that there will be some benefit in some way. Paul is and has always been a 'cool as a cucumber' kind of person about problems. And I've learned that I don't have to do everything; other people can get the job done."

fort in other seasons.

Gail's responsibilities as corporate secretary of Maple Lawn Farms includes managing the office with its computerized record-keeping systems, handling payroll, and helping manage the retail market. She also does the extensive advertising for the market and pick-your-own and publishes two issues annually of the MAPLE LAWN FARMS CONNECTION, the orchard newsletter for customers. One is mailed out just ahead of the peach and blueberry season, the other goes out to customers just before fall fruits are ready for harvest.

About five years ago, the McPhersons diversified with the land improvement business, purchasing a few pieces of heavy earth-moving equipment from a neighbor who was retiring. Maple Lawn Land Improvement specializes in constructing soil conservation and farm water management installations such as terraces, manure lagoons and farm ponds. They also work with home builders in earth-moving for footers, foundations, roads, and landscaping.

Gail and Paul have three children, all of whom have grown up personally involved in both the farm and the public-relations outreach efforts of this ag-advocacy-minded family.

"I no longer have to chauffeur,

business management and in the college's "blue band." Sarah is a junior at Kennard-Dale High School, a track runner and a horsewoman who hopes to work professionally with horses.

Maple Lawn Farms has also been part of the life of hundreds of other children whose families have come here to walk the orchards, enjoy fresh air and sunshine, and clumb into a tree to pluck off a sun-ripened peach or apple. After gaining a personal knowledge of agriculture by picking their own food, some of the three generations of customers may have come to appreciate and share a Gail McPherson philosophy.

"Agriculture," she says, "gives you a perspective on life that, in the long run, the little irritations don't really matter."



In the offices above the retail market and packing facilities at Maple Lawn Farms, Gail McPherson spends much of her time keeping tabs on the family's fruit and grain businesses using phones and computers.