

Bittersweet Berry Time At Venesky Farm

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LORETTO (Cambria Co.) — Strawberries are one of Mother Nature's sweet summer treats but this summer's crop was "bittersweet" at Venesky Strawberry Farm, Loretto. This year marks the 30th and final season for this berry-picking operation. Owned and operated by brothers, Paul and Joe Venesky, and their wives, Emma and Audrey, the partners are now retiring.

Paul and Emma are the parents of two children, George and Sunny, and also have three grandchildren. Joe and Audrey, who live at the farm, have raised nine children: Tina, Mary Jo, Cindy, Luke, Eric, Lisa, Wade, Judy, and Nancy. The strawberries have helped to finance college educations for three of them. Their clan also includes 14 grandchildren. Through the years, all 11 children of the combined Venesky families, along with numerous friends and relatives, have helped with the strawberry operation in some way or another.

Those who still live in the area along with some of the "local" and "visiting" grandchildren continue to "pitch-in" when needed.

Working with the strawberries required quite a bit of hand labor but both Emma and Audrey agree that their children usually managed to turn it into a "social activity." For instance, the children would do their work and then jump into the pond to cool off.

In 1965, "Venesky Strawberries" began. Why strawberries? According to Joe, he always enjoyed this fruit. His favorite variety of berry is "Raritan" because it is a big producer and good tasting — "just an all around good berry." Joe was also advised that strawberries were a fast cash crop. Berry farming fit into the brothers' work schedules. Paul is a retired mason and Joe retired in 1992 af-

ter 34 years in the area coal mines. Audrey, raised on a nearby small farm, knew that the country was a good place to raise a family. When all of their children were at home she would annually freeze 100 quarts of berries and make countless jars of jelly. Even now when some of the children come home to visit they still raid the cupboard for a jar or two of jelly to take with them. Although Audrey has no particular favorite recipes, the family enjoys strawberry shortcake, pies, biscuits, and chocolate dip strawberries.

Working with the strawberries themselves is very labor intensive. To prepare a new field, it must be fumigated in the spring. This sterilizes the soil. Then, as early as the local climate dictates, the new plants are set out. The blossoms are pulled off the first year and the crop cannot be harvested until the following season. "Daughter" plants or "runners" must be placed in rows along with the main plants. A spray schedule is followed and quite a bit of hand-weeding is necessary. In the fall, the fields are mulched with straw for the winter and then this mulch must be removed in the spring with pitch forks and rakes. There are three "picking" years for the berries and then they are plowed down and placed in rotation with hay.

When the Venesky families first went into the berry business they had "pickers" and the berries were wholesaled to local grocery stores. After a few years, they switched to a "pick-your-own" operation and it has remained that way ever since. They now also sell "by the pound" rather than "by the quart." All seemed to agree that weighing the berries is more fair to the customers.

The typical strawberry season at the Loretto farm ran for approximately three weeks beginning around June 20. This year,



Audrey and Joe reminisce as they review photos taken of the strawberry operation over the years.

due to decreased acreage, berry picking was only done in the morning. In the past, it was done morning and evening. During the years when they were in full production, many workers, easily identified by their red "Venesky Strawberries" caps, were stationed in the fields. At times there were long lines of folks waiting to pick berries and these workers were necessary to help keep "pickers" in the designated areas.

When customers first arrived at the berry patch they had their containers weighed and marked. Next, it was out to the fields where the berries were planted in rows and customers were able to pick from both sides of each row. Children as well as adults have enjoyed picking berries at the farm and church groups and other fund-raising organizations have always been welcomed.

Peak seasons saw 12 acres of strawberries in production. This



Daughters, Mary Jo and Nancy, manning the weigh station.

summer the Veneskys were down to four acres. They had planned to have a few more acres open to the public this year but some of the plants were hard hit by "red steel," a berry disease which attacks their root system.

Berry farmers are just as vulnerable as other farmers to weather conditions, plant diseases, and "critter" damage. The past few weeks have been rainy in this area and so the strawberries ripened and became soft due to all of the moisture. In 1972, the entire berry crop was wiped out with "Hurricane Agnes" after only two days of picking.

When asked about the most important part of the farming operation itself all seemed to agree that it is irrigation. This is crucial to saving a crop and a "must" for growers. Audrey comments that they always hoped for lots of sun because "we can make the rain." The irrigation system is also necessary in the event of a frost. When the frost alarm sounds the irrigation system is turned on to allow the plants to be coated with

ice. The water runs until the temperature goes up and then the ice melts naturally. Without irrigation, it is too easy to lose a crop.

Reminiscing a bit, Audrey proudly points out a "memory board" hanging in one of the weighing stations. On this board are many photos taken of the strawberry operation. Each photo has its own story — one picture shows a young priest from India picking berries. This was his very first experience with the fruit! Another photo displays a long line of customers waiting to enter the berry patch — attesting to the popularity and success of the farm.

In speaking of the customers, Joe remarks that most have been very nice to deal with over the years and likens this to the Ivory Soap commercial — "99% good experiences."

The closing of Venesky Strawberries was anticipated three years ago when no new plants were put out to replace old fields. All partners agree that they will not miss the work involved but will basically miss the people. Over the years many customers have become friends. Joe and Audrey's daughter, Mary Jo, says that her parents are "people people" who thoroughly enjoy dealing with the customers and she feels that they will definitely miss this end of it.

Mary Jo also adds that there is also some pleasant "notoriety" in being recognized at places away from the farm and this is something which she will miss.



Grandchildren, Justin Brown, Daniel Tweedy, and Sarah Tweedy picking berries.



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