

Vanishing Acres: Despite Development Pressure, Farmers Find Ways To Thrive

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For Stahl, converting an old tobacco curing shed into a house for 1,800 layers years ago used to be a large undertaking. In 1979, they constructed a house to maintain 60,000 layers. At the time, that was a huge enterprise, but pales in comparison to the 105,000- to 120,000-bird houses of today.

entrance to the Rosemont development, while the old homestead is being remodeled.

Anita and John Valkovec, Klecknersville, farm more than 500 acres, including a great deal of rented land in various locations. In the late 1980s, John Valkovec saw farmland being lost to development at a rapid rate.

"We saw that they were selling

According to Joe Stahl, the mentality is that many homeowners want to be the last one in and are resistant to any additional development.

Still, taking on the debt load for that size of operation proved challenging for the Stahls. Money remained tight. What troubled them the most was, at the beginning of the 1980s, developments skyrocketed in the county and township.

A nearby farm went up for sale to developers. In 1988, the Stahls fell to pressure to put a sewer line through their property.

Then, in the late 1980s, development reached a peak. Two new housing projects, Wheat Stone and Rosemont, were constructed to house 150 units near the Stahls.

"The whole western border of our farm was affected by it," said Joe Stahl. To this day, part of a barn remains gutted out near the

everything around us," he said. "We got scared. We started looking. We were going to move to Bradford County. There was a nice dairy farm up there."

Instead, the Valkovec's decided they couldn't leave the area they grew up in and loved.

Anita said, "It was uprooting everything that we had lived with all of our lives — our families, the whole dairy operation. It was an incredibly hard decision to make."

Anita admitted, "We saw no future for us here anymore. The whole support of the ag business in the area was dying down."

John said that the ag business support infrastructure — the equipment dealers, the repair shops, the supply centers — are



Fritz, who farms part-time, uses composted manure to reduce odor. Notice the proximity of the houses. The spreader is used in the composting process.

located far away. Sometimes they drive for miles just to obtain a \$2 machine part.

sold for a huge amount of money, was turned into the Southmoore Golf Course.

'You don't have to get up at 4:30 in the morning to milk the golf course. You don't get up on Sunday and seven days a week to do that.'

"What do you do?" said Anita. "I mean, I hate the developers, I hate what they're doing, but really the farmer has no one to leave the property to. So they sell it because they can no longer farm it. And who buys it? The developer."

The questions that haunted the dairy family: at this late in life, do we want to go into debt? Can we afford to successfully relocate the business in light of depressed milk prices?

John said, "The roots run deep. My grandparents moved here during the Great Depression. There's four generations of us living here now."

But the facts remain: the nearest veterinarian is 30 miles away, in Oley. Obtaining parts is a nightmare, said John. They can waste a whole workday simply trying to find parts — often located as far away as Lancaster County — for their equipment.

About seven years ago, according to John, developers offered the Valkovecs \$1 million for their 135-acre farmstead.

One nearby property, which

Valkovec said he prefers the land to be golf courses rather than houses because at least some sense of open, lush fields remains.

Old farmhouses still remain in the middle of some of the multitude of housing developments in

"The whole time emphasis has changed," said Fred Seipt. In times past, we worried about timeliness, management, and many other business considerations. Production and profitability were forefront. Now, the "part of the business with the most profitability gets the attention," he said.

But Seipt is sincere about what counts in his business. "I might as well admit it — the entertainment center is more profitable. It gets the attention," Seipt admitted that, recently, haymaking needed to be done and wasn't because of the chores at the entertainment complex.

"The farm is a profit center,

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the area.

According to Joe Stahl, the mentality is that many homeowners want to be the last one in and are resistant to any additional development.

Jacob Stahl said that some of the housing development neighbors also decided that preserving farmland was a good idea.

When some neighbors "found out that we were not minded to sell the farm to development, oh, they were rejoicing. They were all happy — that's what they wanted to hear."

Clearly, attitudes were changing. The move was on to preserve farmland in Lancaster County. The Stahls signed their farm to preservation.

"We were happy to see the farm preserved, and we were hoping that some farmland would be saved. But not all farmers share that opinion," said Jacob.

also. But there's a whole lot less effort involved in the entertainment per dollar return than there is on the farm.

"You don't have to get up at 4:30 in the morning to milk the golf course. You don't get up on Sunday and seven days a week to do that."

"Just plain farming, without the retail store, without the ice cream, without the entertainment, would not survive in this area," he said. "Is that because we're farming for fun? My wife says, why don't you pack it in? The point is, farming is our love and the changes we've made have allowed us to continue."

Editor's Note: In the final part of the Vanishing Acres series, learning the art of public relations — developing good neighbor relations — can go a long way toward farm survivability.

Organizations Raise \$87,000 At Ephrata Fair

EPHRATA (Lancaster Co.) — Not only does the Ephrata Farmers Day Association donate proceeds from the Ephrata Fair each year, but many nonprofit organizations use their stands at the Ephrata Fair as their major fund raising project. This year's Ephrata Fair will be held from Tuesday, Sept. 26 until Saturday, Sept. 30.

Those organizations include Ephrata Area Adult Farmers, Soroptimist International of Lancaster, Society of Farm Women,

Our Mother of Perpetual Help Church, Lancaster County Poultry Association, Knights of Columbus, Ephrata Rotary Club, Ephrata Recreation Center, Ephrata Pioneer Fire Company, Ephrata Area Republican Committee, Ephrata Lions Club, East Cocalico Lions Club, Democratic Committee of Lancaster County and Akron Lions Club.

The total combined net profit for the stands occupied by these nonprofit organizations totaled more than \$87,500 in 1994.



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