

200 YEARS 1795 • 1995



For 200 years, the McMullen family has farmed this Indiana County farm. Family members include Patrick and Jennifer McMullen, standing. Sitting from left are William, Karen, Helen, and John McMullen.

McMillens Celebrate 200 Years On The Farm

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MARION CENTER (Indiana Co.)—A big white-and-blue banner has been hanging across the side of the red barn on the William McMullen farm at Marion Center RD 2 in Indiana County this summer. It proudly proclaims "200 Years, 1795-1995."

On the Fourth of July about 90 of McMullen's relatives gathered at the farm for the family's annual reunion. It included the usual reunion activities — a hayride, hog roast and home-made ice cream.

But a local television camera crew also showed up, because the McMullens were celebrating 200 years of continuous ownership of the farm stretching back through seven generations of their family.

When McMullen's forefathers came to America in the late 1700s they began farming the land along Wrigden Run in Rayne Township. Shawnee and Delaware Indians also lived there, and visited a trading post nearby.

As recently as last spring, John McMullen, William's father and the farm's immediate past owner, was still finding arrowheads in the fields.

In 1984 the McMullen farm was recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture as a Century Farm — symbolizing at least 100 years of continuous family ownership.

The state does not yet have a program honoring farms that have remained in the same family for 200 years. But if it did, the McMullen spread would be the only one in Indiana County — and one of only 157 in the state — that would qual-

ify for the bicentennial recognition, according to Sandy Duncan, the Century Farm Program coordinator in the agriculture department.

Farms that have been in the same family for two centuries are more common in eastern Pennsylvania because that area of the state was settled earlier. Observing 200 years of family farm ownership is more unique in western Pennsylvania.

"You don't do things like this every day," John McMullen said.

Robert Thompson — John McMullen's great-great-great grandfather — came to America from Ireland and settled in Derry, Westmoreland County, in 1773. Two years later they moved to land near present-day Marion Center, and purchased a tract of land from the heirs of William Penn. During the next 150 years, the farm passed down through succeeding generations.

John McMullen moved onto the farm in 1946 when it was operated by his uncle. He purchased the property in 1950, and ran the farm until his retirement in 1981.

John's son and daughter-in-law, William and Karen McMullen, now own the farm. They live in the 111-year-old main farmhouse, and John and his wife Helen live in a newer home nearby.

William received a degree in animal science from Penn State University in 1973 and was working as a district manager for the Ralston-Purina Company when he decided to go back to his roots and take over the family farm.

"It's more than just a job. It's a way of life," William said. "And

you must have a commitment from your family."

In that regard he said he feels fortunate. Karen, an Omaha native, enjoys farm life. And their children, Jennifer and Patrick, are active in 4-H projects and have their own chores and responsibilities on the farm.

The 132-acre spread lies in three townships. With leased property the McMullens actively farm about 200 acres.

It is home to one of only two registered Jersey dairy herds in Indiana County. The McMullens milk about 50 cows and usually have another 25 young cattle on the farm.

Corn and alfalfa are the main crops, and everything grown is fed to the Jerseys to boost their milk production.

After William took over operation of the farm he upgraded the milking system. The cows are milked from stanchions in the barn, and the milk is transferred through a pipeline directly to storage tanks.

John McMullen describes the farm's land as about average for Indiana County. But over the years he has seen milk production from Jersey cows triple, and the per-acre production of corn more than double from what it once was. Those improvements, he said, are a result of improved animal breeding, better feeds, agricultural research and good management of the farm.

He credits son William with computerizing much of the farm's production records, and the business records of "Home Farm Supply," a retail dealership of agricultural seeds started by the father and

son in 1984.

Milk production records for the McMullen's cows have been handled for years by DHIA, but William maintains much of the farm's additional information on his personal computer.

For the year ending in October, his herd average was about 13,500 pounds of milk per cow per year, with 500 pound of protein and 700 pounds of fat per cow per year.

McMillen is working to improve the farm's forage program to further boost milk production. This year he began using wrapped bales to get his hay crops off sooner.

"I've been doing my own breeding with artificial insemination for the past eight years. I've been able to select from six different suppliers. That's helped me a lot, being able to select the best in the U.S."

The farm is a small operation and William basically does the work himself with the help of a part-time high school student, his family and his retired father who lends a hand especially at harvest time.

Home Farm Supply remains a seasonal business William can devote time to in the spring when he's not so busy. It remains a partnership with his father.

Making a go of it on the McMullen spread hasn't always been

easy. The drought of 1988 quickly comes to John McMullen's mind when hard times are mentioned.

"If I was 18 I'd do the same thing again," he said, then quickly added, "I'd sure make some changes," explaining that he'd add a few more labor-saving devices.

Nationally, the number of family farms is declining. But William McMullen can explain why his family's farm has survived 200 years.

"It continues to be profitable. It continues with hard work," he said.

There are no plans to enlarge the farm. Instead, to ensure the farm's future William will concentrate on making it more efficient by doing more of the maintenance himself and upgrading more of the equipment.

Will Jennifer and Patrick be the eighth generation of McMullens to own the farm?

"That's a decision they'll have to make when the time comes," William answered. "Hopefully the opportunity will be there."

John and Helen McMullen's other children are daughter Connie and her husband Gary Spidell of nearby Home; daughter Sharon and her husband Donald Wild of Great Valley, N.Y.; son Robert of Lebanon; and daughter Julie Anne and her husband Brian Spencer of Ephrata.

HOMESTEAD NOTES