

Like A House, Farmland Requires Maintenance

ANDY ANDREWS

Lancaster Farming Staff

ST. THOMAS (Franklin Co.)

— Ken Myers remembers when, exactly two years ago, he spent endless hours restoring his farm's homestead, originally constructed in 1809.

Myers can remember the countless hours of sandblasting and cleaning away the old white paint to restore the original brick surface of the house.

The land, according to the dairyman, is much the same as a house — "There's always maintenance to it," he said — especially when taking on additional responsibilities.

Some of those responsibilities include long-standing conservation work dating back to when Myers purchased the farm in 1972. They include literally miles of underground drainage tiles for his fields, sod waterways, runoff catch basins, and a huge concrete manure storage structure.

The Myerses were honored for conservation stewardship with the Pennsylvania Chesapeake Bay Clean Water Farm Award, presented at the quarterly meeting of the Pennsylvania Association of Conservation Districts (PACD) in July.

Myra-Brek Farm, operated by Ken and Martha Myers and family, became the Franklin County Conservation Farm of the Year in 1980. In the years before and since, the Myerses have done extensive conservation work on their farm to retain the precious soil and to improve the quality of water that enters and leaves their farm.

The Clean Water Award, according to Ken Myers, wasn't awarded to the family for "one thing we did," he said, but "several things we had done over the years." After purchasing the dairy from his brother-in-law in 1972, Ken quickly signed up with the Franklin Conservation District.

"When we moved here, this whole area was just pastureland," he said. "Now we farm a lot of it. So we had to do work."

When he signed up, he farmed about 164 acres. Today he farms

about 400 acres, 240 of which are tillable. The additional 160 acres included rented land on two other farms, one east and one west of the original farm.

The Weikert soil on which Myers depends for his livelihood is often very droughty. It is a combination of shale and slate that makes management of water that much harder.

A real worry is when it rains a lot, because of erosion concerns.

After purchasing the farm, Myers re-evaluated the use of strip crops and started installing contours. He said some farmers "despise" contour stripping because "you're going around a hill and you always end up with little short point rows — they just despise that." But if a three-inch rain falls, according to the dairyman, the soil is retained.

While growing up on a farm, Myers said he was used to working limestone fields, which are often "nice and level." But working with the "slatelike" soil of the Cumberland Valley has Myers think "in smaller terms.

"If you don't, you get a heavy rain and it just washes the soil away," he said.

One of the largest projects Myers faced was installing the underground drainage systems, including about three to four miles of tiles. The drainage systems cover about 164 acres.

Also, installing sod waterways was important. "There was a ditch on the farm that you could actually pull a (pickup) through and you'd never have seen it," he said. The area was smoothed down and graded off. "That was a major undertaking; that was a big deal," he said. A sod waterway measuring 1,200 feet was the largest installed.

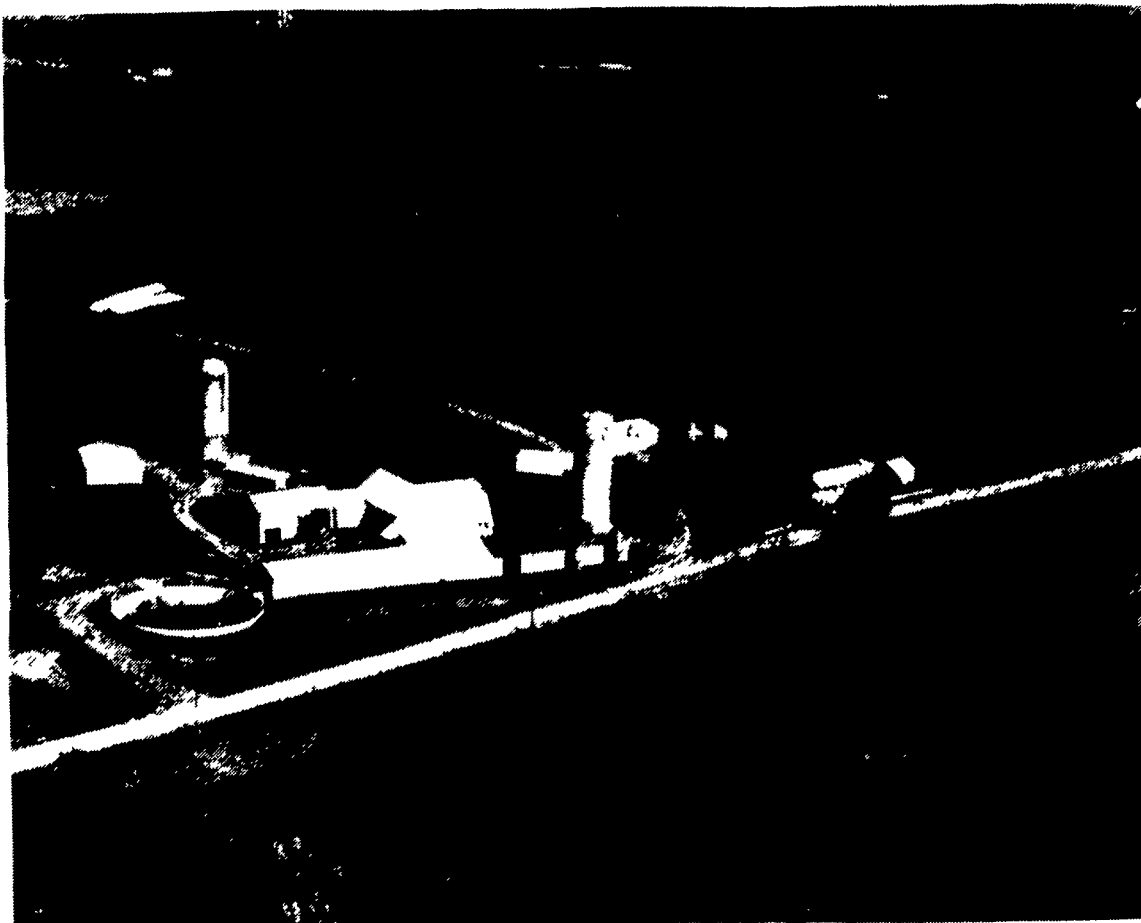
To Myers, installing the grass buffer zones on the roadway helped to retain soil.

"I don't like farming right to the edge of the road," he said. He said he concentrates mostly on the soil upslope, which, before the buffer zone, could easily run off in to the creek.

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Ken inspects the brickwork on his restored house, constructed in 1809.