



Ukraine ag university president Volodymyr Vlasenko, left, posed numerous questions about fruit production to host Stan Brown while touring the Brown family's orchards and retail market in Loganville.

Russian University Leader Tours York Agriculture

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LOGANVILLE (York Co.) —

There may have been a language barrier, but there was no barrier to smiles and friendship when Volodymyr Vlasenko met York County orchardist Stan Brown.

Touring Brown's Orchard and Retail Market at Loganville, the Ukraine agriculture educator was interested and obviously impressed with the quality of the fruit and the operations of the Brown family farm's popular retailing center. Through an interpreter, Vlasenko posed numerous questions during this brief visit about the growing and retailing of the orchard production.

The tour of the Brown's market was the first stop on a late-December whirlwind visit to York County agriculture for Vlasenko, president of the Belaya Tserkov State Agricultural University in the Ukraine. Other visits on his day-long tour of the county were made to Mervin and Ruth Hertzer's beef and wheat farm, Seven Valleys, the Mike Jasienski swine operation at Felton and Robert and Rodney Smyer's Richlawn dairy farm, York.

"It was one of the best experiences of my life," said York ag extension agent Linda Spahr, who along with fellow agent John Rowehl hosted the head of the Bila Tserkva State Agricultural University on his visits to York farms. "We were so comfortable visiting with him. They are trying to start an outreach, extension-type program and want to learn from what we do."

Vlasenko also spent a day visiting with and questioning his agriculture education peers at Penn State University during the several-day stay in Pennsylvania by a delegation of community, industrial and education leaders for Bila Tserkva. The city of about 250,000 is located south of Kiev in the rich agricultural land of the Ukraine, "breadbasket" area of the former Soviet Union. Following

the breakup of the former USSR, the Ukraine has emerged as a fledgling democracy, wrestling with the monumental social and economic challenges of moving from a communist to a capitalist society.

The visit by the delegation from Bila Tserkva came about through mission-outreach efforts by the United Methodist Church and the Ukraine Peace Fund, according to Ukraine Initiative volunteer Steve Crawford, York. Crawford, a marketing representative for WPMT Fox 43 TV in York, has made two visits with delegations from the United Methodist Church whose outreach efforts are aimed at improving conditions for the people of that community.

"Belaya Tserkov is the relocation city for many of the survivors of the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster," Crawford explains. Before their first delegation's visit in 1994, no westerners had been allowed to stay overnight in this key military installation area of the former Soviet Union.

"They are in the midst of very difficult times, with a lot of pressure on their young, democratic government," adds Crawford, noting that pensioners are especially in dire straits, since inflation has run rampant and pensions have little value.

The old currency, the ruble, was replaced by a new monetary note dubbed the "coupon." Originally, the value of one coupon was roughly equivalent to one United States dollar. During Crawford's first visit, the coupon had devalued to a ratio of about 74,000 to a U.S. dollar, and by his second visit, had escalated to about 180,000 to a dollar. A year ago, inflation had pushed the ratio to about 200,000 coupons to a dollar, roughly the equivalent of the price of a hamburger.

"During the Stalin era, Beli Tserkva was the premier agriculture university and was established primarily to teach vet science and agriculture sciences," adds Crawford. The Ukraines'

rich and productive farmland was a precious resource to the Soviet Union, so it was a logical location to site the nation's key agriculture education facility.

Collectivization of formerly private farms was also the rule of the Stalin era, often carried out, according to Crawford, by burning out the peasant owners or sending them to prison camp. Estimates of the numbers of Ukrainians starved out of their livelihoods range from 5 to 8 million, he notes.

"Now these co-op farms are being given back, but it is difficult to get landowners to think about working independently because they are scared of the costs involved," Crawford explains. Thus, a prime reason for the visit of the head of the University was to work toward establishing a partnership with Penn State.

"He asked a lot of questions about the extension programs," Crawford said. Vlasenko is expected to pursue the development of a program proposal in which selected students from the Ukraine could study at Penn State.

While the Ukraine strives to improve its agriculture production base, "kitchen gardens" continue to be a major source of food. Crawford relates the experience of a Ukrainian teacher friend's efforts to maintain a garden on a distant plot.

"She hikes about a 20-minute walk to the train station, then takes a half-hour train ride and walks another 12 minutes to the garden site," he says. "And, that's what she does on her Sundays, after spending the other six days of the week teaching, plus doing private tutoring to be able to send her daughter to college. Lots of people have kitchen gardens and everyone seems to respect everyone else's plot."

"There are some exciting possibilities," Crawford predicts for the Ukraine's future. "And it's in our best interest to see a fledgling democratic state get on its feet and thrive."

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