

Ice Cream At 1932 Farm Show Never Tasted Better

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 — During the Great Depression in 1932, David Semmel was lucky enough to attend the Pennsylvania Farm Show. He remembers when a vendor held out an ice cream cone to entice passers-by to spend a nickel. The advertising gimmick looked so tempting to 6-year-old David, who couldn't resist licking the cone as he passed by.

"I don't know who was more shocked—my parents or the vendor," said Semmel, who is 72 years old. Fortunately, his great uncle dug into his pocket for a nickel to pay for the cone.

Since then, Semmel has often visited the Farm Show as a 4-H'er, as a farmer, accompanied by FFA students when he served on the school board, and as a retired person. The complex has grown larger, the scheduled events more intense, but the sights, sounds, smells, and the taste of that ice cream cone at the first Farm Show he attended remain a vivid memory.

Semmel's father had sent some vegetables in advance of the show for judging, but when the Semmels arrived, they couldn't find the vegetables. Because it was during the Depression, Semmel presumes "some hungry people made use of them along the way."

Semmel was fascinated by the steel wheels, threshing machines, grain binders, horse-drawn planters, cultivators, grass mowers, and even the hand tools on display.

Hoping to sit awhile, the family searched for a seat in the small arena, but the seats were filled.

"What we call the large arena was not constructed until later, about 1937," Semmel said.

After the large arena was constructed, Semmel said of the event, "I can still hear the sounds of the roosters—each trying to outdo each other."

This year no sounds and sights of exotic birds or poultry will be at the Farm Show because of the ban from avian influenza.

Semmel also laments the loss of the big machinery displays.

Farm Show was always the place to hear and see new wonders of the mechanical age. One year, Semmel was amazed to hear that Allis Chalmers was experimenting with producing a battery-operated tractor. "But we never heard anything after that," Semmel said.

Farm Show is almost always accompanied by weather-related horror stories of getting to and from Harrisburg. Although Semmel doesn't remember having snow-covered roads on the trip from Allentown to the Farm Show when he was only six, he does recall that they drove in a 1929 Chevrolet, with no heater or defrosters, tires that were not too reliable, and at an average speed of 30 to 35 miles an hour.

"My father remarked about the few cars and trucks on the road, but this was when many people had their cars setting on blocks, not having enough money to pay for a license, let alone gasoline and tires. In fact, some people got a license for six months from July through December, at half fee rather than the full year for \$10," said Semmel, who is a noted historian.



The Semmels stand next to the original stone house (at left) on the property that is believed to have been built before the Revolutionary War. In the background is the house, built in 1842, where the Semmels live.

While there weren't many cars on the road for that initial journey, later trips involved "horrible traffic" on the old Route 22 bypass. Hopes that the new Route 81 would alleviate the jam-ups were dashed when "traffic backed up past the exits making travel really dangerous."

In the 1950s, Semmel recalls leaving the Farm Show complex during a heavy snow storm. At one point his carload reached the top of a long hill only to have the car spin around and take them back down the hill.

Semmel and his wife Mary live on the 75-acre farm that his grandfather purchased in 1906. The original part of their 10-room house was built in 1842.

"In 1915, my grandfather added a bathroom and running water that was pumped with a gasoline engine," Semmel said.

Semmel's father was a blacksmith. It was in the blacksmith shop that Semmel was regaled by tales of the past. His interest in history was piqued and no doubt influenced him to begin his collection of antique tractors, cars, and gas engines.

In 1947, Semmel married and began farming in partnership with his dad and later his brother. In 1949, he and Mary moved on the farm, where they raised two daughters and a son. They now have five grandchildren.

He did general farming until 1960. "This was potato country,"



Dave and Mary Semmel dress in garb typical of the era when they display their antique tractors, cars, and gas engines at the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival.

Semmel said of the farmland.

"My father always said that if the plowing is poor, that's the first thing against a good potato crop. Semmel's diligence in plowing a straight row paid off, for he won numerous county plowing contests and the state plowing contest in 1956.

Plowing wasn't his only field of expertise. In 1953 Semmel won the state public speaking contest sponsored by the Pennsylvania Farmer's Association (now Farm Bureau) and went to Chicago to compete in the national convention, "where I got beat out by some guy studying to be a lawyer," Semmel said.

Although the soil was great for raising potatoes, it was too stony for the mechanical potato pickers, and Semmel reluctantly discontinued potato growing.

When his brother graduated from Penn State and convinced his dad to install a dairy operation, Semmel continued grain farming on the side and worked in the engineering department for the Lehigh County Authority until his retirement.

Semmel has a large collection of antique cars, tractors, and gas engines. He purchased his first vehicle in 1957. He and his wife often display their collection of gas engines and antique vehicles at places such as the Kutztown Pennsylvania German Festival.

"I never collect vehicles with the idea of making money. I just buy what I like," said Semmel, who has purchased a 1925 car and a 1926 truck, which commemorate the birth years of he and his wife. When he

purchased the truck for \$25 to save it from the junk pile, he didn't envision that it would now be worth \$6,000-\$7,000.

The Semmels drive the vehicles to antique car conventions such as the one held annually in Hershey. But Semmel believes that he and his wife will not be able to attend the shows indefinitely and he is in the process of distributing his collection to his children and grandchildren.

In 1986, Semmel and Sterling Zimmerman started the Antique engine, tractor, and toy club. From the first meeting with 17 members it has grown to more than 500 members. Semmel continues to serve as secretary and treasurer of the club.

"We are comfortably retired in our 10-room house until I look around at all the outside buildings and think of all the upkeep that needs to be done, then I get uncomfortable," Semmel said.

"If I had to go out and start farming, I'd need to learn all over again," he said of the need to be licensed for chemical usage and the computerization of machinery.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the Farm Show continue to fascinate Semmel, but he won't be able to attend this year because of a bad knee. Instead, Semmel will spend the week doing what he does most weeks: He writes a bi-weekly column "Lore & More," for the "Parkland Press" about local historical events, and is compiling all the tools required for blacksmithing to donate to the Kutztown Pa. German Heritage Center of which he is a board member.



This picture from the Semmel's scrapbook shows son Dalton who was part of the Lehigh Potato Judging Team, which placed first in competition held at the state Farm Show in 1961. From left, Robert Reitz, Bryan Kistler, Dalton Semmel, and Larry Hamm.



A bad knee will keep Dave Semmel from attending the Pennsylvania Farm Show this year, but it will not prevent him from remembering Farm Shows past. Considered an archivist, Semmel spends his day compiling historical accounts of the area. He wrote a church history book, writes a column for the local paper, and collects antique tools, tractors, vehicles, and gas engines. In the background is a photograph of the steam engines that Semmel collects. His son Dalton, left, collects antique toy tractors.