

# Age Does Not Idle The Industrious Hook

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WOLMELSDORF (Berks Co.)

— For the first time since he started farming, McCullough Hook did not do the barnwork on his birthday.

"They wouldn't let me do it," the 85-year-old Hook said of the 38 family members who came to celebrate his birthday on May 24.

Despite their protests, his children couldn't prevent Hook from baking a ham and 12 quarts of macaroni and cheese for the celebration.

The industrious Hook is determined that age will not idle him. He's out every day managing his three farms and planting corn. Under his tutelage, two of his grandchildren milk 80 cows. But Hook said, "I do the managing and pay the bills."

Last year he put up a new silo and a feed room with an automatic mixer.

Some years ago, Hook built a home on a ledge that enables him to see for miles around and keep a sharp lookout on his dairy farm in the hollow.

"It's good to get out in the fields

after sitting up here all winter," Hook said recently at the end of a hot day.

When asked what he attributes his unusual energy to as an 85-year-old, Hook answered, "Faith in God and hard work."

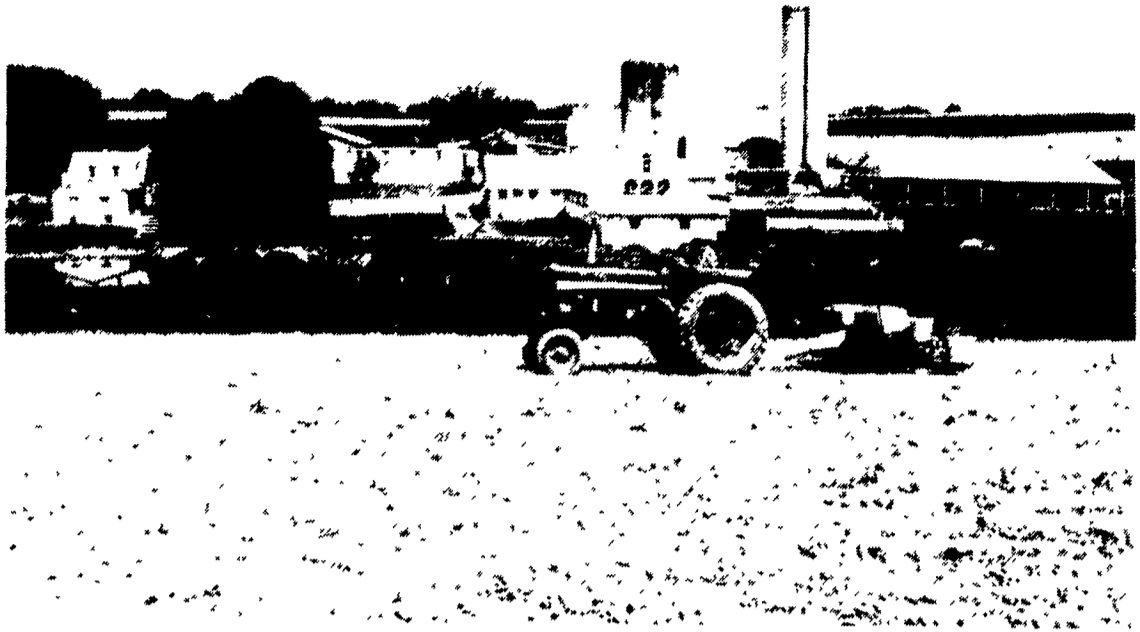
His father died when he was 13 years old. As the oldest child, Hook took over farming responsibilities to enable his mother to keep together the family that included an 8-year-old sister, a 2½-year-old brother, and a 6-week-old baby.

He used three horses and a walking plow while his mother used three horses and a riding plow to farm the land.

"My mother told me that hard work won't kill anybody," Hook said. It's a saying that he is prone to repeat as he finds much satisfaction in hard work.

Hook married a city girl who learned to "outmilk me," he said of the time when cows were milked by hand.

As time went on, the Hooks had five children, acquired seven farms, and were recognized for progressive conservation practices.



Although he is 85 years old, McCullough Hook has no intention of taking it easy. He's out in the fields plowing and planting on his Wolmelsdorf farm.

"I was the first guy in the area in 1940 to lay the farm in contour strips," Hook said. He was named a Master Farmer by Pennsylvania Farmer Magazine.

Despite his age, awards keep coming. This month Hook received an award from Berks County Ag Land Preservation for his long-term commitment to agriculture.

Although Hook became a well-lauded farmer, his life was not without pain. He nursed both his mother and wife through years of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases. His oldest son, who farmed with him, died of cancer in 1992. His son's wife Loretta Hook continued to work on the dairy farm, but in 1995, a 230-pound doe ran through the car's windshield and killed her. That was the year Hook's wife also died.

Hook himself has had some heart problems and a bout with cancer.

"My knees give me a little problem, and I get stiff if I don't keep active," Hook said.

"I still drive the car but not in the city," Hook said. He added somewhat abashedly, "I can't back machinery like I used to. I'm starting to go back, I can tell."

Nonetheless, Hook finds great delight in continuing to open his farm to the Berks County School District. His carefully tallied records show that more than 25,000 children have visited his farm over the years.

His favorite question asked by a student is "Which cow gives the chocolate milk?"

An annual outing on the farm is held by Hook's church.

"We have about 210 children coming on one day. Pastor Philip

Smith goes along on every hay ride to make sure the kids behave," Hook said of the hay rides that take about 25 minutes each.

Never one to sleep more than three or four hours at night, Hook often cooks and bakes from 10 p.m. to the early hours of the morning.

"It's lonesome when you're all alone, and I do my best baking after 10 p.m.," Hook said.

He baked 1,200 Christmas cookies to give to neighbors and carolers who stopped by. He also served chocolate milk with the cookies.

He baked 140 shoofly pies last year that he gives to his family members, which includes 12 grandchildren and two great grandchildren, and friends.

"Some of my pies went to Florida, Maine, and Virginia," he said. "They say my pies are better than mail-order pies."

Hook said that the secret to making great-tasting shoofly pies is to add vanilla and lemon juice.

He also makes pies and fruit

salad for bed fast friends. The week of this interview, he made 60 quarts of vegetable soup, which he freezes and gives to those who drop by to see him.

Last year he canned 300 jars of produce, which included 84 quarts of peaches and 68 of tomatoes.

Hook has clipped and tried hundreds of recipes from *Lancaster Farming* newspapers. He likes to keep experimenting with recipes to make them better. Here is one that friends request him to make for church suppers.

**Baked Lima Beans For A Crowd**  
14 pounds dried lima beans, soaked overnight

15 medium onions, chopped  
14 tablespoons dry mustard  
½ pound bacon, diced  
1½ stalks celery  
60 ounces King Syrup  
9 cups brown sugar  
60 ounces catsup  
Salt and pepper to taste  
Cook beans until soft. Fry bacon, onion, and celery. Mix ingredients together in large baking pan. Bake one hour.



In his lifetime McCullough Hook has received numerous awards for outstanding farming practices. A former Master Farmer, Hook continues to receive press coverage. He holds an award he received recently from Berks County Ag Land Preservation for his long-term commitment to agriculture.



More than 25,000 students have toured the Hook farms according to records. Here Hook answers questions and poses with a group who just took a hay ride tour of the farm.



This year on the first day of mowing his grass, Hook's lawn mower flipped on top of him. Hook brushed himself off and chalked the mishap up to the unevenness of the ditch where he was mowing.

## Homestead Notes