

Zern's Market Attracts 25,000 To 30,000 People Weekly

LOU ANN GOOD
Lancaster Farming Staff
GILBERTSVILLE (Montgomery Co.) — "You've got to do a story on 'Zernies,'" reader Kermit Laub wrote to this paper. "It sure is something to see."

Laub's been going to the market for about 50 years. "I went when there wasn't much there," Laub said.

Today, between 25,000 and 30,000 people visit Zern's Farmers Market in Gilbertsburg every weekend.

Folks come to buy fresh picked produce, sample Pennsylvania Dutch treats such as funnel cake, corn relish, and shoo fly pie. They come to bid on used furniture, search for a nostalgic treasure at the flea market or participate in a Bingo game. Some even come to have their hair cut and their glasses cleaned.

"We sell everything, from A to Z," said Kim Kline, who took over management of the market two years ago.

With more than 400 stands, Zern's draws a unique mixture of customers. Some come because it's a family tradition.

"My grandparents came, my parents came, and now I come every Saturday night," said a customer.

The market began in 1922 with a handful of farmers who brought excess garden vegetables, hay, and straw to sell in the Zern family's yard.

"They sold off the back of their pick-up trucks," Kline said.

Farmers still come and bring freshly picked vegetables and fruits to sell. But the market has long expanded to varied merchandise and even to holding special events and shows such as a Native American Show, an Elvis weekend, and a community choir competition.

This summer, a new marketing concept was birthed at Zern's. According to Kline, an antiques and collectible bid board was started. Customers enter a written bid on display items. At the end of the month, the items go to the highest bidders.

Jim Smiley, who manages the bid board, said that the concept represents an efficient way of exposing and selling antique and collectible pieces, including estate items.

Bidders who are reluctant to bid at the fast-moving pace of a public auction can examine the items closely, make a reasonable bid, and even return to the bid board and increase the bid if they see it is

going to another bidder.

Participation is high and both Smiley and Kline expect the giant, silent auction to attract thousands.

According to Kline, Zern's is one of the nation's largest markets.

Kline likes to tell the story of how one of the auctioneers fell in love with a young lady from Philadelphia in 1949.

She persuaded her father to come to the secluded country setting to see the market. Her dad, who had an interest in the clothing business, found the market fascinating, and a lot different than he was accustomed to on South Street, Philadelphia. Ben Silver persuaded his employer Morris Lipton to accompany him to the market.

The Philadelphia entrepreneur visited the market, saw the potential of a profitable venture, and purchased it in 1949.

Together Morris Lipton and Ben Silver guided the market's expansion. Old wooden rafters and dirt floors formed the setting for the market. Vendors hung clothing from the rafters and candles were used for light during evening hours.

Three fires almost destroyed the market during the 1960s and 1970s, but each time, it was rebuilt. The main building now stretches a mile long.

Lipton and Silver both died, but it's still a family business, according to Kline.

Although the market is only opened weekends, it's an every day workload for Kline and a crew of workers.

Stand rentals, promotion, building repairs, maintenance, meeting with township authorities, insurance, legal matters, and survey competition are part of the behind-the-scenes work required to operate the market and such added fringes as a midway section, plant and flower auction, and a tractor pull.

"We've added a few new things, but it still maintain flavor of farmers' market," Kline said.

Customers can shop at the markets on Fridays from 2 p.m. until 10 p.m. and on Saturdays from 11 a.m. until 10 p.m.

Directions to Zern's: From Philadelphia, take Schuylkill Expressway (Rt. 76 W) to Exit 26B. Take Route 422 W to Pottstown to Rt. 100 N, go 7 miles to Rt. 73 (Boyerstown exit), turn right. Zern's is a half mile on the right.

If you get lost, call (610) 367-2461.

Free parking and admission.



Kim Kline manages Zern's Farmers Market. Although it continues to grow, Kline wants it to maintain its farm market flavor.



More than 400 merchants sell produce under one roof that is said to stretch more than one mile long.

Granger's Legacy Lives On Through Toy Projects

FREEDOM (Beaver Co.) — In life, Mary-Lee Steel wove her love for sewing with her desire to do community service through the Pennsylvania State Grange's Stuffed Toy Project.

So strong was her passion for this particular women's activities project that her home was transformed every fourth Tuesday of the month into a Santa's workshop, of sorts, as Grangers gathered to use their hands to craft toys. Upon completion, the toys are donated to ambulance ser-

vices, hospitals, homes, women's shelters, and police stations to help calm children during a traumatic experience.

When Mary-Lee, who was women's activities (WA) director in Beaver County, unexpectedly passed away last March, her passion didn't die with her. In fact, the very flame that fanned that passion has spread to Grange members all across Beaver County.

"We were at her house just two days before she passed away and

she jokingly said we should shoot for 1,000 toys this year," director Deb Elliott said. "At the time, we all kind of laughed at what she said. Then, after she passed away, we decided we would do it (make 1,000 toys) in memory of her."

As a rural and community service organization dedicated to improving the lives of all Pennsylvanians, the Pennsylvania State Grange has led the nation in the number of toys made the past six consecutive years out of the 22 that the National Grange has sponsored it. In 1997, Pennsylvania Grangers made nearly 9,000 toys in what has become commonly known as a "Labor of Love."

"When you are working on these you can't help but think about the kids who will be getting them," Elliott said. "But when you see them get the toys or hear that they are being put to good use, it is so much different than just thinking about it."

Reaching the 1,000-toy goal was quite a task considering the Pomona (county) Grange members were increasing their output by nearly 60 percent over last year. PA State Grange Women's Activities Director Becky Michalka said Beaver Pomona members made over 400 toys in 1997.



At the Beaver Medical Center Mariann Murtha, pediatric nurse, left, and Deb Elliott, women's activities director for the Grange, talk to Grange President Bill Steel about his late wife's legacy that lives on through the toy project.

"We have been working on toys at our Grange (Hookstown) before the meeting," Elliott said. "And everyone has been involved — men, women, youth members and Junior Grangers — one way or another. Whether they were sewing or stuffing them with polyester fiber, everyone has pitched in to help."

Mary-Lee's husband, Bill, who is the president of the Pennsylvania State Grange, is proud that the members have met their goal.

"I'm delighted that they accepted the challenge and that they have carried through with it," Steel said. "Mary-Lee was quite active. She also participated in the needlework contest and made quilts for at-risk babies and lap robes for nursing home residents."

Elliott said the toys will be boxed at Hookstown Grange and shipped to various charitable organizations in Beaver and Allegheny counties, East Liverpool, Ohio and West Virginia.