

Farm's Rebirth Results In Conservation Honors For Hummelstown Producer

(Continued from Page A1)

March 25, at the Dauphin County Agriculture and Natural Resources Center.

Geesaman, who operates his own construction business in Hummelstown, spoke about the work on the farm in the decade since he's owned it.

Photos reproduced here show how far the farm has come in its restoration.

Where the building once had missing doors and no manure storage area, now the barn has new doors, new paint, a new roofed manure storage area, a refurbished feedlot, and a whole new outlook.

"We were cooperators with the district almost from the word go," he said. A lot of soil was moved and a lot of work was done to restore the building. New roofs were installed. High-tensile and wood fencing was put in place.

To build a retaining wall for excess manure and to keep manure from draining haphazardly into a field, Geesaman used old telephone poles stacked up on the side like a loghouse. Geesaman used to dump the manure on the side and stack it, but when asked by the district a few years ago if he wanted to build a manure storage area, Geesaman agreed.

In the late spring of 1996, at the same time he enlarged the size of the barn, Geesaman installed a cement-floored and roofed manure area. The storage area was installed with a conservation district cost-share program. He has four months of manure storage with the structure. There he stores the manure separately from his 45-head beef cow/calf and finishing herd and some poultry manure from a nearby farm.

Geesaman mixes the chicken and steer manure as he spreads it. He regularly conducts soil tests to ensure nutrients are used properly, following the farm's nutrient management plan.

In the reconstructed barnyard, he uses a siphon tank and spreader bar which allows nutrients running

off the feedlot to be captured and spread evenly with a grass filter area.

Where the soil pH used to range from 5.1-5.2, now, after successive liming, the pH measures 6.7. He will put another one ton per acre on to bring it up to neutral levels.

Geesaman said that he purchased 137 acres of the farm in 1988. Since then 26 acres have gone to a new sewer plant line. The farm retained the 14- x 45-foot concrete stave upright silo, which doesn't have an unloader.

On the beef herd, Geesaman said he has about six cows and one bull with the balance made of steers. He obtains them from auctions and nearby farms, taking them from 700 pounds to finishing weight. He purchases them locally, some from the Greencastle Livestock Sales and some from New Holland. He prefers the Charolais/Limousin cattle, a mixed herd that is easy to handle.

Geesaman, who operates John Geesaman Construction, also sells freezer beef. Last year he took 16 of his steers to Groff's in Elizabethtown for processing.

When Geesaman purchased the farm, there was some row cropping, mostly corn. There was no alfalfa, just timothy and orchardgrass. Now Geesaman maintains 11 acres in pasture, 28 acres of corn, 12 acres of alfalfa, 28 acres of timothy hay, and five acres of mixed hay (orchardgrass). Rotation is corn/oats/wheat/hay/soybeans and corn/small grains/hay/soybeans.

He also grows about 27 acres of small grain, this year mostly oats and soybeans. What he doesn't use for his cattle he sells.

The steers are fed corn, oats, barley, and wheat. He obtained some oats and wheat mixed by a neighbor. For supplemental feed, he uses wrapped alfalfa baleage. He sells quite a bit of hay, he said, to the local horse farms.

He grazes his cattle mostly in sacrifice-type lots.

The most significant conservation practices in place on the farm,

with a Berks shale-clay type soil, are the contours and drainage ditch systems.

"When I purchased the farm, there were water problems out in the field," he said. In addition to the diversions, some drainage pipe was installed. A majority of the acres are in contour. The previous owner used to simply law out strips "up and down the hills," said Geesaman. The conservation plan fixed that.

Geesaman employs a mixture of tillage practices at the farm, including no-till, minimum till, and conventional. He said he no-tills into sod fields. He conventional tills corn or soybeans into grass.

The challenge of the clay and shale fields vary — ridges can be difficult to manage. Geesaman has moved topsoil on the ridges. Depending on the rains, he said, the fields can be either too wet or too dry. Before he purchased the farm, because of the fencing problems, cattle would cross regularly into neighboring fields.

Geesaman installed high-tensile fence with all-wood white posts and those problems have disappeared.

In the early 1970s, Geesaman became sold on farming as a lifestyle when he rented a dairy farm in Fredericksburg for three and a half years. He milked 45 cows. About the same time, he built a house that is still his home in Hummelstown. John and wife Karen lived in the basement of the house for about three years until the second floor was complete.

At the time, the development of which the house is almost a part of used to be simply a dirt road. Geesaman maintained steers "right up against the yard," he said. "I used to raise a couple of pigs — at that time, the hogs paid the taxes on the house."

At one time Geesaman crop farmed and worked in construction. He went from the dairy farm to full-time construction work, building houses, working as a mason and then becoming a general contractor.



Since John renovated the farm, people have told him that "they've never seen crops grown like they've seen since I've moved there," he said. "I'm doing the best I can. I feel honored more for this than any kind of money, for (the district) to pick what I've done. When they thank you, it comes from the heart."

After building a spec house, word of his work spread until he became a full-fledged developer.

Since then he has several lots in various areas under development, many "mid-grade" homes priced from \$200,000-\$250,000.

"This will sound strange, but I don't like to see farms cut up," he said. He is saddened by the loss of good soil, especially on one subdivision he purchased, but the owner was going to sell for development anyway.

"If I didn't do it, another would," he said.

He believes that too many developers do not subdivide the properties carefully. Local township ordinances dictate that each lot must be at least one acre in size. Geesaman said it is important to "cut it right."

He said, "I love farming and I'd like to see land stay as a farm." That's why he didn't divide the farm near Grantville into lots.

The conservation award is a personal honor for Geesaman, he said. "The conservation district said I was easy to work with," he said. "I knew what I wanted and they knew what I wanted. We could work together for both of our benefit."

As a contractor, Geesaman said that he answers a lot of questions. Some of them ask what they consider to be "dumb questions."

He said, "There's no such thing as a dumb question. I would have asked a lot of them, because I don't think they're dumb."

Many people don't have a con-

cept of what a new house looks like. But Geesaman, who incorporates what he sees of other farms on his own, can see the "size and settings of things," he said.

"I can visualize something real quick, with size and grades. I know how to set a house to get the most out of it." He enjoys working with his clients, which include retired farmers.

"Many want to build a rancher or a Cape Cod," he said. "The ones retired want a ranch house — they're tired of climbing steps."

Geesaman farms with wife Karen. They have four children, including Galen, 32; Duane, 30, who lives in the farmhouse; and Warren, 29. The sons are hired for the contracting business. The Geesamans have a daughter, Becky, 26, at home.

Geesaman said Galen works on plumbing, heating and air conditioning and Warren operates a dry-wall business. Both work with the construction company. Duane installs computer flooring in the New Jersey and Philadelphia areas.

Since John renovated the farm, people have told him that "they've never seen crops grown like they've seen since I've moved there," he said. "I'm doing the best I can."

"I feel honored more for this than any kind of money, for (the district) to pick what I've done. When they thank you, it comes from the heart."



John Geesaman, who operates his own construction business in Hummelstown, spoke about the work on the farm in the decade since he's owned it. The farm was run down when he purchased it more than 10 years ago.