

Retail Marketing Stretches Ag Horizons

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downside is that local farmers must compete pricewise with those in other countries.

An example of this was mentioned by Stephen Quigley, a managing partner in Merrymead Farm Inc., a dairy farm and farm market in Lansdale.

Niche Marketing

Niche marketing has provided a nice income for the Roy Brubaker family. Since 1992, Brubaker has been operating Village Acres, a 15-acre certified organic vegetable and small

fruits farm in Juniata County. A former missionary, Brubaker said organic farming was his first stab at farming. On his farm, top soil was shallow, not well-drained, and polluted with stones, which continues to be an ongoing hassle.

Some of the marginal land is used for raspberries, blueberries, and perennials since the soil doesn't require tilling for these crops.

Brubaker said that being part of the Tuscarora Organic Growers has enabled him sales and opportunities that wouldn't be possible operating alone. About 65 of the co-op sales are in the Washington D.C. area to restaurants and retailers.

During January and February, co-op members decide what each member will grow, negotiate changes, additions, and diversity.

The Brubakers also operate a community-supported

Entertainment Farming

As a farmer, Quigley is frustrated by low commodity prices and stifling government regulations. At the same time, to remain profitable, Quigley is forced to make astute business decisions. That often means it is cheaper for him to buy elsewhere than raise it himself or buy from a neighboring farmer.

Quigley found he could have Canadian pumpkins delivered to his farm cheaper than raising them or than buying them from other growers in the state.

While this news sounds discouraging to farmers, Quigley, Janet Finney, Roy Brubaker, and Romaine Erb shared how they are finding ways to remain profitable in the changing market.

Both Quigley and Finney cater to entertainment farming.

"People don't want to pay for food, but they'll pay big bucks for entertainment," Quigley said.

Realizing this, Quigley has helped steer Merrymead Farm into a place where families come to spend money. The drawing card is that Merrymead is the closest working farm to Philadelphia. Eighteen family members and additional seasonal help are employed on the family farm that has a 100-cow herd and 400 acres.

Visitors are charged \$4.50 each to visit the farm.

"They pay to go to a museum. Why shouldn't they pay to see our farm?" Quigley asked in regards to the attraction of animals and open space.

People are willing to pay. Merrymead has been so successful that traffic is sometimes backed up five miles in either direction waiting to get into the farm on a busy day.

Merrymead, open seven days a week from 6:30 a.m. to 10 p.m., makes 50 flavors of ice cream, operate their own bakery, and are constantly trying new activities.

The store's biggest retail growth has been in flowers. But complicating the growth is the strict zoning laws enforced by his county.

"We are only allowed to sell what we can dig with hand shovel. Zoning is horrendous," Quigley said.

"Business is big, but the future doesn't look good," Quigley said of the battle with zoning laws that stifle their growth and are often times ridiculous.

The farm is not allowed to erect a permanent building but is allowed to continue a bakery business within three sheds on the property. This inconvenience requires additional labor in walking back and forth between sheds and in transporting baked goods from one place to another. Eight rooms of the farmhouse are used for office space. The barns and six trailers are used for storage.

Zoning will not allow permanent signs, so a sign is erected on a wagon and moved periodically.

Merrymead is surrounded by development. But, Quigley said, milk sales remained flat in the last five years despite the population increase.

"The neighbors go to the supermarket for milk. They don't want to another stop for milk," he said. They do come for ice cream. In the summer, the store employs 75 students who work 12 at a time dipping ice cream.

Quigley is the first to say that the family could not survive by relying strictly on agricultural pursuits. Some of their attractions include having the world's largest pig, offering unique games of chance such as the harvest slinger — which pays better than a whole dairy herd for a year — 13 hayride wagons, Johnny Appleseed reenactment, and many seasonal events.

Janet Finney doesn't live in Philadelphia, but her family has also managed to carve a successful business with entertainment farming concepts in Crawford County. The entertainment started by accident with a few pumpkins in 1958. The family now raises 30 acres of pumpkins and five acres of Indian corn on their 100-acre property. They rent an additional 50 acres. A former dairy farm, it is now a vegetable farm with no irrigation system. They grow everything they sell except apples and cider at the roadside stand.

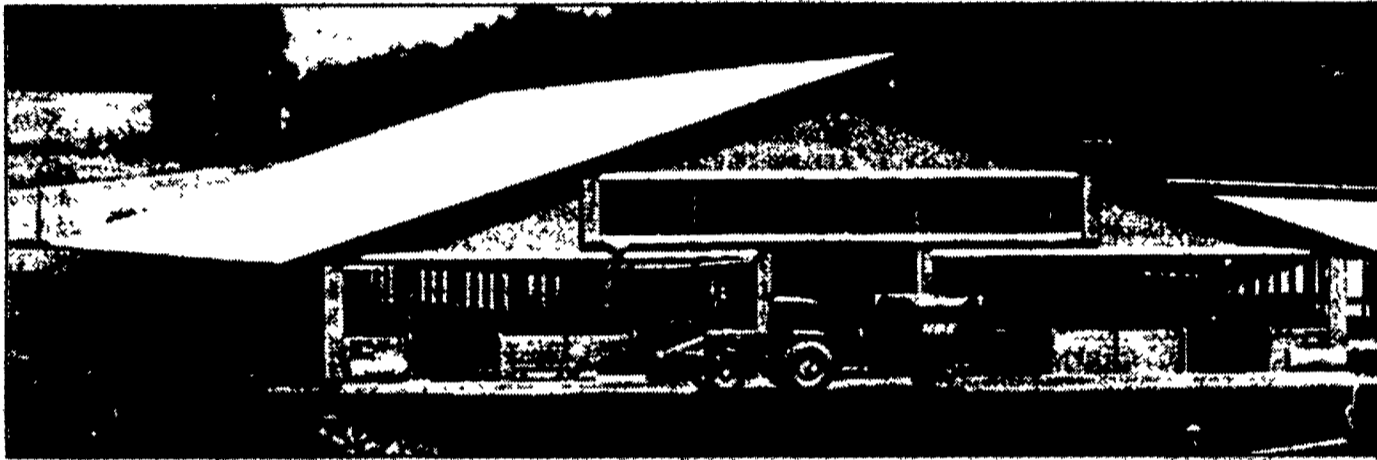
Seasonal pumpkin sales are the Finneys' forte. Finney turns pumpkins into the big, bad wolf and the three little pigs, Wizard of Oz characters, and other storybook personalities.

The Finneys do not charge for entrance to their farm, but they sell Pumpkinville treats such as hot dog and vampire specials and sometimes offer rides on their registered Belgians.

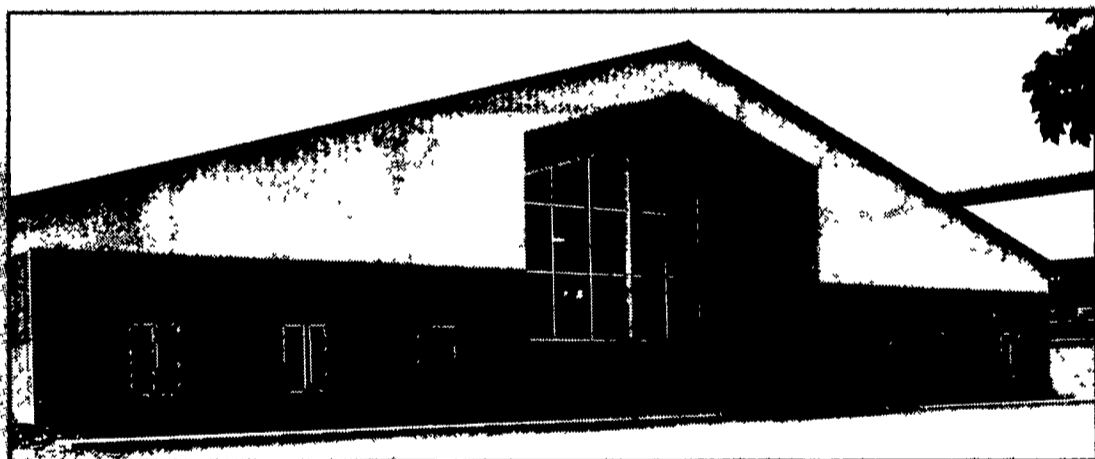
Finney said the entertainment aspect of Finney's Pumpkinville draws customers. Even if they do not buy anything that day, they usually become repeat customers of the farm market, making it worth the no admission policy.



(L to R): Dan, Beverly, Alyssa, Tami, Andrew & Doug Smith.



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