

Make Hay While The Sun Shines . . . All Year

(Continued from Page A1)

corn, soybeans, and rye for straw, according to landowners' preferences.

"Some don't want corn because it spoils the view and some want corn for the privacy," said Gail.

Besides fields owned by retired farmers, nonfarm landowners who no longer want to mow their acreage ask the Crookes to mow their fields. Lot size for the suburban houses varies from 3-10 acres.

The couple has spent seven years in Dublin, "probably the most active area in agriculture," said Gail, "the last of the frontier in staving off developers."

Jim, who grew up on a dairy farm in Bucks County, started full time in the haying business in 1979 with custom baling. He began by working for a neighbor and later, after his neighbor passed away, took over the business.

"We've changed the business," said Gail. "For a while there, we did a lot of hay for landscapers for seeding."

The Crookes provided hay for the Blue Route bypass from the turnpike, an airport, prison, and housing developments. Now mushroom growers are main buyers of the hay.

"We started out with small bales and it go to be so much volume, the weather would get bad and it would get wet," said Jim. This hay then went to become mushroom hay.

Ten years ago, when the Crookes purchased a large square baler, marketing swung from feed to mushroom hay. Now 80 percent of the hay acreage goes to mushroom hay buyers to 20 percent for feed hay.

With the ability to make half-ton square bales, the Crookes have doubled their acreage in seven years, a growth they attribute to word-of-mouth advertising. However with suppliers coming from northeastern states and Canada, there is now more competition for mushroom hay, according to Jim.

Pennsylvania is a leading state in mushroom production, making it a ready market. Mushroom growers require the large square bales which are easily loosed to spread for the mushrooms. They also test every load for moisture and subtract weight if the load is more than 20 percent moisture.

The Crookes employ one full-time employee from early spring to late fall.

Hay equipment wheels begin

to roll approximately the third week of May and continues until snowy or wet weather closes the season.

"When the weather is good in June and July we make as much feed hay as possible," said Jim, who gets almost double the price for feed hay than mushroom hay. The downside is that the smaller bales take more labor. The large bales are not wrapped but stacked 4-5 bales high and covered with plastic until spring.

The large acreage the Crookes must cover means that many of the fields are only cut once. "We still have 200 acres where we haven't been through the first cutting yet," said Jim.

Even though their schedule is busy, the Crookes still take off every Sunday plus take a summer vacation.

Acreage comes from not only farmers but also suburban homeowners and housing developments. "We have a claim to fame with 400-500 acres in the county which we mowed before they went into development. Our equipment was the last to go over it in farming," said Jim.

"We're still cutting now," said Gail. "With mushroom hay, it does not have to be as green as feeding hay. Jim has baled year-round."

Crooke has put chains on the tractor to bring in the hay.

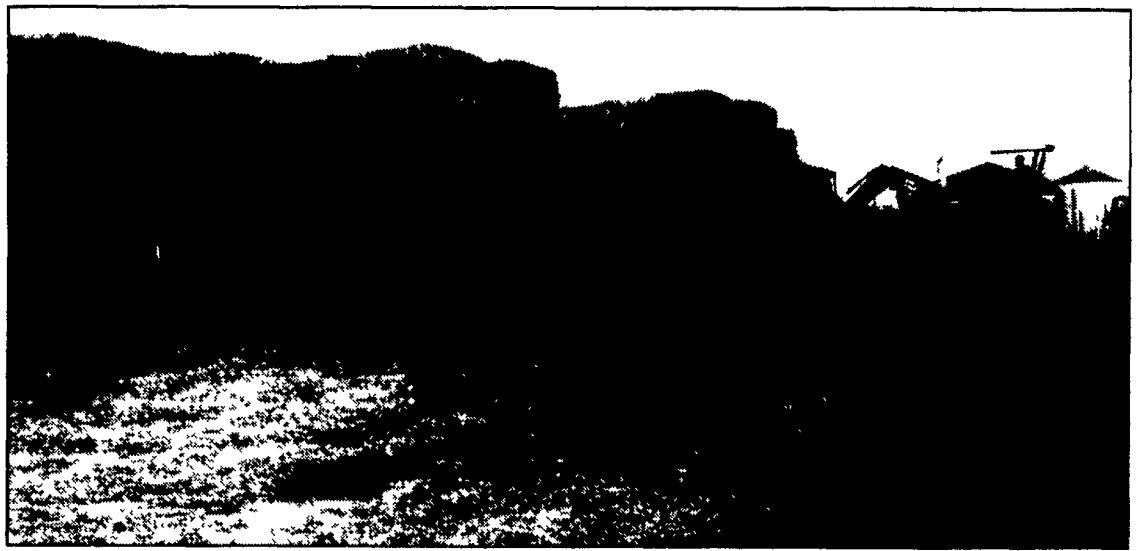
"We have more than we can handle, but we are losing farmers all the time. There's been quite a bit of an exodus about the last 15 years or so when people got fed up with the hassles of farming in the suburbs and moved elsewhere to farm," said Gail. She pointed out that the agriculture preservation program for the area, however, is growing.

"This may be a short-term scenario," said Gail, who said that it is difficult to plan for the future with the extent of development in the area. "Our son wants to farm and we're not sure if this area is where he should try to farm. There is no way a farmer can buy land here and pay for it farming."

Arsonists have posed a challenge to the Crooke's business. The hay left outside is now stacked smaller to make it less obvious, said Gail.

Gail, a former county 4-H extension agent in Illinois, is now a leader for the Danboro club. The Crooke children participate in 4-H with hogs and a few of the family's 25 ewes.

She helps raking and tedding in the fields, plus "maneuvering and logistics," said Jim. With



Crooke moves the half-ton bales, probably destined for a mushroom grower, to a flatbed trailer. "With these big bales they're actually packed so tight they don't soak up water," said Crooke. Thirty-bale loads may equal 15-19 tons of hay moving down the road.

more than 2,000 acres, 10 different townships, two states and 50 different landowners with fields to cut, the Crookes must plan strategically to have the proper equipment in the right fields, plus fuel and transportation.

"It's a difficult task that he has, determining who is working where, fuel, what trucks to leave in, and how to move equipment," said Gail.

"A lot of it is planned around the weather," said Jim, who tunes in to the weather station every morning. "We always have to be thinking ahead to the next day."

"We work in a circuit. We move step-by-step down the county from township to township," said Jim.

Walkie-talkies have greatly aided the Crookes. "It makes a big difference to be able to call with a change of plans," he said.

The United Parcel Service has

also been a big help to hay production as the Crookes can forego long trips to get parts to receive them in the mail the next day.

"I keep everything in my pickup - like baling twine, fuel, grease, oil, or tools. I try to guess ahead as to which part I'm going to need and keep those in stock."

"I also need to know where my support systems are," said Jim, who takes his flat tires or hardware needs to different locations as necessary.

In the fall the Crookes provide for several hay mazes. Customers design their own maze by gluing blocks on plywood. The template is placed on the fender of the loader tractor and the maze is built on the pattern.

They have dealt with six or seven fires over the years. Not only smaller piles of hay but also dispersing the piles onto several

farms helps keep arson risk lower.

During the winter Jim will be busy hauling the piles of hay.

Transporting equipment from area to area is also a challenge. A sicklebar-type mower folds up to the width of the tractor. The Crookes also have carefully scoped the bridges in the area that can handle the height and weight of the equipment.

Jim pulls the hay rakes and tedder with a pickup and a low bed transports the tractor. "It's never more than a couple of miles to the next field," he said.

Traveling around the surrounding area to various hayfields has given Jim a thorough knowledge of the area in perhaps an unusual way. "I actually think of the county in terms of the ridges, hills, creeks, the lay of the land, almost more than roads," he said.

Special Deadlines For Dec. 30 and Jan. 6 Issues

Because of the Christmas and New Years holidays and the promos for the Pennsylvania State Farm Show and the Keystone Farm Show, the Dec. 30 and Jan. 6 issues of Lancaster Farming will need to be published with different advertising deadlines. They are as follows:

Dec. 30 Issue

Public Sale Ads: Tuesday, Dec. 26, noon
Mailbox Markets: Friday, Dec. 22, noon
Section D Classifieds: Tuesday, Dec. 26, 3 p.m.
Farm Equipment Ads: Wednesday, Dec. 27, 9 a.m.
All Other Display Ads: Friday, Dec. 22, 5 p.m.

Jan. 6 Issue

Public Sale Ads: Friday, Dec. 29, 5 p.m.
Mailbox Markets: Friday, Dec. 29, 5 p.m.
Section D Classifieds: Tue. Jan. 2, 5 p.m.
Farm Equipment Ads: Wed. Jan. 3, 9 a.m.
All Other Display Ads: Fri. Dec. 29, 5 p.m.

COMING NEXT WEEK

An insert as part of your regular subscription issue

The 2001 Lancaster Farming Ag Directory

A comprehensive listing of contact people with addresses, e-mail, and phone numbers for all segments of agriculture. Included in this first-ever, one-of-a-kind directory are farm organizations, state and federal agencies, extension personnel, and ag-related educational and promotional institutions.

REGIONAL IN COVERAGE

The coverage area follows the Mid-Atlantic region of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia.

You will also want to review the advertising messages of the major agribusinesses in the region that are included in the very large, 160-page booklet.

The 2001 Lancaster Farming Ag Directory is published by:

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Ken Stoop, New Hope, a longtime employee of the Crookes, pulls two rakes through the late-fall fields.