

IT ALL BEGINS ON A FARM

Mark Metzger on his
Century Farm in Alvada.



By Christine Denecker and Sarah Sisser



HIO FARM STORIES is an on-going campus-community collaboration between the University of Findlay and the Hancock Historical Museum, which began in fall 2013 with a grant from Ohio Humanities.

Christine Denecker, professor of English at the University of Findlay, and Sarah Sisser, Director of the Hancock Historical Museum, have spent the past several years traveling to Hancock County farms and speaking with their owners in order to build a video archive that traces the evolution of agriculture in Northwest Ohio over the past century.

"I'm from Hancock County and generations of my family were farmers," said Denecker. "Since farming is in my blood, I couldn't turn down a chance to record these stories."

"This project ties in so well with the museum's educational focus on our agricultural roots," added Sisser. "We currently have an agriculture traveling trunk program and feature an agriculture station in our 'Hands on History' program that's presented to nearly all Hancock County 5th graders."

FARMS PASSED DOWN GENERATIONS

Mark Metzger, a participant in the project, lives on his family's Century Farm in Alvada where his ancestors first put down roots in 1832. The retired dairy farmer now uses his 1898 barn for family gatherings and has preserved its authenticity down to the last detail.

During Denecker and Sisser's visit to his farm, Metzger shared a story of change in his farming practice that had a huge impact on him personally.

He explained, "When I got out of the Navy, I milked cows for 22 years, and then my son and I, we talked about it. He said, 'Dad, you don't need to milk.' So I

PHOTOS BY AMY DEPUY, UNIVERSITY OF FINDLAY



Jacki Johnson displaying her grandmother's quilt.

(LEFT)
Three generations
of VonSteins have
farmed in Jenera.

rented more land. But the cows become part of your life, you know. I knew the man was coming with a truck to get the cows that day, and I cried.

"But I had my mind made up. That's what I was going to do. So we sold the cows, and it turned out okay. But then you're not sure, when you're doing it."

As in Metzger's case, many farms in the Findlay area share a rich history of handing down precious land, livestock and a cherished way of life to the next generation. According to third-generation farmer, Miles VonStein of Jenera, "Farming is a little different than any other career. You can't just decide that you want to do it. It takes the hard work of the generations ahead of you to build up the equipment, the land and everything. It's something that you have to be brought into by the family. There's nobody just one day saying, 'I'm going to be a farmer.'"

His father Dennis added, "Farming is in your blood." For the elder VonStein, springtime has a special charm. He explained how energized he becomes when the gray Ohio skies turn blue and the muddy fields turn green. "Your blood really gets rolling when you smell that fresh dirt plowed over; there's just no other smell." He also explained, "There's nothing greater than the fall, getting in the combine, and harvesting that crop and watching the bushels rise in the bin."

FARMER AS EDUCATOR

For farmers like Gary Wilson, the role of a farmer extends well beyond planting and harvesting crops. Wilson and fellow Arlington native Jacki Johnson both play active roles in 4-H, and Wilson participates at the Hancock County Fair and with the Hancock County Farm Bureau. He believes that farmers have a constant job to do in educating the public about where and how their food is produced, and Johnson agrees.

Johnson shared a story of a woman from the city

who scolded her for being a farmer and claimed that Johnson's work was cruel and unnecessary. When Johnson asked the woman where she would get her food if Johnson (and others like her) were to quit farming, the woman replied, "from the grocery store."

According to Johnson, "We, as agriculture people, have to continue to educate people about farming and about livestock. If I can do that through 4-H and the Agricultural Council, then that's a good start. Farmers have to be able to get out there and explain to the public what we do, or we're not going to have anything to eat someday!"

While initial themes of changes in farming, the importance of heritage, and the need for educating the public have emerged from the Ohio Farm Stories project, Denecker and Sisser are certain there are stories left to be told and themes yet to be explored.

"We see Hancock County Century Farms as an initial focus, and once we've gathered the stories of Hancock County, we'd like to move out into other regions of Ohio in order to help preserve the great agricultural history of our state," said Denecker.

Wilson underscored the important role agriculture continues to play. "One out of seven people are going to be employed in work that is connected to agriculture. Just look at the food industry — all the restaurants, grocery stores and distribution centers. Many people don't think of agriculture when they think of these places, but they show it all begins on a farm, somewhere, somehow." ♥

Christine Denecker is Chair and Professor of English at the University of Findlay, where she also serves as Director of The Center for Teaching Excellence. Sarah Sisser is the Executive Director of the Hancock Historical Museum in Findlay. The university and historical society collaborated to document family farms in Hancock County.