

THE GENEGANTSLET TREE FARM

By Christine E. Buck

Tim and Brenda Crumb say the highlight of their Christmas season is hosting Greene Central School first graders at the Genegantslet Tree Farm. The students visit to learn about the Christmas tree business. They make wreaths and have a tractor-drawn wagon ride to pick out a classroom tree; snacks and cocoa follow. Tim and Brenda reflect on the enthusiasm and good behavior of the students and how much they themselves gain from the experience.

Tim and Brenda continue the farm's agricultural tradition passed to them by the late Gerald Hagan. The Genegantslet Road farm, with history dating back to the early 1800s, has survived by adapting to changing times.

When Gerald Hagan was born in 1909, the farm had been in his family for generations—five that I can trace. During Jerry's great-grandparents' day, it was a busy dairy operation supporting multiple families. Local farmers earned good income turning milk into butter and cheese to ship to cities by rail.

Jerry was an only child. His parents died young—less than a year apart—during the Depression. He was left alone and in charge of the farm at age 22. The Depression hit dairy farms hard. The late Ralph Beardsley, Jerry's friend and neighbor, told me that Jerry continued on, but "I don't think he really had his heart in it. We would often hear his milking machine running at odd hours."

"About 1939 or 1940," Ralph continued, "Walt Bartlett, who used to live in the neighborhood, got him a job as a guard at the Dannemora prison. Jerry rented the farm to Clarence Wadsworth, a cattle dealer. When World War II broke out he joined the marines and saw major action in the Pacific as a sergeant."

After the war, Jerry met Dorothy Sowden, an IBM employee; their first date was for dinner at Seeber's in Smithville Flats. Dot told Jerry she had always wanted a poultry farm. So after they married, he converted the dairy barn into a hen house, the poultry business being quite profitable at the time. They raised chickens—Dot did much of the work—and sold eggs and meat.

Meanwhile, Jerry worked as a postal carrier and took up a new hobby: growing Christmas trees. New York State encouraged landowners to use abandoned farm fields for Christmas tree production. In 1947, with the help of some Greene High School students, he planted his first seedlings—5,000 of them.

The Hagan chicken business was successful until a widespread disease wiped out poultry. The disease, coupled with competition from large-scale farms in warmer climates, led them to close down. Besides, by then Dot had learned she was not really all that fond of chickens.

Jerry and Dot started selling their Christmas trees, both wholesale and at their home, pre-cut. Dot's brother-in-law, a florist, taught them to make wreaths by hand. According to Dot's records, in 1972 they made 51 wreaths and sold 42, with prices ranging from seventy-five cents to \$4.50. The Christmas tree business grew,

and it was one Jerry loved and excelled at. In a way, it was a neighborhood business, for Jerry had volunteer help from many in the community, two being Ralph Beardsley and Red Brown.

Tim and Brenda Crumb are proud to be the farm's first owners outside the Hagan family. When I visited, the aroma of Christmas filled the workroom as Brenda, her mother Ann Shapley, and her aunt June Ellison made wreaths; last year they produced nearly 200. Surrounded by stacks of evergreens, they were busy clipping and bundling the boughs and seemed to be having a good time.

Tim and Brenda explained how they became tree farmers. Tim started working for Jerry as a seasonal laborer in 1976 at age 14. He worked every summer mowing and pruning and always learned from Jerry. Brenda said Tim was like a grandson to Jerry and Dot.

In 1983 Jerry suffered a stroke and then learned he had brain cancer. Tim graduated from college that year and became Jerry's partner in 1984. Two years later Jerry died, leaving the business in good hands.

When Tim and Brenda married, they moved into a trailer on the farm. They watched over Dot and became full owners of the business in the early '90s. After Dot's death, Tim and Brenda moved into the farmhouse built in 1832.

Tim and Brenda have warm memories of the Hagan family. Jerry was physically fit, a hard worker, and a determined man; he worked outdoors with his Christmas trees as long as he could walk. Experts in the Christmas tree business sought his advice, and he designed a clever tree-planting spade.

He was a private person and never talked about his time in the military or about his parents. He was gentle and kind, with a dry sense of humor. When Tim and Brenda moved into the house, they noticed everything was brown—the walls, the carpet, the furniture; brown was Jerry's favorite color. Tim still finds packs of chewing tobacco tucked away in farm buildings; Jerry quit smoking when he and Dot married, but he was allowed to chew tobacco—outdoors.

Tim recalls that Dot prepared wonderful lunches every day. He remembers her spaghetti, her pies, and how she tricked him into eating the despised sauerkraut by making chocolate sauerkraut cake.

“If you're going to be a farm wife, you'll have to learn to can,” Dot told Brenda. She showed her how and taught her to make Welsh cookies and Tim's favorite pickled beets. And Dot, reflecting on her own experience, advised Brenda to make time to enjoy life. Dot was always eager to travel; she and Jerry took one trip to the northwest and vacationed in Florida with Mr. and Mrs. Don Hayes for a month. But Jerry couldn't wait to get back home to his Christmas trees.

Tim and Brenda told me the Christmas tree business has had ups and downs through the years. As local farms declined in number, New York State urged landowners to plant Christmas trees. It wasn't long before the market was flooded with trees. Then as people realized how much work it entailed, many quit, causing a shortage of trees. Large-scale farms in Canada and Maine are definite competitors;

they are highly mechanized and can undercut small growers' prices. And as for artificial trees, Tim and Brenda notice buyers shifting back to fresh trees.

The biggest challenge of their business is finding the hours to get the work done. Both have other employment, and Tim and his father Irv operate Genegantslet Lawn Care. While we may think of Christmas trees as seasonal, caring for trees covering 75 acres is year-round work—mowing, pruning, fertilizing, testing and preparing the soil, planting seedlings, and treating for insects and diseases. And then there is equipment maintenance and repair. Some growers trim trees mechanically, but the Genegantslet Tree Farm still prunes by hand as Jerry did; they think it makes a better tree. The farm is subject to regulation by the New York State Agriculture and Markets Department and is inspected every year.

The business hires seasonal help—high school and college students. And just like Jerry Hagaman, they couldn't get along without volunteer help from their family, friends, and neighbors. Their daughter Annamarie and son Gage and friends clip, mow, prune, and handle trees. The Boeltzes, Beaches, Bob Smith, Irv and Joan Crumb, Brenda's mom and aunt, and others pitch in. This time of year, Brenda provides a hot lunch for the volunteers—stew, chili, lasagna, or scalloped potatoes, followed by Kim Boeltz's desserts. Everyone misses Ralph Crumb, Tim's grandfather, who used to be the first one out the door to greet a customer, no matter what the weather. Brenda says he could sell a tree to anyone.

Their operation still uses old-fashioned methods, but some production improvements have been made. While they used to hand wrap trees for transport, now a mechanical baler does the work. It's worth a visit just to watch the action. A tree is fed into a machine that spins and spits it out bound with twine. Wreaths are still hand made, but a mechanical implement helps with the time-consuming wrapping step. Rows between seedlings in the field have been increased to nine feet to allow machine mowing.

Tim and Brenda sell cut-your-own and pre-cut trees, ranging from four feet to twenty feet tall. They offer the popular balsam fir, which is soft, fragrant, and holds needles well. Other varieties of fir, spruce, and pine are available. For anyone wanting a tree but feeling overwhelmed, they will gladly place the tree in the stand. Along with trees, one can buy kissing balls, roping, and bountiful wreaths ranging in size from six inches to six feet.

The tree farm is meant for families to enjoy; I saw many heading out to the fields with enthusiasm to pick out a tree. One whole Chenango Bridge neighborhood makes the trip together every year for their trees. Some buyers are grandchildren of Jerry's original customers. Refreshments, hot drinks, and a place to warm up are provided, as are saws.

On December 8 and 9 and December 15 and 16, horse drawn wagon rides through the fields will be offered—provided road conditions cooperate. Former Greene resident Robbie Ryan (Chenango Valley Stables) brings her horses from Boonville, New York for the occasion. She wouldn't miss the fun.

The Genegantslet Tree Farm is on 727 County Road 2, just 0.2 mile south of Route 206. It is open from the day after Thanksgiving until Christmas Eve. Weekday

hours are 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays from 8 to 6. Even after Christmas, trees can be bought for the Russian Orthodox Christmas and for military personnel who come home at other times of the year.

We all know our small farms are endangered. Not only does the media inform us, but a drive on any country road reveals fields grown over and barns falling in. Increased costs, static income, and competition from mega farms and other countries have hurt the small farmer. Tim and Brenda say there is not big money to be made in the Christmas tree business, but they have fun doing it and are proud to carry on the Hagaman family tradition.

When you see a Christmas tree this year, think of the labors of Christmas tree growers. Think of Jerry Hagaman's hobby started 60 years ago and where it has led.



