

Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary 1823-2013

No. 7—Our Agrarian Heritage

At the beginning of the 19th century, fertile soil and an abundance of natural resources encouraged fishing, lumbering, and farming south of the Susquehanna River. Lumbering turned dense forests into open farmland as far south as the Pennsylvania border. The only exception was the southwest corner of the town where an area, known as the "French Tract", was selectively logged.

During the 19th century census records show Vestal's numerous farms grew grains, raised sheep, pigs, and cattle along with making butter and cheese. If you grew up in Vestal you'll recognize some of these names:

- The VanDervort Dairy Farm that spanned Route 26 and its famous Dairy Bar on the corner of what is now W. Sheedy Road.
- Grant and Lois Breed purchased their Tracy Creek dairy farm, now owned and operated by their son Robert, in 1945. Although no longer in the dairy business, Bob still raises cattle and grows soy beans. He's one of only a few remaining Vestal farmers.
- Brookdale Stock Farm in Tracy Creek was owned by L.A. Mason who raised Holstein cattle. When tuberculosis was discovered in several animals the whole herd had to be put down as a precaution. The farm was then restocked.
- Gates Round Top Hill farm in Willow Point grew grains and was known for its berries which were transported to market in specially designed crates that prevented them from being crushed.
- Orin White's chicken farm called White Leghorn Nook in Willow Point.
- B.F. O'Hara's large Willow Point Stock Farm spanned the Vestal Road. It is now a subdivision.
- Brookvale Dairy Farm on Route 26 that was owned by Vincent O'Hara.
- The 1825 Willis Dairy and Chicken Farm on Jensen Road and the Parkway.

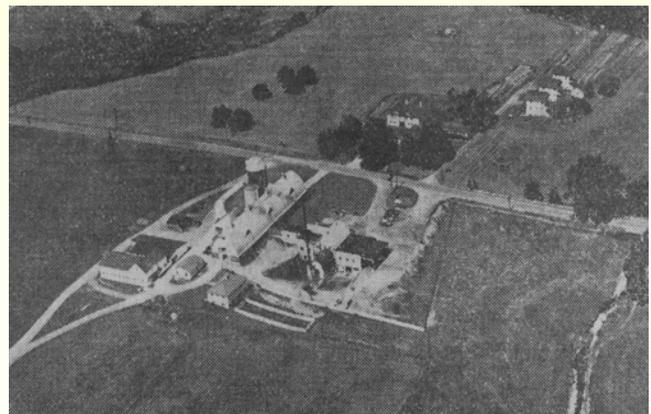
Others were the Bunn, Eldredge, Swan, Martin, Clark, Peabody, Weed, Seymour, Harrington, DuBois, Jones, Rounds, Wakeman, Winans, Ford, Hogan, and LaGrange farms to name just a few. During the first quarter of the 20th century many of Vestal's small farms were divided into subdivisions to house the influx of workers at factories across the river. Following is a brief history about four of Vestal's larger farms.

Hazard Lewis Farm

The Hazard Lewis Farm (HLF) was founded in 1829 by Colonel Hazard Lewis, one of Broome County's early pioneers. His accomplishments included owning a lumber business, setting up a sawmill in Willow Point, serving as water commissioner, promoting the Chenango Canal, investing in what became the Clinton Street Ferry, and helping to build a dam on the Susquehanna.

In 1919 three thousand farmers and their families associated with the Broome County Farm Bureau, the Dairyman's League, Milk Producers Association, and Pomons Grange gathered for an outing at the farm where a demonstration of the use of a tractor for plowing and fitting ground was of particular interest.

Fire destroyed a large barn and four outbuildings along with six farm horses and farm equipment valued at \$50,000 on August 28, 1926. The structures were rebuilt as shown in the 1958 photo taken just before the farm was dismantled. A succession of HLF owners included James N. Allen Town of Vestal Supervisor who died in 1927, Archibald MacArthur who bought the 290 acre farm from Allen's widow in 1931, and MacArthur's granddaughter Edith Tuthill who introduced modern equipment to the farm. The farm also included tenant houses for the workers.



HLF was known for its cleanliness and high output. A 1933 article reports that the Guernsey herd of 80 cows produced 577,000 pounds of milk and 27,000 pounds of butter fat in 1932. The sire of the herd was one of the leading Guernsey bulls in the United States.

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Believing that hand milking produced the best results, all 120 cows on the farm were milked by hand rather than by machine. Crowley's Milk Company purchased milk from the Hazard Lewis Farm for local distribution and eventually bought the business and machinery in 1955.

One hundred head of cattle and some work horses were sold at auction in the mid-40's due to a shortage of farm labor. During the 50's, pieces of the farm were being sold off; First-City National Bank purchased one acre for a branch office at Murray Hill and the Parkway and ten acres were sold for the sewage disposal plant. MacArthur sold 216 acres of the farm to the State of New York for the new Harpur College. Each acre had an estimated value of \$50,000...the land had turned to gold. By 1958 the Hazard Lewis Farm was only a memory.

Ideal Farm

The son of George F. Johnson, Walter L. owned his own company, the Walter L. Johnson Co. in Endicott, and Ideal Farm on Vestal Road. Across from the large landmark barn was Walter's elegantly appointed home, complete with servants. The Broome County Holstein Club met at the farm in 1921. Like other farms, it also sold milk, eggs, and grains during its best years.



Johnson built homes just east of the farm in the late 1930's that featured such amenities as an attached garage, a tiled floor breakfast nook off the kitchen, a built-in ironing board, a clothes chute from the second floor to the basement laundry area, and tile flooring in the kitchen and bath.

In 1958 after close to 40 years in business, Walter L. sold at auction the farm's equipment and internationally known Jersey stock. Henry Uhelein, the head of Schlitz Beer, purchased Ideal Farm's top bull called Prima Donna's Design. Walter died a year later at the age of 82.

The large wetlands between the Ideal barn and the D.L. & W. railroad tracks, known by locals as "the swamp" was a favorite ice skating spot for kids and adults alike. The cows long gone, Ideal Farm was sold in 1965 to Vestal-Johnson Inc. of Rochester for the construction of the Vestal Nursing Home.

Rood's Maples Stock Farm

Three large farms totaling 587 acres along what is now Vestal Road were purchased in 1890 by cigar manufacturer William Rood who named it The Maples Stock Farm. There he raised registered Holstein-Friesian cattle that were sold in Brazil, New Zealand, Mexico, Canada, and across the country.

Prize bulls named Sir Henry, Sir Netherland of Vestal, and Sir Jewel of Maples were featured in circulars mailed around the world. Visitors of the time described a scene of cattle grazing in pastures as far as the eye could see. Well-kept buildings, huge barns, a creamery and granary completed the picture.

A 1901 fire destroyed the main barn and several buildings on the farm William Rood Sr. never lived at but enjoyed spending time at. Sadly, a fishing accident in the Susquehanna River behind the house claimed his life in May 1908.

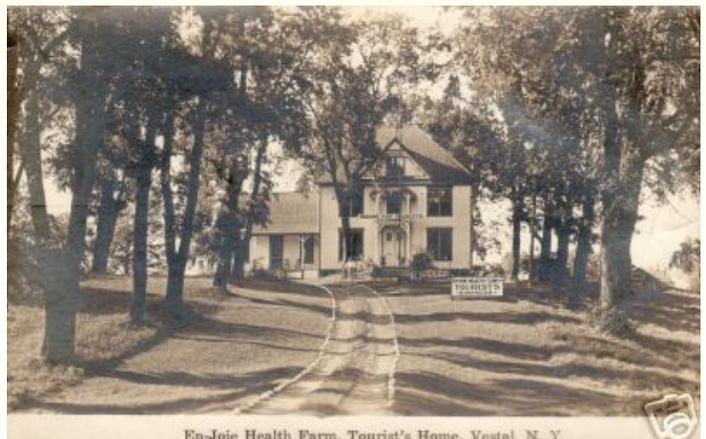


Photo captured from eBay Seller Ad

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George F. Johnson leased the house in 1930 for fighter Max Schmeling to use as training camp while he prepared for his title bout with Jack Sharkey. The temporary camp was called En-Joie Health Camp. Sergeant Leo Chanley, who had been hired as a body guard to Schmeling, received a thank you letter from Schmeling after his return to Germany.

During the mid-30's two subdivisions, Rood Subdivision No. 1 and No. 2 were created from part of the farm. The large 10-room Victorian home built in 1878 stood empty before being burned in preparation for the construction of the Route 17 Expressway.

Castle Gardens Greenhouse

Ward B. Castle purchased the former Livermore farm on Old Owego Road in 1918 and moved his family to the old two-family farmhouse. It would be 1925 before he built the first greenhouse...the beginning of Castle Gardens farm. After his death in 1963 the business was continued by sons William, James, and George.

Besides the twenty-four acres of farmland, "Ten Acre Island" (aka Potato Island), one of five islands in the Susquehanna River, was used to grow potatoes and onions. The rich river soil grew abundant crops of notable size without the need of fertilizer. A cable guided barge, propelled by poles and elbow grease, transported farm equipment, workers, and crops between the island and the south bank.

Known for its excellent produce, business was strong in 1947 when they purchased a truck to make deliveries throughout the valley. A wide variety of plants were grown in six large greenhouses. As the Castle brothers reached retirement, Castle Gardens Farm was sold in 1978 to Paul Schill and his wife Carolyn who planned to continue carrying the same products while expanding a line of house plants. By 1983 Morris Freed, owner of the Hi-Way Fruit Market that had burned in 1982, was planning a new business called E&A Hi-Way Produce Co. and Garden Center at the former farm.

Wide open farm land has been replaced by business and industry, retail establishments, subdivisions, and the sprawling Binghamton University but the lush summer hillsides still remind us of an earlier Vestal.

Additional information and sources for this article can be found at the historian's office.

