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Farm family staves off sprawl in Bucks

By Art Carey

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When 90-year-old Sam Snipes was a boy in the 1920s, Falls Township was a bucolic place with about 2,500 people. Nearly all the land was occupied by farms.

In the ensuing years, some of that fertile soil was covered by a steel mill, a landfill, and the communities of Fairless Hills and Levittown. Today, the township population is about 35,000, and only two farms remain.

One of those relics is the 150-acre Snipes farm near Morrisville. It is hemmed in by housing developments and highways, notably Route 1, a noisy, garish four-lane commercial corridor.

The din of traffic can be heard from the porch of the homestead, built in 1854. The farm has been in the family since 1808, and forebears came to the area with William Penn.

For decades, Sam and his brother Brad sold produce from the farm and operated a nursery. Five years ago, bowing to competition from big-box stores and chain gardening centers, they shuttered the enterprise.

That would have been a logical time to sell to developers, who have been knocking on the door for years, waving millions. Instead, the task of perpetuating the family farm was assumed by two people with a passion for the past, a vision for the future, and a fervent sense of mission - Jonathan Snipes and Susan Snipes-Wells, the son and daughter of Sam Snipes, and the 10th generation of the family to care for this pastoral oasis.

"People often ask, 'Why don't you sell out?' But I believe we have a larger purpose, and I want to fulfill it," says Snipes, 49, who lives in the family manse.

"Selling land for suburban sprawl is the least creative thing we could do," says Snipes-Wells, 54, who lives in Yardley. "It's been done many times, and we all know the result. It isn't very interesting."

From the outset, the two knew that running a family farm in this day and age would be difficult. They also knew they wanted to protect the land, keep it open to the public, and contribute to the local economy.

Last year, they made their vision concrete by opening a 25-acre "outdoor classroom," the Farm School at Snipes. Its mission: to model and teach sustainable farming while building community and reconnecting people to the land.

The Farm School is an agricultural amusement park. Disney slick and synthetic it is not. It's a place where visitors can pick apples, blackberries, blueberries, and pumpkins; pet barnyard animals; see apples pressed into cider; climb aboard old tractors and carriages; find their way through a six-acre corn maze; take hayrides; and toast marshmallows over a campfire.

Imagination is evident everywhere, especially if it is defined as intelligence having fun - in this case, fun with a purpose. For example, the theme of the corn maze, a major attraction of the recently concluded Fall Harvest Festival, was "Spaceship Earth." At every turn and dead end, there were puzzles and games, runes, and rubbings that disclosed amazing facts about our planetary home.

"We want visitors to leave with a new understanding of agriculture," Snipes says, "especially organic agriculture and the natural systems that allow for food production - watersheds, soil fertility, composting, worms, and bees."

The Farm School's focus is children of elementary age, partly to combat what Snipes calls "nature deficit disorder." ("This generation of children is completely disconnected from farms and the outdoors and too connected to computers and TV sets.") Its symptoms: obesity, hyperactivity, a short attention span.

The hope is that these schoolchildren, once acquainted with the taste and nutritiousness of healthful food, and the farms so essential to producing it, will become, in adulthood, advocates of open space, farmland preservation, and natural agriculture.

Through "Healthy Farms, Healthy Schools," a state-funded initiative, the nonprofit Farm School has set up programs with local elementary schools involving both classroom and farm visits.

"Kids want to put their hands in the dirt," Snipes says. "They want to study worms, pick up bugs, and get straw in their hair." Snipes says 4,000 children have been at the farm since it opened.

The Farm School is a working farm that sells all manner of vegetables grown without herbicides or pesticides. The orchard is low-spray, treated with products that are 90 percent organic.

Local residents can partake by joining the community-supported agriculture program. During the 25-week growing season, members stop by weekly to pick up half a bushel of the farm's bounty.

"It's a wonderful way to support a local farm and to get fresh organic food," says Maiké Haehle, 39, of Yardley, a volunteer who helped plant lettuce, weed the onion patch, and pick beetles off potato plants.

"You can see your veggies grow and get engaged in the community," Haehle says.

The Snipes family is Quaker, and Jonathan Snipes was educated at George School and Haverford College. His faith shows in a commitment to social welfare, service, and beneficial change.

"As a child, I had a deep sense that God is in everyone. As an adult, that has expanded to a feeling that all creation is divine. We must live in harmony with nature or we'll be in big trouble."

A million acres of farmland are lost each year, he rues. Industrial farming, besides destroying family farms and addicting people to inferior food, relies heavily on fossil fuels.

"There are fewer farmers on less land producing more food for more people," Snipes says. "That can't last."

Not surprisingly, in managing the farm, the Snipes siblings have gone green. Atop the cider barn, 30 solar panels provide power for the cider press, coolers and freezers, electric fences, and a "solar tractor" whose motor was converted from gasoline to electric.

One of his ancestors was an abolitionist, and Snipes believes today's environmental issues are as important as the social-justice issues of that time. Despite the daunting challenges, he is optimistic.

"In trying to keep a family farm in the middle of suburbia, we're holdouts, but I don't believe we're an anachronism. We want to be part of the wave of what's happening next, and I believe people are waking up.

"There's an incredible wealth of goodwill in the community. People want to see the farm succeed. Kids and families want to be part of it."

Snipes-Wells adds: "It's really about preserving the planet. That's such a cliché, I know. But this is class-one, alluvial-plain soil, irreplaceable soil that's among the best in the country, and nearly all of it has been paved over. We're struggling to find a way for the farm to be viable economically. We know it's the right decision for future generations."

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