

Museum documenting Illinois' vanishing agricultural history

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When a network television news show recently needed a Chicago-area example of a dairy farm, the crew knew exactly where to go.

It wasn't hard to pinpoint. With 625 milking cows, Golden Oaks Farm near Wauconda is the largest dairy operation in Lake County, and one of the last.

That film clip caught the attention of Robert Warren, who is leading the Illinois State Museum's long-awaited Oral History Project.

The idea is to explore the nooks and crannies of age-old agriculture practices and present them as personal stories in a modern, interactive format on the Internet.

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[Golden Oaks Farm](#)

Audio

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"I got on the Web site and found out where the dairy farm was. That's our connection," he said.

So it came to be that Golden Oaks, founded 60 years ago and still owned by the billionaire Crown family, became the only agricultural concern in Lake County -- and one of few in northeastern Illinois -- to be included in the two-year, nearly \$1.2 million project.

Changing times

Since the late 1960s, the number of farms in Illinois has decreased from 130,000 to about 72,000.

Those that remain are larger, however, in part because of better equipment, seeds and fertilizers.

How and why these changes occurred will be illustrated through personal stories, and the agricultural experience will become available to a public that might not otherwise get to see it.

Golden Oaks is one of three remaining dairy operations in Lake County, but it is in the unusual position of being protected for the foreseeable future. The Crown family in recent years has increased the size of the farm and its nearby holdings act as a buffer to suburban development.

There is no sign that will change, according to Nate Janssen, dairy operations manager. That's why he agreed to participate.

"We want to maintain the integrity of agriculture in an area where agriculture is going away," he said. "This was one of the most booming (dairy) areas in the country."

Though agriculture has been and continues to be a big part of Illinois' past and future, state museum offerings are limited to artifact collections, such as old plows and hand tools in storage.

Drawing-board plans someday call for an expansion of the Springfield facility to include a Hall of Agriculture. There is no telling when that might happen.

Shared experience

So as a first step to expand his offerings, researchers have been fanning out across Illinois with video and audio recorders to document the back roads of agriculture.

Dozens of audiotapes previously made and archived at libraries at the University of Illinois at Springfield and Northern Illinois University will be included. The material will be digitized and edited for sound quality and included in the "Audio-Video Barn" -- an interactive Web site indexed by theme, topic and geographical location. That Web site is scheduled to go online in September.

From beekeepers to horseradish farmers and from the 1920s to the present, the intent is to provide a wide-ranging, personal perspective in a modern format. Fifty participants will be interviewed.

"We're kind of starting out small in the new direction," Warren said. "One of the key things is all the interviews will be searchable, like a computer database."

Other Chicago-area interviewees include: Orion Samuelson, agribusiness director and WGN radio personality since 1960; Don Zeldenrust, a vegetable farmer from Crete; and Ed VanDrunen, a worldwide herb grower in Will County.

The expected result is a rich, historical perspective that won't fade.

"I think it's important," said Samuelson, who has become an institution in the industry. "Agriculture today, like it or not, is a global industry."

Study in contrasts

The tapes rolled in early May at Janssen's domain on Bonner Road near Route 12.

The 33-year-old graduate of Cornell University oversees the annual production of nearly 2 million gallons of milk. The farm spans 1,500 acres and has 1,250 Holstein cows.

Cows that aren't milked are used to develop varieties of high-value Holstein genetic material. The result is many females, bulls and embryos sold worldwide.

Milk remains the main business, but it is not processed on site. It's pumped each day into a waiting tanker and sold to a privately owned cheese company in Wisconsin. The finished product is used at high-end restaurants.

At least two people are on premises at all times for the three-times-a-day milking. But you won't find Farmer John on a stool milking Bessie by hand. This is a stainless steel, high-tech operation in which 24 cows can be milked simultaneously.

Measurements of speed and output are constantly downloaded into a diagnostic computer program, the results used to optimize milk production and quality.

Admittedly, this is the corporate side of the dairy system. But it's an essential part of the agricultural story.

"We wanted to have a contrast (with) the family farm," said Warren, whose official title is curator of anthropology for the Illinois State Museum. "It's a parallel between the increase in farm size and decrease in farm numbers."

Golden Oaks is one of four dairy operations included in the interviews. The others are a century-old concern near Beloit, an Amish family operation in Moultrie County and a small family dairy in Morgan County, where the farmer plays swing songs for his cows because he thinks it makes them more productive.

Janssen says part of his job is to educate the community and consumers about what goes on at a dairy farm. A native of New York, he attended Wauconda High School, when his father managed Golden Oaks. He left to study agricultural science and worked as a salesman and nutritionist at grain giant Cargill.

He was lured back to Wauconda by an opportunity to oversee expansion of the business. His tenure in Illinois may be short, but he agrees with the museum's mission.

"They're going to educate the public about what agriculture used to be in the state and what it is now. That's important for the public to understand," he said.

Farms that remain are adapting by diversifying, Warren said.

The Illinois State Museum also has plans to develop a comprehensive history of Illinois agriculture from prehistoric times in five broad themes: land, plants, animals, people and technology.

"It's one of the most interesting projects I've ever done," Warren said.