

SPOTLIGHT on JW Merrell Farm

Carteret Local Food Network member JW Merrell Farm is the only active Century farm in Carteret County. It's been quite a journey during the past 148 years.

Recently we talked with Joe Merrell whose family – dating back to 1868 – have successfully managed the Merrell Farm on Route 101 in Beaufort.

148 years! That's quite a story! How and when did it all get start?

Our family moved to Carteret County in 1734, when King George II, issued four land grants to the Quaker elders from Somerset County Maryland. My family has been farming, fishing and logging in Carteret County ever since.

The land we farm now was purchased by my great-great-grandmother in 1868 and my great-grandfather between 1880s and 1920.

My great-great-grandmother started the farm and my great grandfather and then grandfather continued until my father took over. The farm in early days was called Merrell Farm and raised hogs as well as soybean, corn and tobacco, mostly for themselves and friends, family and neighbors.

My father – Johnny – after graduating from the Beaufort High School, class of 1961, began farming full time. At that time, he changed the focus of the farm and added his initials to the name. Now it's called JW Merrell Farm and we sell directly to the public and concentrate on raising vegetables only.

What are some of your challenges running the Farm?

Each crop brings new challenges and learning experiences. I have found that no two days are alike; no two seasons are alike. And the work never ends. Our days start at 6 am when we head out to tackle the most pressing chores. At the end of the day we head home and plan for the next day. The next morning, we head to the fields to do it all again.

Our biggest challenge, lately, is the weather. The old famers' saying... "A dry year will scare you to death, but a wet year will kill you" is so true. I tell people I can pump more water into the field than I can pump out.

Government rules, changing markets, and lower profit margin due to higher cost are also major concerns. As in the fishing industry, there are more and more government

rules farmers have to follow and it's especially difficult for the smaller farmers. We do not have the resources the larger farms have.

In addition, our wholesale market is changing; the primary reason being that our local grocery stores -- for the most part -- are now owned by larger corporations. These parent companies are beginning to require that the local store purchase from farms that are GAP (Good Agricultural Practices) inspected and certified. Most small farms do not have the resources to comply.

Everything affects our profit margins, especially the weather – and in Carteret County we have plenty of that! Also, loss of wholesale customers as well as the day to day cost of running a farm. Take seeds for example: The cost of some of our seed, such as corn, has increased about 500 percent in the past 10 years. Others have increased about 200 percent in that time frame. In addition, the cost of fertilizer has doubled in 10 years.

What are your thoughts on how cope with these concerns?

I believe diversifying our operation will be the future. Each farm has to find its niche market(s). I think more variety but smaller plantings, planted more often will give a small farm diversity, while ensuring quality, and variety.

Tell us about the day to day operation.

We really a very hands-on operation. There are four Merrell family members involved at this point and we hire approximately 2-3 part-time employees to help during certain crops. Vegetable farming is a 12 months a year job!

We start in January with planting our greenhouse, preparing for our spring planting with broccoli, lettuce and cabbage. We harvest different crops throughout the year. These include Swiss chard, lettuce, sugar snap peas, bok choy, spinach, strawberries, cantaloupe, spring onions, leeks, mustard greens, turnip greens, kale, turnip roots, and field and sweet corn. In late summer and fall, it's new potatoes, cabbage, sharp cabbage, beets, broccoli followed by squash, cucumbers, and okra. We finish the year with collards, kale and mustard greens during the cooler months of November and December. And January.

Who are your customers?

Starting in 1961, my father sold mostly wholesale to the local grocery stores. For example, in 1996, we sold to 18 stores in four counties. Today, most of these small markets are out of business. Others are purchasing from larger, GAP certified farms.

We continue, however, to sell to a number of local grocery stores. We've also added restaurants to the customer list.

Most of our income however comes from our direct sales to the public at several outlets: The Olde Beaufort Farmers' Market and at our produce stands on NC Hwy 101 and Beaufort Square Shopping Center. In addition, we just started selling at the Morehead City Curb Market.

Do you have a mission for the farm?

Our goal is to provide a quality product to all our retail customers, grocery stores, and restaurants. Our mission statement would be " By the fruits of our labor give our customers a fresh, local, healthy eating experience."

Sounds like this is a labor of love.

Labor of love. Passion. "Touched in the head." Stupid. All these things could describe a small farm owner. Sometimes I wonder why we put up with all the hassle, then I can walk in a field and see the vegetables growing, and I know why. Or when an appreciative customer stops by to say thanks...that's also sharpens my "why."

What comments you hear from market shoppers?

Our farm family is very appreciative of all the hard work we do. We receive a lot of support from lots of customers. And we sure appreciate them in return.

We have regular customers who visit us daily in our various locations. And they have for years. Many have questions for us about the fruits and vegetables. They want to make sure they are storing the items properly. Many ask for information on how best to cook certain vegetables. Or want to know how we cook what we grow. We are happy to comply.

Tell us a little about you personally?

It's about love. I grew up on the farm and I want to farm as long as I can. My brother and sister have also been involved with the farm since we were kids. I consider myself truly a local Carteret County / Beaufort boy. Actually, I graduated from Beaufort Christian Academy in 1986. I have a number of emails; however, my key one is NCFarmBoy101@gmail.com. That tells you who I am.

Farming is what I know and the Merrell family enjoys working with the land and seeing fruits of our labor growing mature and going to the tables of our many customers. What would I be doing if not farming? It would be in a related field, I'm sure. I always want to have a job working outside.

The End

NOTE to Will Ashby: Joe was on the start-up team for the Olde Beaufort Farmers' Market and has been a key player ever since serving in his third

year as a board member

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