

FAMILY FARMS: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF HIGHLAND

In the early 1700's John Dorsey had what is now Highland surveyed for a tract of land to give to his children, thus ushering in the tradition of the family farm, which dominated the social and economic structure of the area for the next 300 years. The *2011-2012 Highland Business Directory* explores this phenomenon by focusing on the recent history and life on four of Highland's family farms. They form the nucleus of what draws us to this community. It is an integral part of what we strive to preserve and protect in order to maintain the appealing nature of Western Howard County.

By definition, the family farm is a tract which is run by a family and handed down from generation to generation. In Britain, and many European countries, the eldest son inherits the property leaving it intact. The tradition in the more egalitarian US is to leave the farm to a group of heirs, or, as children marry, pieces of the farm may be given to this new family, thereby diminishing the total acreage of the original farm, yet still keeping the property within the family.

As we introduce you to the featured farms of Highland, you will see how this tradition has come to shape much of what surrounds the commercial crossroads which form the Heart of Highland.

Hickory Ridge

By 1727 there was already a tenant house on this well manicured farm we see from Highland Road. It comprised somewhere between 700 and 1,000 acres, extending west to Brighton Dam Road and south to the river. Like most farms of that time, its principal crop was tobacco, however the acreage also produced most of what the family, and their laborers, needed to live on: vegetables, grain, meat, eggs, fiber for fabric, wood for cooking and heat, and more.

Current owner, John McDaniel, purchased Hickory Ridge in 1982 and is the eighth or ninth owner. Over the past 250 years, the 1,000 acres have been whittled down to 50, as pieces were broken off for family members or put into farm preservation. At the time of the 1982 purchase, Hickory Ridge was already a thoroughbred breeding farm, part of the highly respected Maryland thoroughbred world. Multiple race tracks in the state shared a 12-month racing season. Top quality stock, including Man-O-War and Northern Dancer, grazed, trained and stood at stud on farms throughout the state.

In recent years the once glorious Maryland thoroughbred industry has fallen on hard times. As racing dates and tracks, have constricted, prize money has dried up, or moved to adjacent states where other forms of legalized gambling infuse more money into the racing business. With less income, farms have been hard pressed to continue to operate and in many cases the alternative has been to develop the valuable and beautiful farm land.

Gentlemen farmers, such as McDaniel, who are also savvy business leaders, are often the saviors of the remaining farms and the Maryland racing industry. As McDaniel knows, farms must continually re-invent themselves to keep abreast of changing economic conditions. He points out smaller farms going back to producing environmentally clean, organic crops which now find a substantial market among those who appreciate the healthful qualities of these products. Hickory Ridge has also reinvented itself to keep pace with the times. Not too many years ago, each spring would see a new crop of leggy foals gamboling in the fields bordering Highland Road. Some, McDaniels raced under his own colors. Others went to the big auctions in Kentucky where they commanded substantial sums. Ten years ago 2,000 thoroughbreds were foaled in Maryland annually. Now that number is down to 750. There is evidence the thoroughbred in Maryland is starting to make a slow comeback, but in the meantime farm owners must look to other ways to support themselves and their land. In the case of Hickory Ridge, this has meant taking in injured race horses for rest and recuperation. It has also led to a fledgling business in repurposing ex-race horses by retraining for second careers in other types of horse work.

Like all astute business people, farmers must look to the future and what is the best stewardship of their highly valuable property. Some land will go into farm preservation where government funds are used to bank the land as permanent green space. The funds available for this are growing, however the sale value is still greater. This leads to the potential for development. Then the question is: How can you develop the farm in such a way that it preserves the beauty, history and environment. A splendid example of how this can be achieved exists right in the Heart of Highland. Read on!

Paternal Gift Farm

Paternal Gift Farm occupies the golden triangle girded by Rt. 108, Hall Shop RD and Rt. 216. Originally a working farm of nearly 130 acres, it is now one of the most handsome and sought-after developments in Howard County, with homes and 74 acres still actively being farmed. Just as in days gone by, the revenue from the farm pays for maintenance and infrastructure. Paternal Gift has been both preserved and reinvented.

In 1946, the Scheidt family purchased the farm. For the next 5 decades Paternal Gift Farm supported a dairy herd, sheep, chickens, horses, fields of corn and hay, as well as crops which kept the family fed. It was a wonderful place to grow up and to live. All members of the family worked together to operate it with the additional assistance of several tenant families. Like Hickory Ridge, over the years Paternal Gift made transitions, at various times raising beef cattle and later thoroughbreds.

Fifty years after purchasing the farm, the Scheidt parents passed away, leaving it in trust to their three adult children. It became obvious to the heirs, that in the tradition of the American family farm, Paternal Gift must be divided. The conundrum was: how to do this in a way which best contributed to the surrounding community. Peter and Susan Scheidt, with intelligence, vision and inspiration, to say nothing of just plain guts, carved out the development and remaining working farm, against odds which would have daunted less committed individuals. When farm preservation funds, which the Scheidts had planned to rely on for funding the development infrastructure, dried up, Sue thoroughly educated herself in all aspects of land use and design, real estate and government relations in order to realize their goal of preserving, and repurposing, the farm. The happy result of this tenacity and ingenuity is obvious to all who visit Highland. We benefit from the way the gently rolling agricultural land and views have been protected. We benefit from the preservation of the open fields and the precious, forest tree canopy. This golden triangle which is Paternal Gift is a true treasure for Highland.

The Pugh Farm

The Pugh farm is a true working farm. As you drive by on Rt. 216, you will see tractors, threshing machines, giant silos, stock trailers and all the variety of equipment needed to harvest crops and keep stock fed. Once a dairy business, owner Lansdale Pugh now grazes some Angus beef cattle, but largely produces corn, soy beans, wheat and hay. It is still a dawn to dusk operation for the seventh generation farmer and life-long Highland resident.

Pugh's ancestors arrived in Ellicott City from England. The original family farm was across Hall Shop Road from the current operation and comprised 173 acres. Lansdale Pugh's grandfather, Grover Cleveland Pugh, died of influenza in 1918. His grandmother eventually sold the large tract to Mr. Cashell and purchased the current, more manageable farm, which comprises approximately 80 acres. The family ran a dairy there from 1931 until about 2006.

Pugh recalls it was great fun to grow up on the farm; hard work, but fun. His mother often vacationed on the Virginia shore and Lansdale went with her until he was of an age where his services were required on the farm. At that point vacations became few and far between.

Lansdale is the last member of his family to work the land and has no heirs active in farming to carry on the family tradition. He speculates that the picturesque, rolling tract will not qualify for the Howard County farm preservation program which now is geared to preserving large, contiguous pieces of farm land. Since the Pugh farm is now surrounded by development it is not a prime target for preservation.

Hi-Land Farm

In 1942 Smith and Margaret Allnutt purchased what was then a 100 acre truck farm on Highland Road. It eventually grew to become the 298 acre Hi-Land Farm, also known as S.W. Allnutt, Jr. and Sons Farm. Along the way it was transformed into one of the premiere dairy farming operations in the world, attracting agricultural visitors from over 67 countries to learn how it was done.

Smith Allnutt grew up on his family's farm in Burtonsville and loved the agricultural life. Margaret was a city girl who grew up in New Jersey. They met and fell in love while both worked for a hardware concern in Washington, DC. As World War II loomed, Smith Allnutt had the choice of enlisting in the military or continuing to farm. His love of farming made the choice obvious. It also led him to extensive study on the subject which later resulted in the break-through innovations he instituted at Hi-Land Farm. Some of these included a horizontal trench silo. Fodder was stored in long, wide trenches dug in the ground and covered with waterproof material. As cattle needed to feed, the cover could be peeled back making the feed directly available to them. The milking parlor was a model of economy, efficiency and healthful production. As cows entered they were quickly cleansed and then placed where feed dropped down directly to them as the milking machines were attached. The milk moved directly from the automatic milkers to stainless steel holding tanks, never being coming in contact with air, thereby dramatically reducing the hazard of exposure to airborne impurities and keeping the bacteria count remarkably low.

Here Smith and Margaret lived and worked with their 3 sons, all sharing in the chores and long hours which define life on a dairy farm. Although Margaret was an industrious farm wife, selling tomatoes by the bushel, canning 80 quarts of corn and butchering 2 hogs a year to make sausage, at heart she remained a city girl. She honed her admin skills as president of 3 different PTAs and then obtained her real estate license, learning the skills from the legendary Dick Hallowell who early on recognized the tremendous appeal and potential of Highland.

As with the other family farms discussed here, when the next Allnutt generation matured, it became obvious the sons would not all become career farmers. This meant the land needed to be divided. Since it was not going to be needed for farming, this meant Margaret could apply her considerable knowledge of real estate sales and development to the disbursement of the property. Starting in 1970 the first 1 acre lot sold for \$25,000.00. When the last lot sold, close to 30 years later, it commanded a price of \$500,000.00.

The Hi-Land farm development became just as much a show place as the dairy farm which preceded it. Margaret drew up strict covenants and then became their enforcer, thereby protecting the value of the homes and the development. Each of the three sons received a lot, and while none ever built there, two Allnutt grandchildren do make their homes on what was once the family farm, thereby continuing the tradition.