

Wilbur Vance, John Mann: True farmers

By Elaine Dalrymple
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WATKINS GLEN AND HORSEHEADS, March 10, 2015 -- The Chemung and Schuyler County Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) and the agricultural community have lost two dear friends and conservationists -- dairy farmers Wilbur Vance of Beaver Dams and John Mann of Horseheads.

Wilbur and John were highly-respected farmers who took especially good care of the land, using cropping practices such as strip cropping, cover crops, diversion ditches and crop rotation to prevent soil erosion.

“Both men were always researching and applying new techniques to maintain profitability without the expense of reduced soil and water quality,” said Mark Watts, District Manager of Chemung SWCD. “They were self-made men and great mentors to other farmers.”



Leon Callahan, a neighbor, lifelong resident of Beaver Dams and fellow farmer, said that Wilbur “was always into doing something” and that one of his more recent passions was fixing up an older barn the Vances own near his property.

“Wilbur was trying to get a foundation under the front,” said Callahan. “He put in new wing walls and had replaced some of the roof. He always had on his bib overalls and pull-on boots and was such a hard worker,” Leon said.

Another neighbor, George Roy, commented, “He was a man of the earth. He had a big heart and helped anyone in need. Wilbur got the Ag. District started in Chemung County”

George Bonham, also of Beaver Dams, worked for Wilbur before starting his own dairy farm. “Wilbur was one of a kind,” he said. “No one worked harder, and he would do anything for you. Wilbur always wanted to keep moving, he didn’t spend much time talking, and was not after a lot of publicity.”

Wilbur's curiosity in how nature works was contagious. His questions would stimulate many important discussions, and when he showed up at an agricultural or natural resources agency, you knew you would learn more from him than the other way around. His visits were usually not long but always memorable. He enjoyed reading and shared magazines and articles with friends he thought would be interested. He took very good care of his animals and loved tending calves and milking cows.



John Mann also loved farming and was known for his ability to fix machinery; he was an excellent welder. Ross Lant, a nearby dairy farmer, was a very good friend of John's, as was Ross's dad, Fred.

"I knew John my whole life, and you couldn't ask for a better neighbor," said Ross. "He loved to fix things. He would stop what he was doing and immediately help if you had something that needed to be repaired. He also loved doing the crop work, and our farms worked a lot together. Farmers need good neighbors."

David Boor, a dairy farmer on Middle Road, also said that John was a really good neighbor. He recalled that in 1971, their family took a rare trip away from the farm to go to a Yankees game in New York City. Lightning struck their Harvestor silo and caught their barn on fire while they were all away. By the time they got home, John had already torn down the barn rafters and had about 50 neighbors helping to clean up the damage.

"It was incredible," David said. "I couldn't do half of what he did; what a worker. He had a passion for farming, and there was a lot of mutual respect between our families; a silent friendship."

The Chemung and Schuyler SWCD's worked on many conservation projects with the Vance and Mann families, including nutrient management planning, manure storage to reduce winter spreading, silage leachate collection, cattle crossings, no-till planting and grazing management.

“Wilbur and John were gentle with their soil resources, as with everything,” said John Wickham, Grazing and Agricultural Environmental Management Specialist for Schuyler SWCD. “They cared so much for the community, natural and human, and they loved all animals -- domestic and wild.”

Wilbur Vance and John Mann were farmers nearly their whole lives, farming on valley and hill land around Beaver Dams and Horseheads. They passed away recently, but their accomplishments as leaders in the community, as friends, and in the use of farming practices that produce healthy food and protect the environment will inspire, always, the many people whose lives they touched. They were two of a kind.

Photos in text:

Top: Wilbur Vance with his granddaughter, Rachel, in their calf barn.

Bottom: Wilbur Vance in 1947, when he was 12 years old. (*Photos provided*)

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