

The Swain Family Farm

Bethel, Maine



Swain Family Farm – First 75 Years

In 1936 Edwin and Leah Swain bought the Burbank farm near Skillingston on Route 2 and with their family moved from Frye near Roxbury, Maine to their new home in Bethel. Their family included Roscoe, 11; Ruel, 10; Edwin, 6; and Henrietta, a baby.

Ruel’s father Ed and Mom Leah had four children to support after losing their farm near Roxbury, Maine in 1935. They lived in a camp in the winter of 1935-6 and due to the generosity of family members were able to move to Bethel in the spring of 1936. Ruel said the farm’s price tag was \$1,700.

Having the farm was really a means of family survival due to little employment outside of millwork and lack of equipment during the aftermath of the Great Depression.

One of the first memories of the older boys is arriving at the farm with some of the essential furniture just sitting on the porch – Henrietta needed her crib!! Ruel remembers his dad driving the “mill horse” to the dowel mill every day as part of his pay of 35 cents per hour – and long hard days.

Sometimes Edwin, Sr. had to work away to make a living and was slowly able to accumulate a milk cow and work horses to work in the wood lots that went with the farm. Early on he bought wood lots and hired men to help with the harvest.



Leah and Edwin Swain



Front: Lori Swain, standing left to right: Ruel, Maureen and Ed Swain



Henrietta remembers caring for the chickens and being chased by a turkey or a goose. Edwin, Jr. had a work horse and the big event was having a colt born in the pasture. Rocky and Ruel had a pair of yoked steers and spent a whole winter cutting logs for one of the last wood drives down the Androscoggin River.

After an especially bad storm Dad Ed had a job scaling for the government at 60 cents an hour. Ruel remembered it as the Hurricane Pine (maybe the 1938 hurricane).

Henrietta remembers that during World War II she and her class mates worked the fields to collect milk weed fluffs for life jacket material and for parachutes. There was lots of milk weed on the lower Bond Island. Henrietta also remembers skating on the icy Route 2 and skiing at Mt Anderson (also used by the Gould Academy ski team) just up the road.

Ed and his wife Leah Taylor Swain worked together in all ways – Leah made homemade ice cream and lemon tarts for a “Tea Room” operated and staffed by the older boys and cousins Nellie and Marion. The “Tea Room” was the family’s first “stand”. It was built to resemble the one in photo below.

Ruel probably began delivering potatoes in the Rumford area in the early '40s. Lots of the Swain’s old neighbors would only buy Green Mountain potatoes – a variety that is not so easy to grow.

Ruel graduated from Gould Academy in 1944 and entered the Army. Edwin graduated from Gould in 1948 and Henrietta in 1953. Eddie and Henrietta went to college through the generosity of Mr. Bing-



Bond Island corn



1948 Advertisement in Bethel Citizen



Ruel and Hereford calf



ham. Edwin's career was with DuPont before and after military service. He retired to Aiken, South Carolina. Henrietta went to Bates and Salem State College then into a teaching career in Woburn, Mass. She retired and lives in Otisfield, Maine.

Edwin Swain Sr., died in 1959 and his wife Leah died in 1962. Roscoe "Rocky" had become a trucker; Ruel then became head farmer at the Swain Farm.

Each generation of the Swain family has merged into farming according to the times, employment situation and military service. Like many farm families in the Bethel area, farm income alone was not enough to support a growing family.

After completing military service Ruel worked full time as a welder for the Portland Pipeline Co and farmed part time. The Swains were able to buy additional wood lots and farm lots. "Cash crops" over the years have consisted of lumber for the mill, fire wood, potatoes, corn and pumpkins. In 1950, Ruel bought their first new Farmall tractor.

"Factory farming" is a term no longer used in Bethel but in the 1940's Ruel remembers well how he work raising factory (green) beans for the Portland Packing Company. Beans from the Swain Farm went to Norway where the packing company's plant was located at the south end of Norway Lake. (In 2012 the building is unused but had been a C.B. Cummings sawmill.)

In 1960 Ruel and Maureen Witter married. It was about that time they bought six registered polled Herefords from the Peasley Farm in Vermont. Maureen said, "Our first calf got us up in the middle of the night, of course, and we really enjoyed our babies. At the most we probably had about 20 head of cattle and occasionally sold some beef. But, this part of our farming didn't turn out to pay for itself. We became aware that it was more profitable to sell hay instead of feeding the cattle. We sold the last of the cattle in the fall of 2011".

Besides farming, Ruel and Maureen's father, John Witter, operated Bethel Oil Company, Inc., which sold Texaco heating



Ed and Kathy—Ed with ear of corn to drop into paper bag held by Kathy.



After corn came the pumpkins



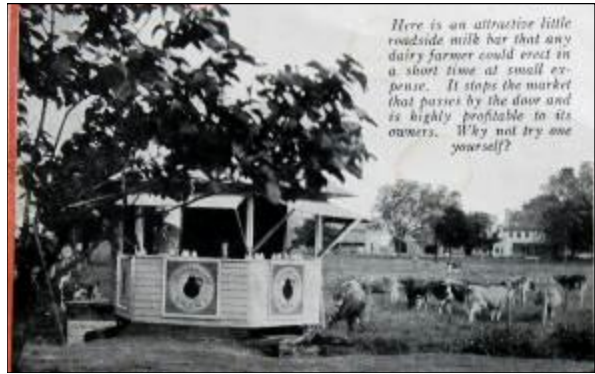
oil, Homegas and appliances. Maureen was the company's clerk and bookkeeper.

Maureen's and Ruel's, son Ruel Edward Swain, Jr., was born in 1962 and their daughter Katherine was born in 1965. Ed went to vocational school after Telstar where he obtained his welding license and worked at Bath Iron Works for a few years until he began working at Sunday River. In the early 1990's Ed had more time to work on the farm summers. As he was able to devote more and more time to farming, the family raised a larger variety of veggies.

Meanwhile their daughter Katherine had done well for herself graduating from Telstar in 1983 and getting her pilot's license the same year. She went on to graduate from the University of Maine at Orono with her BS as a Soil Scientist. Most of her flying instruction occurred out of the Fryeburg airport. Although she hated weeding and farm work, now she loves working in her flower garden at her home in Concord, NH.

As the farm's corn production attracted new buyers, the Swains first wholesale deliveries went to Rumford stores before appearing in Bethel's "I.G.A.". As the potato business faded out and the children grew, the family began to open the farm stand on a picnic table. Farm stand business picked up when new corn is available with the other vegetables. Besides local customers, what has been noticeable for a number of years is how many New Hampshire cars stop at the farm stand - Swain Farm is well known in Gorham and Berlin.

In 1986 Ed and Lori Maddon were married. Lori stepped into the farm's book-



Model for the Swain's first road side tea room



Farm stand in August 2012—Ed Swain looks on with a pickup load of corn parked behind him.



keeping job, keeping track of orders and last year started the farm's Facebook page – Swain Family Farm.

Besides the family help, the Swains are thankful for wonderful farming neighbors who have helped them birthing calves, weed control and many other ways – John Carter, Stanley Moore, the Hastings Farm, Arthur Ladd and his father Chet, and Charlie and Bryan Blake.

Yearly Ed sells about 10,000 bales of hay which is raised on Bond Island and he estimates they sell about 4,000 ears of corn a year. End of the season vegetables like tomatoes, pickling cukes and peppers are in demand for those who are planning to make pickles. Pumpkins, gourds and squash – besides pumpkin pies and butternut squash at meal time – pumpkins on the lawn have led to more people coming by to get pumpkins big and small and corn stalks for fall decorations. Teachers come to get small pumpkins to show them in their classrooms. Maureen says, "We used to feed the corn stalks to the cows until Halloween – but corn stalks for decorating has added an extra boost to our fall farm income."



Crossing the river from Bond Island to mainland in 2012 in the farm pickup. Dept of Agriculture grant was applied to improving the crossing ford and reinforcing river banks at the crossing site.



For many years their Hereford cattle were a familiar sight for motorists passing the Swain farm. The last cows were sold in 2011.





Early spring 1977—Looking for Fiddleheads—Kathy, Maureen, Nana, Gramp and Betty



1985—Kathy and friends at Bethel Airport



Moving ice house to Bond Island