

Historic Hardin Farm Listed “For Sale”

The last time The Hardin Farm — historically known as ‘Hungry Ridge Farm’ — was sold, payment was probably in English pounds. Back then, England’s infamous King George III was a 12-year old prince. The earliest known deed in the names of my family’s progenitors — the DeWitts — dates back to 1750.

The DeWitts had strategically exited The Netherlands, following religious intolerance that proved fatal to some of their famous relatives. Pioneering DeWitts pushed west from the Hudson Valley. When some ancestors determined to farm on the ridge above the fertile Clove Brook valley (near what was then called Deckertown, and is now Sussex, New Jersey), neighbors warned they’d go hungry trying to farm on that ridge. Hence the historic name, Hungry Ridge Farm.

16-year old Moses DeWitt was a marksman in the militia during the Revolutionary War. In the summer 1782 Battle of Minisink (near what’s now Port Jervis, New York), local militias were summoned to fight against Indian raiders led by Chief Joseph Brant. The raiders had paddled down the Delaware River, burning settlements and murdering settlers along the way. Signal fires atop what’s now High Point Mountain alerted colonial militias to the crisis. The Battle of Minisink was a losing affair for the local militias, and could have been worse, except for the sharpshooting talents of Moses DeWitt. In that battle, Moses and a handful of locals hid behind a big rock. While the other soldiers kept reloading the muskets, young Moses repeatedly fired. Later, in retreat, he carried a wounded comrade up over High Point Mountain. Moses was awarded a land grant after the Revolutionary War. The family retains two of Moses DeWitt’s muskets.

In 1840, Jacob W. DeWitt built a large, two-family farm house that stands today. In the mid-1850s, he invested several thousand dollars to help bring the railroad spur down from Orange County, New York. Earlier, in 1842, neighboring Orange County had cultivated the nation’s first rail shipments of milk from grass-fed, country cows to New York City. The railroads allowed distant farmers to sell their quality, fresh milk and cream to buyers in the city. Prior to the railroads — and for some years afterwards — much milk sold in New York Cities came from local breweries’ dairy herds, which were kept in dark, dank stabled and fed mostly brewers’ grains. With an interruption of just a couple months, The Hardin Farm has been in continuous milk production since the middle 1800s.

Louis M. Hardin’s mother, Miranda, was a DeWitt; she died in childbirth. Louis’ maiden aunts took the train to Newark in the mid-1870s and brought home their tiny nephew in an egg basket. (He weighed less than two pounds at birth.) Louis Hardin took over the family’s dairy enterprise as a young man. In 1902, he welcomed into the world his son, Laurens, as well as a big, new dairy barn, which is still used. In the early 1900s, local dairy farmers had little traction in the marketplace, given the powers of the New York City milk companies.

In 1907, Louis Hardin joined with dairy farmers from Orange County, New York to form a new dairy producer organization — the predecessor of the Dairyman’s League Cooperative. Times then were financially difficult for local dairy farmers. Louis served as a director and officer of the Dairyman’s League from 1907 to 1956. He was a ringleader of the October 1916 milk strike that shut off 90% of the milk flowing to New York City for more than three weeks. That strike gained local dairy farmers a 50% milk price increase — all the way up to around \$3.00/cwt. Prior to the successful strike, milk producers’ prices had remained flat for 20 years. Louis Hardin served the dairy industry during tough times. A few years after World War I, private milk condensing plants across New York closed. Demand for canned milk to feed troops and civilians in war-ravaged Europe literally evaporated. For agriculture, the Great Depression of the 1930s started in late summer 1920, with the across-the-board collapse of farm commodity prices — including milk. Dairying during the 1920s and the Great Depression was an

act of faith for many members of the Dairyman’s League. That co-op often scrimped to pay producers as little as 90 cents a hundred-weight for their milk in the 1930s. But those meager payments somehow allowed many farm families to somehow stay on their farms at times when no other good options for earning livelihoods existed.

Laurens DeWitt Hardin (“Pop-Pop”) earned an agricultural degree at Rutgers University and came home to manage the dairy farm in the early 1920s. His father’s work with the Dairyman’s League was a full-time calling. But, father and son parted farming ways in 1936. Louis’ inability to cull favorite Ayrshires had left his son overseeing a collection of non-productive, old dairy cows. One day in 1936, when Louis drove off for what his son erroneously believed would be several days on the road working for the Dairyman’s League, Laurens cleaned the barn with some long overdue culling, shipping those favorite, worn-out old Ayrshires to the local auction. But Louis surprisingly returned late that same afternoon. After a visit to the barn, Louis angrily stormed back to the house, demanding to know where his beloved, old Ayrshires had gone. Son Laurens replied that he couldn’t look at those worthless critters any more, and had sent those animals to market. Louis then hopped in his car, drove to the auction barn, bought his own old Ayrshires from the sales ring, and brought them back home.

Shortly thereafter, Laurens (Pop-Pop”) and his wife, Mae (“Grammy”), moved to town. Laurens enjoyed a successful career with the Lime Crest Products Corporation of New Jersey — selling pulverized limestone to farmers in northern New Jersey and lower New York State. “Pop-Pop” started selling lime to dairy farmers precisely at the time when President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal programs to restore soil fertility by encouraging planting of alfalfa became law. In the early years, “Pop-Pop” was basically compensated on a commission-only basis. Alfalfa — a deep-rooted forage that persisted through drought conditions — required lime to “sweeten” soils. Just prior to Christmas 1939, the company president called “Pop-Pop” into his office and shut the door. “Pop-Pop” was the firm’s top agricultural lime salesman and had enjoyed a very good year. But the company president explained that it was improper to have a salesman earning three times as much money as the company president, so “Pop-Pop” would have to go on a straight salary ... or be fired! By that time, “Pop-Pop” loved his job. He had found the best trout streams and poker games in New York State’s Catskill Mountains. But the family farm remained one of his deepest loves. He and “Grammy” retired to the farm in 1976.

The next generation — Laurens M. (“Larry”) and Lois were also drawn to dairy agriculture. Larry operated a lime spreading business for 50 years in northern New Jersey and Orange County, New York. His v-shaped, home-made lime spreaders drawn by stripped-down, souped-up Ford tractors (8Ns and Jubilees) were local icons in northern Sussex and Orange Counties. My father also operated a service station, which maintained a local fleet of bulk milk trucks.

Aunt Lois married a most capable young man, Walter R. Wright. They operated their dairy farm on Route 23 north of Sussex with great success for nearly 40 years under the CloveWright Holsteins prefix.



Summer 1949 at The Hardin Farm. Four generations of Hardins are pictured. Their careers in agriculture have totaled over 225 years’ experience. Adults left to right: Louis M. Hardin (my great-grandfather), Laurens D. Hardin (my grandfather), and Laurens M. Hardin (my dad). In diapers: Peter L. Hardin.

Following Louis Hardin’s death in 1959, “Pop-Pop” (my grandfather) managed the farm’s affairs. Louis’ daughter, Mary Morrison, remodeled the family side of the farmhouse and retired from her career as a medical librarian in New York City in the early 1960s. “Aunt Mamie” was an amazing, caring person for whom family was very important, and she hosted many family events at the farm.

Since the mid-1950s, a succession of farm families has rented and milked cows at the farm. The farm’s rugged 220 acres include 130 tillable acres, located on the two highest tilled ridges in the state. Views from those windy ridges may range 15-20 miles on a clear day.

The farm is currently owned by Hardin and Wright cousins. Those partners’ decision to sell is a big move, arrived at with much discussion and thought.

Over the past 150+ years, it is impossible to fathom the importance to the local economy that dairying brought to northern New Jersey and lower New York. The Hardin Farm was one of the first commercial dairy farms in New Jersey, and is now one of the remaining several dozen. In 1950, just after this writer was born, Sussex County still counted over 4,000 dairy farms. Today that number is in the teens. That demise represents a 99.5% disappearance of dairy farming from New Jersey’s mountainous, northernmost county over the past 65 years.

The future? Tremendous interest is arising in local, specialty food endeavors in the areas near big cities. The farm is ideally suited for grazing, and perhaps — with local township approval — a small scale, on-farm dairy processing endeavor. Yogurt? Cheese? The future will be in the hands of the subsequent owners.

Persons interested in specifics of the real estate offer may go online to:

<https://www.realtyexecutives.com/Agent/Bonnie-Majka/PropertyDetails/17624710-74-Wantage-School-Rd-Wantage-Township-NJ-07461->

Or you can find it at www.gsmls.com with criteria: Property Search, Sussex County, Property Type Vacant Land & Wantage Twp., and List Price +1,000,000, the click on search. The property is listed at the bottom as 74 Wantage School Rd.

(Note: The Hardin Farm’s long history helped provide the foundation of my knowledge and inspiration to write about the dairy as a lifelong, professional endeavor. One of my earliest memories is peaking at Moses DeWitt’s Revolutionary War musket hanging over the doorway in the dining room at the farmhouse as Louis Hardin said the Grace, prior to carving the family’s Thanksgiving turkey. That musket was the symbolic glue patching together all the family’s stories over so many generations.)