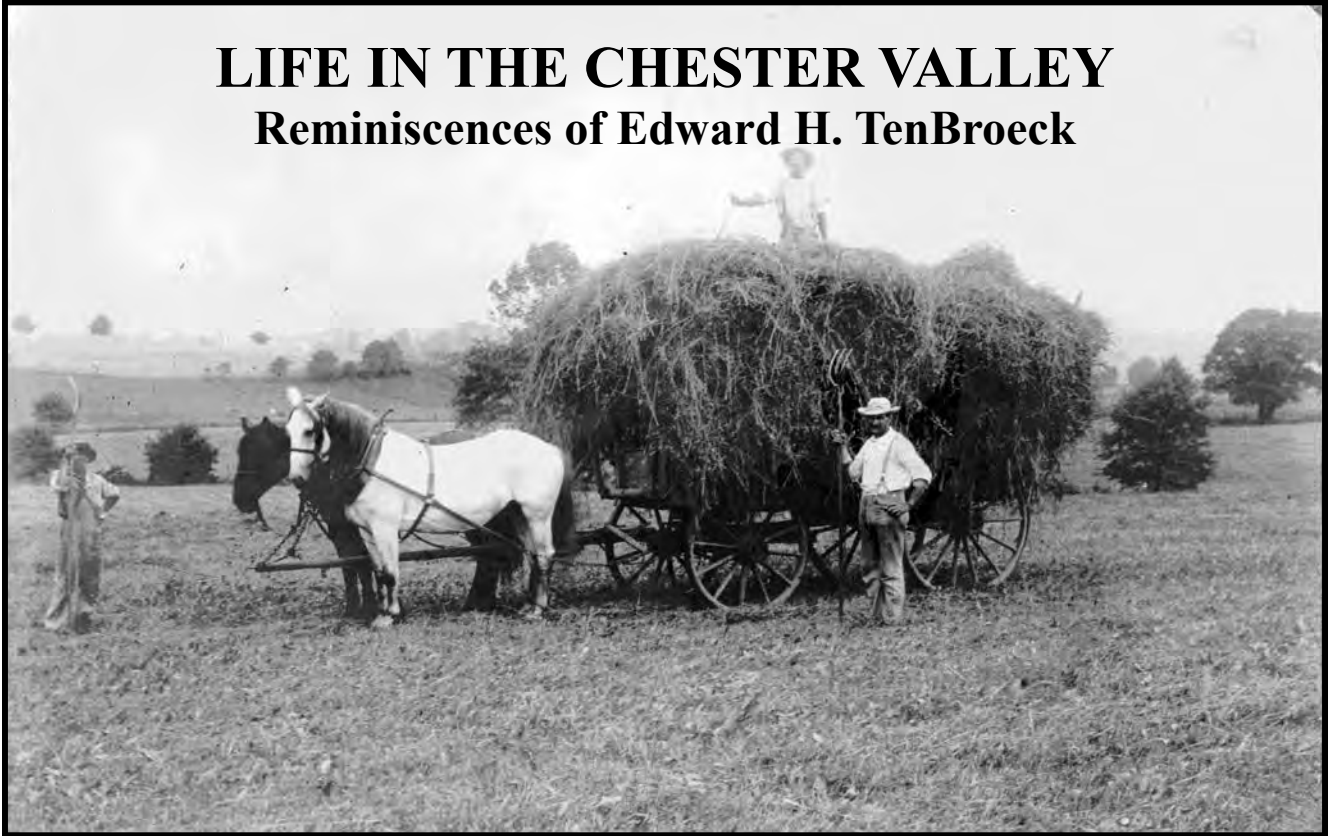


LIFE IN THE CHESTER VALLEY Reminiscences of Edward H. TenBroeck



Bringing in the hay at Bonticu Farm. *Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of Craig TenBroeck.*

The following interview was conducted in 1984 at Mr. TenBroeck's home, on the farm that is just northwest of the intersection of Yellow Springs and Mill Roads, about a mile west of Valley Forge Park.

My name is Cindy Harrington and I am a student of Conestoga High School. We're here in the home of Mr. Edward TenBroeck of Valley Forge. Mr. TenBroeck, would you tell me about where you grew up?

I was born in North Philadelphia just around the corner from Temple College. Then, when I was about ten years old, we moved out to West Philadelphia. But before that, around 1903, my father bought a farm in Chester Valley [known these days as Great Valley—Ed.], which we called Bonticu Farm. That's next door to where we are living now. This house was built on a knoll, which we used for picnics and it was in the middle of what was then a pasture field. In those days, we split our year between wintertime in Philadelphia, where I went to school, and summertime on the farm. So I've seen the countryside for a good many years and it's been a very pleasant place to spend those long summer days.

Can you tell me about your life on the farm as a teenager?

On a typical day, we would start out to get Dad over to the railroad station, which we did with a horse and carriage. It took nearly an hour to drive over there. To get father in town by nine o'clock, he had to take a train that left Berwyn Station between seven-thirty and eight o'clock. It would be nine-thirty to ten o'clock by the time I got done with the morning shopping and got back home. If it was harvest season, which started at the end of the school year in June, I would help with the harvesting. In early summer there was hay to mow and dry and stack and then bring into the barn. After that it was time to get the timothy cut and then, around the

Fourth of July, we usually had a wheat harvest and, finally, oats. Often we would have a couple of alfalfa crops because alfalfa gave you three or four crops during the entire summer. But no matter the crop, at four o'clock it was time to go back to the station and pick up my Dad. So a typical day consisted of mostly going back and forth to the station, along with the work I did in the fields. Another important item was picking the vegetables for the family. We had a big vegetable garden and depended on the vegetables for a good part of our livelihood during the summers.



Ed at work in the Bonticu Farm vegetable garden.

Did you raise the same crops every season?

We had pretty much the same crops every season but we rotated fields. Most farms in this area were dairy farms, so you raised corn, oats and wheat in that order, year by year, and then three years' of hay would follow. That was pretty much the rotation for all the farms around here. But there were times when you would vary it because of local conditions in your own farm and fields.

About how large was each farm?

Our farm was 102 acres and other farms in the valley ranged from 75 to maybe 200 acres, except of course for Chesterbrook which was over 600 acres. That was the farm A.J. Cassatt, President of the Pennsylvania Railroad, put together as a stock farm to raise racehorses, but he was never too successful at that.

Do you know why?

According to Dr. Bartholomew, who is a well-known and very good veterinarian who lived in Berwyn, Mr. Cassatt tried to put too many horses on the farm. And if you have too many horses or any other animal in a comparatively small area, they don't do as well as if you had fewer. It ought to have been a good area for a stock farm or horse farm because this is limestone country, which is good for raising horses.

Can you tell us what horses were used for on your farm?

We had a carriage horse that took us to the station and to church on Sundays. And we also had two to four farm horses that hauled the hay wagon. When we first came out here, Dad had a spring water business. We had a spring up on the north ridge of the hill and we used to ship the water by horse to the city – to two drugstores: Ottinger's at 20th and Spruce Streets and Cuthbert's at 40th and Walnut.

Is the spring still there, after all these years?

Yes, it is but we don't use it any longer. We did up until a few years ago but then Mr. Zink and Mr. Fryberger started to build a development next door to us on our old farm and they broke my water line so many times that

I finally sold the water rights to a man who bought one of the houses that Mr. Fryberger was trying to build. After that, we used the well, which is right outside the house.

Tell us about what sort of extra activities you were interested in, after you finished your chores.

We generally read or somebody read to us and then we went to bed at a fairly early hour.

During the daytime did you have any hobbies, like fishing?

I used to fish in Valley Creek and never caught anything much because I didn't know how to fish in those days. All I knew how to do was drown worms. If we had no work to do on the farm, my brother and I used to very happily go down to Valley Creek, walking or riding bicycles, and fish for most of the day. If we wanted to swim we walked down to the same creek and up to the swimming hole, which was near the Brackens' house (on LeBoutillier Road, about a half-mile west of Mill Road.) Of course they haven't lived there now for quite a long while. I believe the Warnocks built the house and then the Brackens bought it from the Warnocks. Down below the house there was a deep hole in the stream at the head of the mill dam where all the boys in the neighborhood went swimming. Girls were not allowed, there were no bathing suits, so...



Ed TenBroeck and brother Phil –gone fishin'.



The old swimming hole on Valley Creek. Mike Bertram, 2008.

I'd like to go back to a question about your farm, for a moment. I was wondering if you would talk a little about the threshing machine?

Right. It would be towards the end of the harvest season because in June and July you were cutting hay and wheat and oats. And then came the threshing machine, or you hoped it would come, because the man who ran it had a pretty irregular schedule and you never knew when he was coming. The threshing machine consisted of a steam locomotive, which pulled a main threshing unit and behind that was hitched the boiler and behind that was hitched the water tank. The farmer supplied the coal for

the engine, as I remember it, after they arrived. They set up with the threshing machine and boiler in the barn and the traction engine located about fifty feet outside of the barn with a long belt to drive the machine.

How many men did it take to operate the threshing machine?

It took about six or eight men on the threshing crew. There was a man who ran the engine, who was the boss, and a man who fed the thresher. Along side of him there was generally either a boy like myself or some other

boy who cut the strings of the wheat sheaths or oat sheaths before they were fed into the machine. You couldn't feed without cutting the string because they would jam the machine. The string had to be cut and the sheaths spread out to give the machine a fair chance at threshing out the grain. Then there was a man who took care of measuring the grains that came out of the machine and bagging it. Another man operated the boiler and then there were generally a couple of men in the mow to pass the wheat from the haymow down to the threshing machine.

What sort of pay was given to these men for their work?

In the days when I worked on the machine, if the farmer's wife fed you your three meals a day, you got a dollar and a half a day. If you supplied your own food, which sometimes we did, the price would go up to as high as two dollars a day. Very often I didn't get paid at all because the farmers helped each other by trading off. If Joe came over to help us thresh, then I went over to Joe's when the threshing machine went to his place.

You lived so close to Valley Forge. Can you tell me about some of the businesses that were in operation there?

The only businesses I can remember in Valley Forge proper, the little village, was the grocery store which was a general, country store and of course the Post Office. There was a little church which is still there. There weren't any other businesses there. The nearest place where you could get any things like farm equipment and so on were either Berwyn or Malvern. Malvern Farm Supply was one place that I remember. Valley Forge Park was just an area of farms called a park until, I think, about 1902 or 1903 when the State started to develop it and post speed signs along the roads. Incidentally, the original speed signs in Valley Forge Park read "Speed Limit: One Mile in Six Minutes."

Can you describe what sort of things Malvern Farm Supply stocked and sold?

Anything that a farmer needed. Oh yes, there was one other thing I might mention. At the foot of our lane, which is the corner of Mill and Yellow Spring Roads, there was a Blacksmith Shop run by Mr. Aaron Golder. And his son-in-law was our farmer. He had three boys that my brother and I used to play with.

Tell me about Lancaster Pike during the time around 1915 and how it's changed. Was this area mostly farms then?

Yes, it was still mostly farms, but they were commencing to go because of the high cost of labor and there was also the coming of the Turnpike. Around 1915, when I was in about my senior year in high school, Lancaster Pike was still a dry macadam road -- that is no oil was used on it. And as a result it was dusty or muddy or gravelly because the only way they repaired it was by putting crushed stone on the road and rolling it and then leaving the carts and the wagons to crush it finally into fairly smooth surfaces with their iron tires. But when rubber tires came along on automobiles, they promptly sucked the dust out of the spaces between the crushed stone and the first thing you knew you had a road that was practically too rough to drive in. It was terribly hard on the tires. I mostly got around by riding a bicycle. The trick was to ride while you had smooth road and



The haying crew brings in another wagonload.

downhill and walk and push the bicycle uphill or over places where they had recently put crushed stone. There was a toll charged on the road at that time, all of one cent per tollgate out as far as Berwyn, so it cost me seven cents to ride from Overbrook, where the first tollgate was, out to Berwyn. But before the coming of the automobile, of course, our roads were either just ordinary dirt roads or in a few cases, the better ones were macadam.

Was it one cent for every vehicle that went through the toll?

No. It depended on the size of the vehicle; the bicycle was cheap with one cent. The cost of the toll went up with the number of wheels on a wagon, with the size and weight of the wagon, or with the number of horses that pulled it or both. Then along came automobiles and people began to complain about having to stop to pay a toll, as well as complaining about the toll itself.

So, early on, it could be quite expensive for a wagon to go to Berwyn?

Yes, from the city. I don't know whether there were any tollgates in my time beyond Berwyn or not. The last tollgate that I, of course, remember was the one that was at Strafford.

You say you lived in Philadelphia during the winter months. What sort of entertainment did you have there?

Movies, which in those days started in the old Nickelodeon days; because the charge was a nickel, they called them Nickelodeons. They were usually in old stores that had been unprofitable. Somebody would simply set up some rows of chairs and get a movie machine and charge a nickel admission to see the movies. It gradually moved up in price and quality. As I grew older, one of my favorite movie houses was the Old Arcadia down on Chestnut Street between 15th and 16th. My favorite stars were Bill Hart and Douglas Fairbanks.

What other sort of entertainment did you have?

If there was snow and ice on the streets we used to coast on the Spruce Street hill, which ran from 45th Street down Spruce Street to 43rd and then the grade went the other way so the sled would gradually stop and you'd climb off and walk up the hill again. You asked about what I called the "Double Decker". That was a big sled with a small steer-able sled at the front end and a longer weight-carrying sled that ran over about two-thirds of the rear of the whole thing. It was equipped with steering ropes and a bell that you rung as you slid down the hill. We coasted until about ten o'clock when the police closed us down on the basis of a compromise because the neighbors didn't like too much noise. The proceedings were generally noisy, with so much hilarity, but not rough; I mean if you have six or eight or ten of those big old deckers, each with a gong on it, going down the hill at reasonably spaced intervals, about a half a block apart, it made a good bit of racket. So the neighbors and the boys and girls in the neighborhood reached a compromise so that we could coast in the afternoons and at night until ten o'clock. Ten o'clock was the curfew.

Thank you Mr. TenBroeck.

Thanks to Craig TenBroeck for providing the transcript of this interview with his father.

Cindy Harrington is a pianist who not only teaches and freelances in the field of music but also works in the marketing department of J.W. Pepper of Paoli, the largest retailer of sheet music in the world. She remembers that the interview was an assignment for a communications class at Conestoga High School. Her teacher was Mr. Smedley. She was matched up with Mr. TenBroeck and conducted two short interviews in his home, which were videotaped. She remembers feeling a sense of reverence when she entered his home, both for his having lived a long life, and for the many changes he had seen. She appreciated his sharing some of his experiences and reminiscences.