Wheat from the Chaff

The West Virginia Century Farm Program recognizes families who have farmed the same tract of land for at least a century.

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY JORDAN CARTER
There’s a word, “anemoia”—the longing for a time you’ve never known. You feel it when you drive down West Virginia’s country roads, past lone barns and farmhouses barely standing. Long gone are the days of winnowing grain, skimming cream from milk, and churning butter, but the images sit in your mind somewhere like a memory.

But for some West Virginians, farming is more than a memory. Nearly a quarter of the state is made up of farmland, and there are still those who sow seeds each spring, make hay in the summer, and harvest their crops come fall. Each year, the West Virginia Association of Conservation Districts separates the wheat from the chaff and recognizes families who have farmed their land for more than a century.

**Smith/Bush Farm**

Karen and Barry Lay own more than 700 acres of pasture and woodlands four miles north of Glenville. In 1815, Karen’s great-great-great-grandparents John and Hannah Goff Smith came from Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, to their land grant on Leading Creek. They drove their cattle and hogs and carried all of their belongings—including their children in feed sacks—on one packhorse the 300-some miles to the site of their future homestead. The Smiths provided for themselves by raising cattle, corn, and wheat. “Farmers are the best stewards of the land you can get,” Karen Lay says.

After five generations, the Lays continue to raise cattle on the Smith/Bush Farm, and 198 acres of the original homestead were recognized by the West Fork Conservation District as a Bicentennial Farm in 2019. The focal point of the Bicentennial Farm is a two-story white farmhouse built at the turn of the 20th century by Karen’s great-grandmother, Phoebe Elizabeth Smith, and her husband, William C. Bush, and the Bush family lived there until 1959. The Lays own 73 acres of adjoining land purchased in 1883 by William C. Bush. This tract, once home to one of the area’s few grindstone quarries, received its Century Farm recognition in 2016.
Fitzwater Farm

Not far from the Smith/Bush Farm is the Fitzwater Farm, nestled in a valley hugged by the Little Kanawha River. The Floyd Moffett Fitzwater Place, a white, two-story neoclassical farmhouse, was built in 1899 by the son of Thomas R. Floyd, who moved from Marion County to Gilmer County in 1844 to drill salt wells. He bought the then-520 acre parcel of land for $1,000. The land was divided amongst Floyd’s descendants for seven generations. Floyd’s great-great-granddaughter, Frances Fitzwater, grew up next to the home. She spent her childhood climbing the hills after cows and sheep and returned home to dinners of chicken her mother had killed and dressed or fish her father had caught in the Little Kanawha River. Dessert was sweetened with homemade molasses.

“For years, I lived beside this house,” says Fitzwater. “I just thought how wonderful it would be to have this place. I never ever dreamed that it would be for sale.” But in 1992, after her uncle’s passing, the property was sold “as is” to Fitzwater and her husband, Lambert. “It was like Christmas,” she says. “The home was so precious to me. Everything in it has a story to tell.”

There are the letters Fitzwater’s great-great-grandfather Thomas R. Floyd received as justice of the peace, the bed her great-grandfather made from cherry wood harvested on the farm, a 75-year-old hand-crank phone, a 10-gallon pickling jar used by Frances’ mother, and board games that have been played by generations.

Most memorable, perhaps, are the wagon wheels that line the front of the Fitzwater home. In 1814, the 97-year-old patriarch of the Floyd family took a mule-drawn wagon to Glenville to vote. A flag whipping in the wind spooked the mule, overturning both the cart and Floyd, who later succumbed to his injuries.

Today, Lambert and the Fitzwaters’ son, Ted, raise cattle on the Fitzwater farm and the Smith/Bush Farm. Though the Fitzwater farm has been in Frances Fitzwater’s family for 176 years, it received its Century Farm recognition in 2017, a year before the program began recognizing sesquicentennial and bicentennial farms. But no matter, says Fitzwater. It’s enough to know that her family goes back to 1844 on the property. “In my mind’s eye, I see them,” she says.
Parker Stone House Farm

Off Route 50, amongst the gently rolling hills of Mill Creek Valley, sits a 230-year-old fieldstone farmhouse. It was built in 1790 by Richard Sloan, who came to America as an indentured servant. While working as a weaver in Baltimore, Maryland, he came across the best cattle and hogs he had ever seen. Upon asking where the livestock was bred, he was told the South Branch of the Potomac River. He left Baltimore, Maryland, and made it as far as Romney.

In 1854, Benjamin Parker, along with his brothers William and John Peyton, purchased the home for $4,000. Benjamin and John Peyton Parker lived in the Stone House, farming barley, corn, oats, and wheat, and raising cattle, hogs, and sheep. During the Civil War, the nearby town of Romney changed hands 56 times, and the Parker brothers engaged in business with both armies. Union soldiers used the root cellar under the front porch of the Stone House as a picket station, where they observed and relayed the travel of the troops to other Union forces. The Parkers made repairs to both Union and Confederate wagons and equipment at the farm and sold corn and forage to feed the armies’ horses. Because they didn’t know who would win the Civil War, they wouldn’t accept Union or Confederate money; they only accepted gold. Another source of income for the Parker family came when the farm became the first stop on the 40-mile stage line from Romney to Petersburg.

In the 1900s, the farm continued to flourish. Several rooms were added to the south end of the Stone House, and the farm employed 15 to 25 farmhands. By 1926, the Parkers had purchased their first tractor, a Fordson.

Today, 70-year-old David R. Parker, a fourth-generation descendant of Benjamin Parker, is the primary operator, do-er, and fixer at The Parker Stone House Farm. Affectionately nicknamed “Beef,” David raises Hereford and Charolais cattle on the Parker family land. He lives in the Stone House with his wife, Jill, and his son, John. The Stone House Farm was recognized this year as a Sesquicentennial Farm by the Potomac Valley Conservation District.

“I buy very little,” Parker says. “Sometimes molasses, but the farm will take care of you.”
The Tennant Farms, shown here, has been in the family for nearly 140 years, beginning when Levi Tennant purchased 108 acres near Fairview in 1902. John D. Tennant, Jr. receives a Century Farm sign to display.

**Tennant Farms**

Levi Tennant was the great-grandson of Richard D. Tennant, an indentured servant who settled in Monongalia County. In 1902, Levi and his second wife, Mary, purchased a 108-acre farm near Fairview between Paw Paw Creek and Toothman Run. Levi and his son, John D. Sr., worked the land with horses, growing corn, oats, and wheat to feed their cattle and sheep. Levi operated a granary—now used for storing grain and bales of hay—that employed at least eight extra men during threshing season. Mary kept them well-fed with salt-rising bread, sugar cookies, and apple pies made with fruit from the orchard behind the family home.

John Tennant Sr. purchased an additional 61-acre farm in 1918 and operated both tracts of land after his father's passing in 1926. Throughout the Great Depression, he employed extended family and community members and paid them in food raised on the farm. He sold beef cattle for 3 cents per pound, and the Tennants saved their ration cards to buy gasoline for their cars and the threshing machine. The family also made flour from the wheat they raised. Every fall, John Tennant Sr. cleaned 500 to 600 pounds of wheat to be taken to a flour mill in Cameron.

John Tennant Sr.'s wife, Ethel, was an active farm partner and collaborated in agricultural decisions. She oversaw the planting of a large garden each spring, preserved food for winter, baked bread, churned butter, and sewed clothes for the family. She also oversaw egg production, and what started out with a few dozen chickens in a small coop near the garden grew into a vital source of income for the family. By the early 1950s, the Tennants' 1,200 laying hens produced 60 dozen eggs per day, delivered weekly to restaurants, stores, and families in the Fairmont area.

Today, both farms are owned by John D. Tennant Jr. and operated by his son, Tim, and grandson, Justin. Each year, they raise 25 to 30 calves and brood cattle and approximately 100 pigs. They grow corn, oats, and wheat, just as their ancestors did, and have added soybeans to their crops to increase the protein content of their feed. John Tennant Jr. lives in the original mid-1880s two-story farmhouse on his father’s tract. The home’s walnut and oak baseboards and trim were made at the Tennants’ sawmill using farm-grown timber. A multipurpose wash house and a one-room smoke house also remain.

In 2018, the Monongahela Conservation District recognized the Levi Tennant Farm as a Century Farm, and, in 2019, it recognized the John D. Tennant Sr. and Ethel Tennant Farm as a Century Farm, too.

“Our family has a deep love for the land. We want to make sure it is well-managed and the best conservation practices are used to preserve it for the future generations,” says Tim Tennant. “As I see it, we can’t make any more land, so it is wise to take care of what we have.”