



Educational Farm & Nature Preserve

Farm Connection

by
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MARRIAGES ARE MADE AT STRATFORD

The wooden barn located at Stratford Ecological Center on Liberty Road built in 1992, bears little resemblance to the stone “Barn at Stratford” built about a mile away on Stratford Road in 1848, and owned since 2010 by the Delaware Historical Society (DHS.) Nowadays the 1848 barn and gazebo is often a wedding venue. On Saturday, August 19, many of us had the pleasure of attending April Hoy, Stratford’s Education Coordinator, and Luther Miller’s very happy family wedding there. But as neighbors, our relationship goes back much earlier than 1848 and it continues to intertwine.

Colonel Forrest Meeker purchased the partly cleared 624 acres of land and a grist mill in 1811, and built a sturdy brick home in 1823, now the Meeker Homestead Museum, owned by the DHS and open to the public. In 1838 Meeker sold the grist mill to Judge Hosea Williams, the great, great, great Grandfather of Gale Warner. It was Gale who had the idea to create the Stratford Ecological Center, which was brought to fruition by her parents, Jack and Louise Warner.

Colonel Meeker died in 1845, and the remaining property was sold to George Biber who then built the stone barn. The barn and land has since passed through many hands, and became nationally known as the Garth Auction Barn. The Colonel is buried in a small hilltop cemetery on part of that land which was purchased by Gale’s grandfather Galen Oman in 1953. Extensive restoration of the cemetery, dating from 1816 to 1888, is currently taking place initiated by enthusiastic volunteers from Stratford, with much ongoing help from the DHS, and other local people. Grandfather Oman’s 236 acres were passed on to his daughter Louise in the mid 1980’s, incorporated as Stratford Ecological Center in 1990, and in 2007 donated to Stratford’s Board of Trustees.

The farm and nature guide training was well attended, with five newbies only too eager to shadow seasoned guides, before leading their own small groups. Averie and Elizabeth, this fall’s education interns, are also on a learning curve, and bring plenty of their own experiences to enhance our programs.

The guides shared a special something they do when trying to keep a student’s attention. These ranged from allowing them to do what most interests them - probably the best way for them to form a love of the land; to holding a warm egg; to picking greens and feeding the chickens through the wire fence; to letting them run a long distance alone; to using all five senses; to finding rocks and tracks beside the stream; and a gem of advice from a young mother “to protect if you must, to permit if you can.”

Farmer Jeff took off a hundred bales of hay last weekend, and may be able to cut and bale four more fields as temperatures rise to 80 F. and before Monday's predicted rain. Earlier weather conditions made it impossible to make as there were not been enough continuous days without rain to dry it. Wet hay molds, and the animals don't want to eat it. Also, when hay is less than dry, there is always the risk of spontaneous combustion. The September morning dews hang on into the afternoon, even when the sun shines, temperatures are in the low seventies, and conditions appear good for drying.

Should Farmer Jeff not get sufficient hay for our winter needs there is still time to make haylage, something we did a few years ago when the early summer weather would not cooperate. The grass will be cut and crimped to remove some of the moisture, baled into big round bales with an ideal moisture content of 30-40%, and wrapped in white plastic giving the appearance of giant marshmallows. The lack of air prevents combustion and the grass ferments and produces a sweet fodder.

We continue to have trees on the path to the sugar shack that have either lost branches, or died, and need removing. One is so brittle it is too dangerous to climb or even cut from the base for fear of branches falling. It will have to be lassoed from a safe distance and pulled down. Eight trees, including a beautiful cherry, are already on the ground and these will be turned into planks using a portable log splitter at the Harvest Fair.

More willow trees for zoo browse are to be planted on the north side of the pond where little else will grow in the hard, airless sub clay which was removed when the pond was dug to drain the surrounding land.

A visiting group of children with disabilities delighted in the fact that they could touch the goats through the pen fence. It seemed as if the goats knew the children were special, and came up to greet them.

There will be plenty of opportunities to see the animals and visit all aspects of the farm during our annual Harvest Fair to be held next Saturday, September 23 from 10 – 4 pm. There is so much to do with the family, or for anyone wishing to enjoy a day of pure pleasure.

This year there will be an opportunity to scrape and taste the pollen off specially placed bee hives. It is powerful stuff! Sheila Campbell of A La Carte Food Tours will demonstrate the use of fall vegetables and herbs to make a "harvest stone soup." Penny Slaiman will once again bring her donkey, Mocha. Dan's Deli and J. Gumbo's food trucks, along with Gabby's donated pizza, will provide sustenance.

It is a month away, but it is not too early to make reservations for our Fall Family Campfire on Friday, October 13 from 5-8 pm. \$10 per family, bring your own hot dogs and marshmallows, enjoy hot cider, and each child goes home with a pumpkin.

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