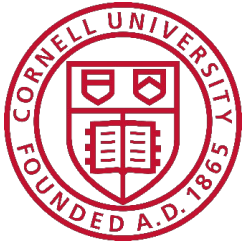


Cornell Cooperative Extension | Erie County

June 2020

John Whitney, Agriculture Educator



*This article is the eighth in a series focusing on vendors who are selling their wares at the Western New York Welcome Center's **Taste NY Market**. Thank you to Tom and Wendy Thompson and Wendy's sister, Shirley Howard, for meeting with me to share the farm's story along with some marketing tips and strategies.*

Spotlight on Thompson & Son Farm, Inc.

Two and one-half year old Henry Thompson, likes nothing better than helping out at his grandparents' farm on Long Road on Grand Island. At 2 1/2, Henry's help is largely limited to picking up stray sticks and rocks or feeding the chickens grain or the occasional blemished, unmarketable or overly ripe vegetables which he confidently and competently hauls in the dump bed of his Peg Perego mini John Deere XUV550. Henry's younger twin siblings, James and Molly are not yet helping around the farm much but they keep a close eye on the customers, cats, chickens and, especially, their brother as they observe all the activity at the busy farm and market.

Henry, James and Molly are grandchildren of Tom and Wendy Thompson (and Colin aka 'Bubba' and Alison Thompson's children). Tom and Wendy have been operating the farm at 2487 Long Road on Grand Island since 1998 raising chickens for eggs and meat along with seasonal produce grown on the farm or brought in from other areas farms. They are not currently raising hogs or growing sweetcorn, Tom explained, although pork products and sweet corn (in season) from other producers remain available at the market. Tom said he can't compete with the deer, raccoons and other crop predators to be able to produce an economical and marketable crop of sweetcorn. He is focusing more on poultry and the vegetable crops he is able to grow in his market gardens and in the new seasonal high tunnel which was funded in part through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).

Tom and Wendy make good use of their Facebook page, Thompson Farms Grand Island (<https://www.facebook.com/ThompsonFarmsGI/>) to update customers and potential customers about what crops are in season and about what vendors will be participating in the

Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.

weekly farmers markets. A loyal customer posted recently, "As always, one of my happy places and thank you for being part of my life."

Thompson and Son Farm, Inc. is part of a resurgence in farming on Grand Island. As Tom explained the history of Grand Island, after European colonists and settlers began living there following the war of 1812, the early economy was based on lumbering of the great oaks that covered the Island. Some were used to build log cabins and plank houses and barns for the early settlers. Cordwood was used regionally and shipped throughout New York State including to New York City. Much of the lumber was used for barrel staves. Many massive oaks were hewn into masts and cut into lumber for the building of the Great Lakes sailing ships fleet. Farming began around 1849 with more clearing and burning of stumps and slash in preparation for planting of hay, wheat and other grains. Fruit trees were also popular on the Island. Beef cattle and poultry were part of the early subsistence farming and marketing. Grand Island oaks and other hardwoods provided the beams and lumber in the historic circa 1869, 40x120 Kaegebein Chicken Farm barn at Thompson and Sons Farm. Of course, transportation beyond the island was always an issue until regular ferry service began and, eventually the bridge system was completed. Much of this rich history, including discussion of the Native American history and the "Farmers Alliance" movement on Grand Island, is included in "The History of Grand Island" which is posted at: www.isledegrande.com/gihist.htm.

The decline in agriculture on Grand Island through the early 1900s and until quite recently had many causes. While a few families continued to farm on Grand Island, including the DeGlopper family, the largest remaining farm on the Island, much of the land was converted to residential, recreational, and commercial uses or slowly reverted to woodland and wetlands. The reemerging farming pattern included many small horse farms, market gardens, and vegetable and livestock farms. These were largely welcomed by the community. That's not to say there wasn't some controversy and conflict with local regulations and policy interpretations, especially with respect to livestock, including poultry. Grand Island's "Right to Farm" Ordinance," promoted in particular by Hans Mobius of the Erie County Farm Bureau, helped to lay the groundwork for the resurgence. Tom also played a major role, not only by his commitment to the farm enterprise, but also through his ongoing efforts to help update Grand Island's ordinances and to get Grand Island farms brought into the Erie County and New York State Agricultural Districts Program.

While Tom is no longer raising sweet corn, he still plants field corn for harvest of decorative stalks and for some of the feed for his chickens and turkeys. Tom also plans to expand chicken and egg production in the near future since poultry has become the foundation of his business and marketing plans. He noted an increase in farm market sale of eggs during the COVID-19 pause, in part because many people were feeling more comfortable buying from the farm market than going to the chain supermarkets or were finding the eggs shelves empty in some

stores. Tom said a part of the problem was the supply chain issue of poultry farms not being able to get the printed egg cartons required for sale of eggs in grocery stores. "It's not that chickens weren't laying their eggs daily like they always do," said Tom. "It's that for a time, the packaging supply chain broke down and poultry farms couldn't get cartons for their eggs." He added that unlike grocery stores, he can allow customers to bring back egg cartons for refilling (with COVID-19 related precautions). Tom said he was even able to supply cartons to other small chicken farms on the Island.

Henry, James and Molly's father is Tom and Wendy's son, 'Bubba' Thompson, the owner/operator of "Bubba's BBQ." Most Saturday's during the market season, Bubba begins serving breakfast sandwiches at 8:00 AM at the Farmers Market. Around 11:00 AM, he switches over to smoked wings, chicken quarters, pulled pork sandwiches, smoked ribs or chops, chili or other Island BBQ favorites using fresh, local ingredients. Particularly during this on-going COVID-19 social distancing period, Bubba says "pre-orders are welcomed and encouraged." Contact information is posted on Bubba's BBQ Facebook page: www.facebook.com/GlubbbaBBQ. "Bubba's bundles" of dried firewood are also available at the Thompson and Son Farm Market.

Farm processed "super compost" is another product available at Thompson and Son Farm. "What doesn't get sold also helps condition our soil and fertilize crops on the farm," said Tom. Another reason Tom has shifted from growing sweet corn and other high water demanding crops is the cost of irrigation. According to Tom, municipal water in Niagara County is currently priced at \$1 per thousand gallons. Grand Island's municipal water costs \$8 per thousand gallons. Tom said "It's much cheaper for me to buy produce than grow it, especially with all the deer damage." The farm's cistern, a common amenity on many of the old Grand Island farms, supplies enough water for their outside vegetable irrigation. The high tunnel crops are irrigated with municipal water.

Tom worked as a chemist at Occidental Chemical Corporation (OxyChem) until 2001. When that business was sold, he moved over to Praxair where he worked for another 10 years before retiring following a health scare. The farm life has been a welcome change and the various enterprises associated with the farm keep things interesting. Tom and Wendy originally bought the 3 ½ acre farm homestead, later adding additional woods and fields that were then owned by a developer. Tom's involvement with bringing Grand Island farms into the Agricultural District Program led to increased involvement with the Erie County Farm Bureau. He currently serves as Vice President. By Tom's count, 50 to 60 small farms and family and market gardens are now operating on Grand Island. He said, "It's only common sense that people should be allowed to grow their own food."

Maintaining farm buildings and equipment is a never-ending proposition. The new metal roof was installed by an Amish crew last year. The Kaegebein barn was re-sided with lumber cut

from Tom and Wendy's property in Belfast in Allegany County. The re-siding project also eliminated the little chicken barn windows to reduce weather damage, eliminate constant window care, and further extend the life of the barn. Metal siding was installed on the weather-impacted west end of the barn before the new wooden siding was added. The barn also sports a fresh coat barn-red paint. Tom and Wendy's son, Justin, uses part of the old chicken barn as a shop for storage and equipment restoration and maintenance. The barn still houses some of the original, Kaegebein-designed and patented egg handling and conveyance equipment that served the 10,000 bird laying facility. Tom's scale is much different but works for this stage of his life and for the local markets.

Another associated enterprise is the Coop Bakery, which Tom's wife Wendy operates with Wendy's sister, Shirley, and Shirley's daughter, Kelly Roulley. Thompson and Son Farm, Inc. is a vendor at the Western New York Welcome Center's Taste NY Thursday Farmers Market. The Coop Bakery supplies baked goods for the Taste NY Market in the Welcome Center. Shirley Howard explained that the Coop Bakery could have gotten much bigger but she and Wendy wanted to keep it small and focused as an enterprise associated with the farm rather than a much larger, stand-alone operation with more staff, commercial scale equipment, and all that goes along with getting bigger. We want it to be considered "a little farm bakery," she said. This is reinforced by "The Farmers Wife" line of baked goods and the "Jammin' on the Farm" jams, jellies and preserves.

The Thompson and Son Farm Stand and Farmers Market products include many that aren't actually grown, raised, or made on the farm. Tom said he likes to provide market customers with plenty of options and he likes making the space available to others who have things to sell. That includes slab bacon from Hartland Abattoir, Jim's Metal Kettle popcorn, Pedlow Farms products, Pickle Annie's refrigerator pickles, Chris Beyer's high tunnel and market garden crops, seasonal fruits from Coulter Farms and other area producers, locally distilled offerings including hand sanitizer from Uncle Jumbo's Vodka, unique, decorative birdhouses crafted by Norm Cerrillo (aka 'Santa'), pure, local maple syrup, honey and honey syrups, among others. Recently, the Thompson Farm Farmers Market hosted the American Legion Post 1346 annual flower sale fundraiser. Children visiting the farm and market are often given small cups of chicken scratch to feed the chickens. "We also pass out Farm Bureau's agricultural coloring books," said Tom. COVID-19 social distancing and other protocols are all part of what the farm is dealing with these days.

Farm-raised turkeys will be available for Thanksgiving. The Thompson and Son Farm Holiday and Christmas Market is also very popular. The Coop bakery switches over to seasonal baked goods and confections. Freshly cut Christmas trees sell out quickly. "We also expect the new high tunnel will allow us to produce tomatoes well into the fall, along with winter greens, kale,

peas and other cool season crops throughout the winter and early spring,” Tom said, “so we’ll continue to have locally grown produce available year ‘round.”

Tom said the farm used to participate in other area farmers markets including the Roswell Park and Tonawanda markets. Scaling back to the farm’s own Farmers Market and the Welcome Center Farmers Market has given the Thompsons more time to focus on local customers. While the weekday farm stand is technically a self-serve, honor system market, Wendy says Tom visits with most of the customers. Produce is often sold out by mid-morning. But, “If we’re home, we’re open,” said Wendy. From “How can I help you?” to “Do you need anything?” to advice on raising chickens or sweet corn, to explaining how chickens produce eggs, Wendy said Thompson and Son Farm customers can expect a visit with Tom if he’s around. Wendy explained that is what Tom loves, but it is difficult to do that when you are spread too thinly trying to cover too many area markets. “And some of the markets just weren’t profitable due to too much competition, not enough customers and market promotion, or too few vendors without enough diversity,” Tom added.

Thompson and Son Farm maintains a membership in the Farmers’ Market Federation of New York State, attending annual conferences and relying on guidance and resources compiled by the federation for its members and others visiting the web page, www.nyfarmersmarket.com. Recently, this includes free, downloadable “Open Together” signage and communication kits which are particularly important as markets strive to keep visitors and vendors safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While 2 ½ year old Henry has his own small John Deere vehicle, he is especially fond of the farm’s full-size tractors. It won’t be long before he and his siblings are likely to be joining in with more farm chores including helping with field work using their grandfather’s tractors. That’s a hope and a dream at this time but it is perfectly consistent with Tom’s assertion that everyone should be able grow their own food. For Thompson and Son Farm, Inc., that includes being able to sell food and other products to neighbors, community members and Grand Island visitors, working to promote and protect agriculture on Grand Island and throughout the region, and supporting other farms and small businesses through marketing collaborations and sharing of resources and marketing space.

Thank you to Tom, Wendy and Shirley for taking the time to discuss Thompson and Son Farm and the farm’s evolving marketing strategies along with the associated enterprises, The Coop Bakery and Bubba’s BBQ. Next time you are visiting Grand Island, I hope you’ll have a chance to sample some baked goods available at the Taste NY Market, visit Tom, Wendy and Shirley at one of the Thursday Farmers Markets at the Western New York Welcome Center, stop by the Long Road Farm Stand, or spend some time at the Saturday morning Farmer’s Market held weekly at the Thompson and Son Farm. Thompson and Son Farm, Inc. is another example of

the many area farms tirelessly working to make fresh, tasty and nutritious, locally grown and raised agricultural products available to consumers in the region.



Taste NY at the Western New York
Welcome Center is operated by:

**Cornell Cooperative Extension
Erie County**

Taste NY Market at the Western NY Welcome Center
1999 Alvin Road
Grand Island, New York 14072
(716) 773-0970
erietasteny@cornell.edu

Cornell Cooperative Extension is an employer and educator recognized for valuing AA/EEO, Protected Veterans, and Individuals with Disabilities and provides equal program and employment opportunities.