

Down-to-Earth News for the Gentle People of Cecil County

CECIL SOIL

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CECIL COUNTY FARMER Milburn Orchards, 100+ and Still Growing Strong

By "Ranger Rick" Barton

The words "Locally Grown Fresh Food, Family Fun!" reach across the screen near the top of the Milburn Orchards web site. Although that says it all, there is so much more to know about this wonderful family business located on more than 300 acres along appropriately named Appleton Road in northeastern Cecil County.

"My grandfather, Esma, moved here in 1902, and planted apple and peach trees as part of his farm. He raised vegetables, cows and pigs, and had a general farm," said Evan Milburn recently. Five generations of the family have now worked there since those early days.

"Esma's son, my father, John W., started specializing in peaches and apples around 1933. He built the farm up to around 75 acres, and my brother John T. and I took over around 1961. We built the farm to more than 500 acres of fruit. Our aim was to get big, but we could never catch up to the big boys who were out in Washington State where they will have 1,000 acres or so. We still did well, sending a truckload of apples to New York every night.

"Starting in the 1980s, wholesale prices began going down. We were working a lot but not making much money. We started looking into more retail and in the late 1980s, we decided to cut back the growing and try to sell all retail.

"In 1990 or 1991, my nephew Jay Milburn, got this bright idea, and it was in its infancy then, of what we call 'agri-tourism' or 'agri-entertainment'. In other words, provide entertainment on the farm. To make a long story short, from the first hay ride wagon we built until today, entertainment is why we have six or seven thousand people here on the weekend."



Evan Milburn and his son Nathan show off some of the red delicious apples grown in their "pedestrian" orchard

Today, Milburn Orchards grows a wide variety of fruits and berries. They have a marvelous bakery that sells donuts, pies and other treats. A retail store sells the products grown on the property. A large area features dozens of activities for children, teens, and parents. Programs, special events, and tours are offered throughout the year, and everything is listed on their web site www.milburnorchards.com.

Esma Milburn sits while grading apples in 1938 while his son, John W. Milburn, and grandson, John T. Milburn, stand nearby.





In 1943 John W. Milburn sprays trees while using a 1020 McCormick/Deering tractor with his son, John T. Milburn. Esma Milburn is standing on the back.

"We are extremely diversified now," Evan continued. "Apples and peaches are still our main crop, but we grow almost anything that will grow in this part of the country. All of it is sold in our retail store.

"We started You-Pick in the middle '90s and it is increasing every year. It is fascinating because most You-Pick operations are going downhill. Ours is going up. People are not just picking fruit, they go out and pick for entertainment.

"What sets us apart from other fruit growers, especially on the east coast, is that we were the first ones on the east coast, if not in the United States, to have a complete pedestrian orchard. Of all the fruit trees we have, we don't have a ladder on the place. You can pick everything while standing on the ground. We plant dwarf fruit stock and we train them to grow the right way," Evan said. The trees stay low, enhancing programs that bring children into the orchard.

Four Milburn cousins are now directing the operation. David manages the entertainment, Jay manages the retail operation, and Melinda is in charge of the bakery and is the business manager. Evan's son Nathan manages the orchard.

"We are all together equal and we help each other in the different departments. Each of us has our own thing and we work as partners," Nathan



The retail store sells the fruits and other products grown at Milburn Orchards.



Nathan Milburn prepares to pour a load of apples into a truck for shipping.

said recently. When asked why he has stayed involved with the farm he replied, "Farming is in my blood. I don't know what else I would do."

Reflecting on his years on the farm, Evan said, "My brother and I are supposed to be retired but we both still work here. The family calls me a consultant. That sounded good because I consulted all up and down the east coast. But, then they said 'free consultant.'" Evan still visits and works on the farm almost every day of the week.

"My brother and I made some huge changes but there is more coming, more diversification. My wife asked me why I go to work every day, even as a 'free consultant.' When you put that much of your life into something it is just hard to let go. I see my son doing the planting now and taking out trees that I planted years ago."

The high quality of their work was recognized when Milburn Orchards received The Apple Grower of the Year Award in August 2008, presented by *American Fruit Grower Magazine*. The award recognizes a variety of management factors that set a standard for their peers.

When Evan looks at more than 100 years of Milburn Orchards, from his grandfather to his son and grandchildren, he sees the progress and the future. "I guess I'm just a link in the chain." —CSM

The pumpkin house is one of the popular autumn attractions in the fun area of the farm.



Five-year-old Brooke Jackson and her two-year-old sister Sarah enjoy the goats.