A young Miller (Delvin) at the family's Washington County farm (inset, opposite page), 1925.
Images of our Rural Past: The Photographs of Albert Miller

by Daniel J. Freas

The earliest evidence of corn cultivation in the Upper Ohio Valley — remains of cobs left by Native Americans more than 2,000 years ago — was discovered by archaeologists at Meadowcroft Rockshelter in western Washington County. The rockshelter is located on the site of a farm settled by Irish immigrant George Miller in 1795, who, like other transplanted Europeans living on the Western Pennsylvania frontier, grew corn in clearings surrounding his log house. A century and a half after George Miller began using a hoe to cultivate corn around the stumps of trees, his great-great-grandson photographed a gasoline-powered, mechanical corn picker being used to harvest corn on the same land. The photographer was Albert Miller. It was also Albert Miller who preserved the log house built by his great-great-grandfather, discovered the Meadowcroft Rockshelter archaeological site, and who, arguably, has done more than anyone to preserve the rural history of Western Pennsylvania.

A region long associated with its industrial heritage, Western Pennsylvania’s past is also rich with images of farming and farm life. From the first frontier farmers who shipped flour, meat and whiskey down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to New Orleans, to their sons who received accolades from London and Paris newspapers for the fine-wooled Merino sheep raised on the bluegrass pastures of Washington and Greene counties, the written history of our region repeatedly mentions the significant role that agriculture played during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Historians also have noted regional contributions to agriculture, such as that of John Gilkey, an Irish immigrant who around 1803 developed the United States’ first commercially successful variety of potato — the “Neshannock” or “Mercer” potato — on his farm in what is today Lawrence County. One

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might even find an occasional reference to John Knox, an Allegheny County farmer who was recognized as one of the nation's foremost cultivators of grapes and strawberries, and whose annual field days during the Civil War era attracted horticulturists from throughout the country. For Albert Miller, however, there was much more to the history of rural Western Pennsylvania than published accounts acknowledging local agricultural milestones. For this farmer-turned-historian, our region's rural past was comprised of the often unrecorded stories of countless men and women who spent their lives tilling the soil, raising livestock and harvesting crops on the hilltops and bottom lands of Western Pennsylvania. More than half a century ago, Albert Miller began to collect these stories. In the years since, he has gathered together a collection of photographs, archives and artifacts, which provide unparalleled insight into the lives of rural families. Today this material serves as the nucleus of the collections at Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life, a site of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.

Albert Miller was born in 1911 in California's Sierra Nevada Mountains, where his father, Earl, worked as a telegrapher for the Union Pacific Railroad. In 1915, Albert's father accepted the position of station agent for the Wabash Railroad in the Washington County coal patch of Penowa, near the West Virginia line, and the Miller family returned to their ancestral farm "Bancroft" in the area to live with Albert's grandparents and uncle. When the Penowa station was closed in 1917, Albert's father got a job as a check weighman for the nearby Waverly Mine. He died in 1918 during an influenza epidemic. The Miller family remained at Bancroft, where 7-year-old Albert began the process of learning about farming under the tutelage of his grandfather, T. Albert Miller.

"Grandfather's farming methods were pretty much the methods used in his youth during and after the Civil War," Albert recalls. "I learned these almost primitive methods of harvesting hay, hoeing corn, creating limestone kilns. The days of our youth on the farm were before we had electricity, telephone and tractors. I learned how to slop pigs, butcher them, and to raise all farm animals."

Albert Miller's grandfather died in 1929, a few years after Albert obtained a camera and began taking photographs of life on and around the farm. Over the next three decades, Albert would document the waning days of his grandfather's world of horse-powered machinery and record the birth of a new way of farming which incorporated gasoline tractors and grain combines.

While observing the changes in rural life taking place around him, Albert remembers, "I became enamored of the idea of how old rural and farm buildings, farm machines, tools and methods might be preserved. I felt that the day would come when demonstrations of the past would fascinate people of all ages." Miller began a prophetic mission to preserve the history and culture of rural Western Pennsylvania for such a time as today, when 97 percent of the American population have severed ties with the processes of producing food and fiber. Albert Miller's mission would lead him to aging farmers, old barns and country auctions
Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life

SINCE 1993, the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania has worked with the Meadowcroft Foundation to preserve and interpret to the public the collections of Albert and Delvin Miller as part of Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life. The 200-acre site also includes the Meadowcroft Rockshelter archaeological site — the earliest evidence of human life in eastern North America, dating back to 12,000 B.C.— and the circa 1920-1950 Jefferson Coal Mine industrial complex. The museum property also includes a woodland area that was commercially logged during the early 20th century. Under long-range plans being developed by the Historical Society, each of Meadowcroft’s cultural resources will be linked together to create a unique, outdoor museum which will tell the story of the shaping and reshaping of the Western Pennsylvania rural landscape by various people and communities over the past 14,000 years.

Through its new hands-on history programs, Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life enables visitors to explore the world of Western Pennsylvania’s prehistoric inhabitants and experience farm life in 1835. The museum also offers a workshop series on historical skills such as blacksmithing, flintknapping and spinning. Located three miles west of Avella, Washington County, Meadowcroft is less than an hour’s drive from downtown Pittsburgh. The museum is open Memorial Day through Labor Day, Wednesday through Saturday, 12 - 5 p.m., and Sunday, 1-6 p.m. The museum is also open weekends during May, September, and October. For additional information, call (412) 587-3412.

where he collected stories, journals, letters, publications, farming implements, kitchen utensils and tools for working wood, metal and fiber. In addition to his own photographs, he acquired hundreds of images taken by rural photographers during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Eventually the collection would include historic structures such as a covered bridge from southern Greene County, a one-room school that stood on the Miller farm, and the log house built by Albert’s great-great-grandfather, George Miller, during the last decade of the 18th century. Inspired by American open-air museums such as Colonial Williamsburg and Greenfield Village, Albert Miller and his brother, Delvin, assembled the collection on a portion of Bancroft Farm which the brothers were reclaiming from strip mining operations. The collection was opened to the public in 1969 as Meadowcroft Village.

Among the thousands of artifacts and archival material which Albert Miller has accumulated over the past 50 years, few aspects of the Meadowcroft collection are as significant as the photographs in which he documented rural life in western Washington County from 1925 until 1950. The images preserve forever the faces of farm boys and hired hands, threshing crews and Halloween revelers. Equally valuable are his comments regarding the photographs, which were recorded during recent interviews with the author. When combined, they provide us with a unique glimpse of rural life in Western Pennsylvania during the second quarter of the 20th century.

The snow-covered Miller family homestead was photographed by Albert Miller in December 1937. The 1840 frame farmhouse (page 29) is surrounded by a variety of outbuildings, including the privy, springhouse, blacksmith shop, corncrib/wagon shed and garage. The log house (lower left) was built by Albert’s great-great-grandfather, George Miller, an Irish immigrant who settled the farm in 1795. The log house was moved, and is now preserved at Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life.

Albert Miller captured his brothers on film many times. One photo in Meadowcroft’s collection shows the youngest brother, Orrin “Chicken” Miller, feeding chickens on the farm in 1928. “He loved chickens,” remembers Albert, “If you didn’t know where he was, you would go look for the chickens.” Orrin Miller was killed during World War II when the B-24 bomber on which he was a crew member was shot down over Budapest, Hungary. A second photograph, taken about the same time, shows Albert’s younger brother Delvin (page 28) balancing on a fence post around 1925. Delvin would follow in the footsteps of his grandfather and uncle and go on to become a nationally known breeder, trainer and driver of harness horses.

Draft horses and tractors worked side-by-side on Bancroft Farm during the 1930s and 1940s — a transitional period in American agriculture. Albert Miller photographed the farm’s team of Percheron horses, Charley and Shuley, pulling a loaded manure spreader in 1947 (pages 30-31). Manure from horse stalls was collected throughout the winter and spread on fields as fertilizer. Plowing fields prior to spring planting was a task in
which horse-power was quickly superseded by tractors as soon as they became available, though Western Pennsylvania’s hilly terrain made some tractors dangerous additions to the farm. Seventeen-year-old Albert Miller escaped serious injury when the "Farmall-20" tractor he was driving toppled while plowing a hillside field in 1938 (p. 34). The accident occurred when the plow being pulled by the tractor snapped on a large rock. "It was steep ground," Miller remembers. "I look at this today and say why in the world was I ever on this? Why was I ever plowing this?"

During the first half of the 19th century, the Upper Ohio River area emerged as the nation’s leading producer of sheep and wool. By the beginning of the present century, however, several factors including lower wool prices and competition from Western states and foreign countries led to the decline of the local industry. Sheep husbandry remained a significant enterprise in Washington and Greene counties into the 1940s, where farmers raised more than one-third of Pennsylvania’s sheep flock. Unlike the fine-wooled Merino sheep popular in the 19th century, many sheep farmers, including Albert Miller, raised mutton breeds valued for their meat as well as wool. Mutton and lamb, not traditionally part of the local farm family’s diet, found a market among Eastern European immigrants living in nearby coal patches or urban communities. The Dorset Horn sheep raised by Albert Miller (p. 35, #2 and 3) often produced two crops of lambs per year. Lambs born in the fall were sold to Greek butchers from Pittsburgh just before Easter. Albert Miller’s dedication to raising Dorset Horn sheep resulted in one of his rams, Bancroft #10, being declared International Champion at a Chicago show in 1944.

The shearing room in one of Bancroft Farm’s barns was captured in photographs by Albert Miller in 1948 (p. 36, #4). Here, each spring, fleeces weighing from 5 to 9 pounds were shorn from each of the farm’s sheep and tied using the wool box on the floor. Many of the objects depicted in this photographs are now preserved at Meadowcroft Museum of Rural Life.

Impressed by the sight of a large field filled with wheat shocks, Albert Miller stopped to photograph wheat threshing on the farm of Dean Fullerton (p. 37, #7) on August 12, 1947. Two of Miller’s photographs (p. 36-37, #5 and 6) overlap to create a panoramic view of the threshing process, where sheaves of wheat from the wagon are being fed into the threshing machine located behind the truck. Powered by the belt from the tractor at the far left, the threshing machine mechanically separates the grain from the straw and chaff. Albert Miller realized that he was recording the end of an era when he took the photographs of threshing on the Fullerton farm. The separate tasks of reaping and threshing grain had already been replaced with a combine on Bancroft farm. A 1946 photograph (p.38, #8) shows two young neighbors using Mr. Miller’s new McCormick-Deering combine to harvest oats.

Another machine, the corn picker, which mechanically harvested and husked ears of corn, eliminated the chore of husking corn by hand. It was also the death knell for a traditional rural social event — the husking bee. By the World War II era, country “frolics” such as husking bees and barn raisings had been replaced by other social gatherings such as Saturday night dances and Halloween parties. Miller photographed one held at the Lower Buffalo Presbyterian Church in the nearby village of Independence.

Among the photographs which Albert Miller collected are nearly 400 images by Frank L. France. A resident of West Middletown, Washington County, Mr. France took pictures of people and places throughout the area during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They include photographs of the Wilson Mill (p. 38, #9), the site of which is now covered by Cross Creek Reservoir near West Middletown, an unidentified farm family working in a field (p. 39, #10), and an unidentified farmer posing with a dog and cow (p. 40, #11).
See preceding text for information about photographs.
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