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## **Farm family preserves Hunterdon land as open space**

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**DELAWARE TWP.** - At age 90, Grover Johnson is among the last of the old-time farmers in this western Hunterdon County community.

One of six children, Grover was born in 1926 in a farmhouse his parents rented from a local family. He and his three brothers grew up farming, using a horse-drawn plow. In 1953, he and his older brother Jacob purchased the house and 69 acres and started their own farm. They raised dairy cows, chickens, ducks and pigs; and grew corn, oats, wheat, soy and hay.

"I've been farming almost all my life," said Grover. "It wasn't easy but it was a good life. I wouldn't trade it ... I wouldn't want the city."

Most of family's farming operations ended in the 1990s, although they still grow hay in the fields. And thanks to Grover and his sister-in-law, Alice (Jacob's widow), 45 acres of the farm were just preserved as open space.



On July 12, Grover and Alice Johnson sold the land, accessed from Pine Hill Road, to New Jersey Conservation Foundation. It is now part of the Wickecheoke Creek Preserve, an ever-growing patchwork of more than 1,100 acres of preserved open space and farmland. The Johnson property provides a critical link between two previously preserved properties.

"They (Grover and Alice) thought it was a great idea to sell the property for conservation," said Patty Eckard, Alice Johnson's daughter. She explained that since nobody else in the family wanted to take over the farm, her mother and uncle were happy to see the property remain undeveloped and available to the public for walking and hiking.

New Jersey Conservation will lease the Johnson hayfields to a local farmer and develop a trail system that will eventually connect the landmark Green Sergeant's covered bridge to the preserved open space off Pavilica Road. New trails extend to Upper Creek Road or the center of Sergeantsville.

### **Preservation Partnership**

Funding for the purchase came from New Jersey Green Acres and Hunterdon County grants to New Jersey Conservation Foundation. In addition, the New Jersey Water Supply Authority covered a portion of the ancillary costs.

"We're very grateful to Grover and Alice Johnson for their willingness to preserve their property for open

space," said Michele S. Byers, executive director of New Jersey Conservation Foundation. "Thanks to them, Delaware Township's rural and scenic beauty will be enjoyed by both current and future generations."

"We're also grateful for our funding partners: Green Acres, Hunterdon County and the New Jersey Water Supply Authority," added Byers.

"Green Acres is proud to be a partner with the New Jersey Conservation Foundation in the preservation of this significant property within the Wickecheoke Creek watershed," said Department of Environmental Protection Assistant Commissioner for Natural and Historic Resources Richard Boornazian. "The preservation will allow for public trails and passive recreation, while protecting important wildlife habitat."

"Hunterdon County is very appreciative of the Johnsons and happy to contribute toward the preservation of property that provides a vital linkage for the hiking trails in the area," said Hunterdon County Freeholder Deputy Director John King.

### **Johnson Farm History**

Grover Johnson's parents, Howard and Violet Johnson, came to the farm with their four oldest children in 1926 after living in Sand Brook, another community within Delaware Township. They rented half of the farmhouse from Joseph Taddei, whose family lived in the other half. Grover and his younger sister Mary were born there.

After Joseph Taddei built a new house across the street, Jacob and Grover Johnson bought the farmhouse and 69 acres from him. Grover and another unmarried brother, George, shared half of the house, while Jacob and Alice raised their family in the other half.

When the Johnson brothers first started farming, they used a horse-drawn plow. They didn't get their first tractor until the late 1940s. "My dad (Jacob) liked the horses better, but Uncle Grover always drove the tractor," recalled Patty.

At its peak, the family farm had about 20 dairy cows, 200 laying hens, 100 chicks, plus ducks and pigs. Milk was sold to dairy companies in Lebanon and Philadelphia and eggs were sold at the Flemington egg auction and to neighbors. Many of the field crops, like hay and corn, helped feed the animals.

"It was a lot of hard work but it was a good life," said Grover.

Grover said his favorite part of running the farm was "getting up early and working late" to take care of the animals. He added that he rarely traveled far from the farm because of his responsibilities.

"My father and uncle did it themselves; they hardly ever hired any help," recalled Patty. "Everybody in the family always pitched in."

Patty said she and her three siblings helped their mother grow and can vegetables. "We always had a big garden when I was a kid - we grew potatoes, tomatoes, beans, lettuce, radishes, corn, rhubarb, pumpkins, squash and cucumbers."

Grover, Alice, Patty and other family members still live in houses that were part of the farm; the homes were not part of the open space acquisition. "This was a nice place to grow up - and living here is still great," said Patty.