

WALTER Golden, left, operates what may be the last farm in Stamford. A farmer for nearly 40 years, he still sells eggs and chickens at his Rockrimmon Road farm. Brushwood Farm, a dairy farm located in the area near what is now Laurel Reservoir, was owned and operated by W. C. Wood from about 1915 to 1953. The view of the farm, below, is from a 1918 photograph. Wood left his position as surgeon-in-chief at Brooklyn Hospital in 1913 to work the dairy farm, originally about 200-250 acres.

Tom Ryan/Staff photo

City's farmer still living off the land

By Angela Carella
Staff Writer

Like Stamford's earliest settlers, Walter Golden makes his living off the land.

And, like the colonists before him, Golden, probably the city's last farmer, has found that the thin, rocky soil is better for raising things other than crops.

Though he grows vegetables for his family on part of the land at Golden Farm on Rockrimmon Road, Golden has for the last 38 years earned money as a poultry farmer.

"To the best of my knowledge this is the last working farm in Stamford," said Golden, 77. "What constitutes a farm technically is that you do it to make income."

Hettling Farm on Stillwater Road was a working farm until about two years ago, said Karl Hettling Jr., whose father started the farm in 1950. Now the field is used to grow flowers and some produce; the family has its main farm in upstate New York.

There are six working dairy farms in Fairfield County — as well as some small sheep farms and a few pick-your-own-fruit or -vegetable farms in the Danbury area.

But "there aren't really any full-time, make-your-living-off-the-farm routines going on in Fairfield County," said Nancy Welsh of the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service in Bethel. "The land is just too valuable for real es-

tate. Farming has been squeezed out."

With the notorious independence of a farmer, however, Walter Golden uses his seven acres for just that. He has been producing eggs and chickens full-time since he retired as a biochemist from Stamford Hospital in 1970. Before that he did it part-time, he said, when he "wore two hats — a farmer and a biochemist."

"When we came to Stamford in the late 1940s there were four or five dairy farms in Stamford," Golden said. "There was one where Westhill High School is now, two off Newfield Avenue and maybe two off Long Ridge Road. I bought this farm in 1953 from Mr. Wesley Sawyer. He came here in the 1920s and started a chicken and egg farm. Before that it had been a small dairy farm. It was not used to grow field crops — not in this century, as far as I know."

In fact, Connecticut's first settlers farmed unforested land along rivers and near the seashore. When more land was needed, they cleared forests. According to "Highlights of Connecticut Agriculture," written by Rudy J. Favretti, once a farmer got rid of the trees he had to then get rid of the stones.

Larger stones were moved by oxen and chain and used to build walls that enclosed pastures. The smaller ones were picked by hand, a never-ending battle that resulted in enormous piles stacked in the cor-

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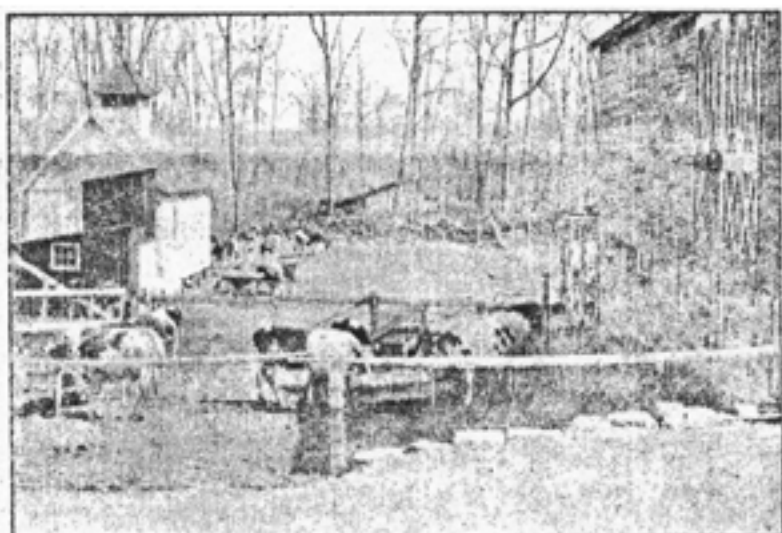


Photo courtesy Stamford Historical Society



Mary Cooleen Cooney/Staff photo



By 1918 his herd of Holsteins and Guernseys, above, numbered about 100. Around 1920 the Stamford Water Co. purchased some of his farm land in order to construct Laurel Reservoir, at left. Over the years, he sold off parcels of the land and at the time of his death in 1953, he owned about 100 acres along Woodbine Road.

Farm

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ners of fields.

Favretti writes that the 17th-century Connecticut farmer barely survived on what he was able to pull from the stony soil. The most common crops were corn, English wheat, rye, beans, peas and pumpkins. In 1647, he writes, Indian attacks were a worry but a greater threat was the loss of crops to wolves and blackbirds.

Farmers soon began to rely on cows, sheep and pigs, as well as apple and pear orchards, to raise the food they needed. In the village of Stamford, families named Hoyt, Weed, Scofield, Holly, Brown, Hunt, Finch, Hait, Seeley and Waterbury took up tracts of land in the 1700s. Paths extended from the meeting house in the village center, Atlantic Square (the current site of the Old Town Hall), out to the farms that surrounded it.

By 1800 an exodus from Connecticut farms had begun — agriculture had proved unprofitable and overcrowding a problem. People headed west for better soil or headed for jobs in grist mills, cloth or wool mills, sawmills or blacksmith shops.

Ninety-six percent of the U.S. population lived on farms when the nation was born in 1776. By 1876 it was 52 percent. And by then a transcontinental railroad was in place, complete with refrigerated cars. Western farmers could ship meat to New England more profitably than New Englanders could raise their own livestock, Favretti writes. Fewer and fewer Connecticut people engaged in farming, and most of the ones who did grew vegetables to sell to the people living in the ever-growing cities.

In the early 1900s waves of immigrants began to arrive; by 1930, nearly two-thirds of the farmers in Connecticut were immigrants. About that time, Wesley Sawyer bought the farm Walter Golden now owns — it was when egg and chicken farms began to gain popularity over dairy farms in this part of the state.

"The nice thing about chickens is that you provide food and water in the morning and they don't need a lot of attention during the day," Golden said. "You're not on a rigid schedule, with milking and all, the way dairy farmers are. You don't have to be there the minute they drop an egg. This kind of farm is at the convenience of the farmer rather than the convenience of the chicken."

That's why Golden, who grew up in New Milford where his grandmother and uncle raised chickens, was able to start his farm nearly 40 years ago. He did the farm chores after work and on weekends, hiring a neighborhood boy to help him until his own two children were old enough. Now only he and his wife,

Nettie, do the work.

"The most we had was 3,000 or 4,000 chickens when the kids were still at home," Golden said. "But the farm was never large enough to provide a full-time living. We have about 1,500 chickens now."

He explained how the farm works. "If you have 200 birds in a pen you don't need 200 nesting boxes, because they don't all seek out nests at the same time. You need 40 or 50 nests. The early bird starts about 6 or 7 a.m. By noon, 80 or 90 percent of the eggs will have been produced. A few will lay in the early afternoon."

So, right after lunch, he and Nettie gather the eggs. Then they grade them and pack them. Walter makes deliveries to the small grocery stores and delicatessens in Stamford that are his customers. Some eggs are sold at the farm.

Golden said his farm produces between 600 and 800 eggs a day, depending on the number of chickens that are in full production. Hens, he said, begin to lay eggs when they are 5 or 6 months old and are in full production by 7 months old. At 12 months, production drops to 60 percent.

"After that, they are ready for a rest," Golden said. "They go out of production for eight or 10 weeks. Then they come back for their second cycle of production and they're good for 10 to 12 months more. Then they go into retirement."

On a poultry farm, a retired chicken is a dead chicken. People who want them come to Golden Farms, buy them live and take them home and dress them themselves. But, as farmers do, Golden replaces what he uses.

"I raise my own baby chicks. And I do breeding studies," said Golden, who holds undergraduate and graduate degrees in biochemistry from Yale University. "That's what's atypical about this farm — it has a little of everything. The large commercial poultry farmers either have just a hatchery, or they only raise the maturing birds."

Although dairy products are still the state's most valuable agricultural commodity, the poultry industry takes a close second. Golden said that in the Connecticut Valley, where farmers once grew tobacco, they are now growing turf to sell to landscapers, as well as bedding plants and other products for nurseries. It's a big business, he said.

And today, when only 5 percent of the U.S. population is engaged in agriculture, Walter Golden continues to work an old piece of farmland in Stamford that helped support the city's colonial settlers.

"It's providing a retirement income for me and keeping me busy all day long," Golden said. "Farming is intimately connected to me from when I was young. You could say it's in my blood."