

## Jerome “Jerry” Fones

Dad wrote this article at the urging of Keith Severson who at the time was a Cooperative Extension agent. It was a request to chronicle his experiences in agriculture. In addition to this aspect of his life he made many contributions to his community. He served on an advisory committee at Mexico Central School whose mission was to develop programs to better meet the needs of the students. He was president of the New Haven Cemetery Association for many years, treasurer of the Oswego County Cooperative Association and Chairman of Board of Directors for Ontario Feed and Grain. He was a New Haven Councilman for twelve years. He spent twenty-eight years a Chairman and District Director for Oswego County Soil and Water District winning the distinction of Top State Director of the year. He was District Director of the Oswego County Breeders’ Technician of the Year and sent to the National Convention in Minnesota. He served as a New Haven volunteer fireman for a time and can be remembered stationed behind the clam booth opening raw clams at the field days with Buster Cronk, Wayne Duell and Harold Fisher for over forty years.

As his daughter, I can remember riding with my dad as he made his daily calls and marveling at how he always spent time talking to the farmers about their concerns no matter how busy his day was. A farmer’s livelihood depended on his herd’s milk production and it was important to him to select the best bulls with that end in mind.

Dad loves horses and he raised, broke and trained-to drive draft horses and Morgans. Growing up we always had horses that were more like family pets than farm animals. Before winter roads were sanded and salted there would often be enough snow on the road to hitch one of the horses to a sleigh or cutter and take a ride. He had many carriages, spring wagons, buckboards, shays, ect. through the years, many of which he refurbished. After a particularly harsh winter in 1993, he sold the last of his horses concerned that he might not be able to make it to the barn through the drifts to care for them at least twice daily. He’d had horses in his life for 74 years. They were the last of the livestock to go.

He spent many of his retirement years woodworking, making and refinishing furniture. He also caned chair seats. His family treasures many of those pieces. After Mom and Dad fell and broke their hips (within three weeks of each other) in October of ’03, they had to give up their farm and their cottage at the lake not far from where Dad was born. They are currently living very comfortably in an Assisted Living Residence in Oswego, not far from my sister, Kate, and me. Our brother, Dan retired to Florida.

This past Christmas, at a pre-holiday brunch at our house, my parents and Laurence (Sparky) Rector reminisced for three hours non-stop. Sparky made the comment that they should write down their memories and experiences for posterity. This recalling of farming through the years represents just one small segment of the wonderful memories Dad can share at a moment’s notice.

I’ve included Dad’s story on farming as I thought that his recollections on the progression of agricultural life in New Haven might be of more interest than his personal contributions and accomplishments. I was not quite certain what Marie was looking for when she wrote me telling

me that, as Town Historian, she wanted to honor men and asked me to write about Dad. My father neither looks for nor expects to be honored in any way.

He always says he can find the good in almost everyone, except when he encounters someone who mistreats children or animals. He has instilled a strong work ethic in his family by example and has a great sense of humor. He loves his family right down to his four-year-old great-grandson. Our lives have been made far richer by our association with him and, I have a suspicion that can also be said for many outside the family.

## **My Life in Agriculture**

**By  
Jerry Fones**

I have been involved in agriculture nearly all of my 85 years of life. I was born July 1, 1919, on a dairy farm at Demister Beach on Lake Ontario. Our nearest settlement was Demister about one mile from our farm and about one mile north of New Haven. There were two stores, a post office, grange hall, car dealership, feed mill, milk plant, machinery dealership, coal shed and scales, a large ice house used to ice railroad cars that shipped strawberries to New York City, and most importantly of all , a railroad station and siding. Today none of these remain.

We milked about 15 cows by hand, which in those days was considered a good – sized dairy. We had four acres of fruit trees and grew about 3/4 acre of strawberries. We didn't have electricity, as the lines didn't come down our road until 1930. Instead a carbide plant in our cellar generated gas for our lights.

Almost everyone that lived in our town had from one two ten cows, a few chickens, grew strawberries and had some fruit trees. I recall families that were considered well off that never milked more than a half dozen cows, but raised strawberries and managed to save most of the money from their sale. They canned their meat, fruit and vegetables and were nearly self-sufficient. One neighbor even made her own soap.

Farmers all made a trip to the milk plant each morning, some with horse drawn conveyances and some with Model-T-Fords. When the frost first went out of the ground in the spring, our wagon bed often dragged in the mud. No roads were plowed in the winter making the trip especially challenging. Farmers worked together to fill the icehouse for the Strawberry Association and usually took home a load of ice at noon and night to fill their own icehouses, as this was their only means of cooling their milk in the summer. One day five freight cars of strawberries were shipped out of the Demister Station. This took considerable ice!

One thing that sticks in my mind was my father buying a 1912 Model-T-Ford from a neighbor for \$5.00. He planned to put the motor in his spray rig and the car was in good running condition. We only had to spray our apples about twice a year, and I had a lot of fun driving that old car around the farm until Dad got around to taking the motor out.

In 1933, around Christmas time, we had a week or more that the temperature never got above 30 degrees below zero and the ground had no snow protection. It ruined our orchard and most of the small orchards in the area. The 83 – acre orchard, now owned by the Simpelaar family, that boarded our farm, suffered considerable damage, but the trees that were lost were replaced.

Not many years after this many of our neighbors stopped raising strawberries commercially; because of the child labor laws they couldn't get them picked. These operations are thing of the past.

Haying was not easy in those days. We cut and raked our hay with horses, cocked the windrows, then pitched the hay onto the wagons by hand. It took a lot of it to fill our two bug mows in the barn.

I graduated from high school in Mexico in 1937, and purchased a 100-acre m farm on County Route 1, about a mile from my family's farm. We spent a year modernizing the house. I married my high school sweetheart, Elizabeth Pilsifer, in June 1938, and moved in and started dairying. We lived at this location for 65 years. Et wasn't a good time to start the dairy business. In May 1939, the milk price was 89 cents per hundred. For those of us who grained our cows, the milk checks didn't cover the feed bill. Fortunately I had some six-week-old pigs which I sold for \$2.00 apiece and that allowed us to eat for a month. You wonder how dairy farmers stayed in business. We had no choice.

There were no jobs available except C.C.C. or W.P.A. and you had to be on public assistance to get on W.P.A. Each town had a welfare officer who wasn't very busy because, in those days, most people thought it was a disgrace to be on wilfare and only applied as a last resort.

This low milk price brought about a milk strike that turned quite violent and, in some cases, made lifetime enemies out of neighbors. However, prices did start going up after the strike. The Farm Service Agency moved into an Oswego office in 1938, and was offering lime and fertilizer to farmers at low prices, sometimes free, to encourage improved plantings and pastures. They mapped farm boundaries on aerial photos and offered vegetable allotments that financially helped with seedings. I worked for them part time at sign-ups and checked farms at \$6.00 a day furnishing my own transportation. Things continued to improve mainly because of World War II. Due to rationing money was made on sales of beef and chicken on the black market. About this time I bought my first tractor. I had done all farm work with horses and, as much as I loved horses, it was a little discouraging to have to put in a really long day just to plow one acre. I used five horses on a drag first getting them harnessed, then coming in at noon, washing under their collars and feeding and watering them. It was extremely time consuming. I appreciated the difference when I got a tractor, a John Deere B. With the plows and drag it cost \$1,149. Presently the smallest John Deere riding lawn mower costs more than \$2,000.

Early in 1944, I attended an Extension-sponsored presentation on artificial breeding of dairy cattle, as I was interested in improving my herd. Artificial insemination was just getting started in the state and was an affordable way of making the use of superior sires available to the dairyman. As I remember, the average cow produced about 7,000 pounds of milk per year in Oswego County at a time. Due to some arm-twisting by Prof. Ray Albrectson of Cornell, I ended

up at Cornell taking the A.I. course. Starting February 4, 1944, I spent the next 37½ years working as an artificial breeding technician along with keeping my farm going. It meant working some 16-hour days, but I got to work with some great people and can truthfully say it was very rewarding. Due to better breeding, feeding and management, production per cow jumped dramatically which is why with fewer dairy cows and farms in the county total milk production has pretty much been maintained. During this period of my life farm prices on the whole weren't bad. Farmers were able to replace worn machinery or buy a new car or truck as needed. I remember walking into Percy Rose's barn one morning and Percy saying, "I never thought I'd live to see the day I could pay all my current bills and pay cash for a new manure spreader out of one month's milk check."

I retired August 1981, from A.I. At this time milk prices had leveled off, but prices on everything farmers were buying were skyrocketing. One farmer told me he had a 20-year – old Massey Ferguson tractor that needed a new rear axle. It costs more to put this part in than he paid for the tractor new. The biggest problem in agriculture today is farmers trying to pay for their supplies and equipment at 2005 prices with their incomes at the 1985 level. Farm agencies have contributed a great deal toward, the well being of agriculture in Oswego County. Cooperative Extension, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, the Farm Protection Agency, and Soil and Water District are helping farmers carry out sound practices with technical, assistance, providing disaster loans and conservation advice. In some cases it means the difference between being able to stay in business or not. Farmers will need their help more than ever with some of the problems that they will face in the future.