

Conversation with Janet Banks

'It's the beauty of the place. I come up here and sit.'

By David Huck
Journal Inquirer

George Hendee, one of the founding partners of Indian Motorcycles, built the Hilltop Farm in Suffield in 1914.

The farm changed hands several times. The Friends of the Farm at Hilltop purchased the property where the large white barn sits outright in 2013.

The Journal Inquirer recently sat down with Janet Banks, the president of the group, days after the organization had held its annual fundraiser that attracted 300 people to the farm for local food and dancing.

As Banks noted, the farm has a "history of a lot of excellence, so we're trying to continue that."

Q: Why was this location chosen for the farm?

A: Because in 1914, Hendee went up and down the (Connecticut) river looking for the highest place in Suffield and this is what he found.

Hendee bought up 500 acres and 27 farms. He built an incredible mansion, which unfortunately was torn down.

Q: What was his reasoning for buying up all that land?

A: He had one of the outstanding dairy herds in the country. Evidently he had money to burn because he built a 20,000-square-foot barn. As an architect working with us once said, "This is the main event."

He originally had Guernseys, which are smaller (than Holsteins, the traditional dairy cows). We think he had about 82. He sold the property in the early '40s to Charlie Stroh, who brought in Herefords. They are much bigger animals. They had to readjust the stalls.

Besides cows, there were also 12,000 laying hens here.

Q: What was done to the place after the friends group purchased it?

A: When we got it, one of the first things we did — we had a \$500,000 grant from the state Department of Energy and Environmental Protection — we redid everything on the barn from the gutters up. All the cupolas, the roof, everything. That cost us \$375,000, plus the architects on top of that. We also created a new fire exit. I think we did a good job of marrying it to the architecture.

Also in the last year we renovated an area that's our work area and meeting room. It has heat in it now.

Q: Tell me about your first visit to the farm.

A: I walked into the barn in 2002 as a member of the Heritage Committee in the

license. They wanted me to come and do a market analysis of the property. I came with another member of that committee who also had a real estate license. We walked in here and I got a few feet into the barn and said to Jack, "Stop and look at this. It's like a cathedral."

Before actually stepping foot on the property, I had driven by and saw the barn and thought it was incredible.

Q: You contacted a friend after visiting the farm. What happened next?

A: We enlisted the help of 12 of our friends who were well known in the community to lobby. We started meeting on a weekly basis. We decided what we were going to do, set about it, and did it. We formed ourselves into an incorporated entity, the Friends of Hilltop Farm Inc. It's a 501c3 non profit.

We had also tried to partner with a farmer who was interested in buying the farm. He didn't like that idea. He was successful in getting the farm, but three days later he pulled out of the contract. I then had my friend go get our offer off the First Selectman's desk and told them we wanted to negotiate.

We got the town to put a restriction on the deed that said the barn couldn't be torn down.

When all of this came about, it just seemed as if it were right. I kept thinking to myself that if my dad were alive, he would be just so happy. He always told me that I had the whole agriculture thing in my soul. It's the beauty of the place. I come up here and sit. Flocks of birds go by.

Q: How much did the farm sell for?

A: The sale price was \$325,000, but we had difficulty getting a loan. The wife of the owner of the culinary institute next door became interested in the place. She talked him into buying it and leasing it back to us. So we had, up until last year, a 99-year lease with an opportunity to renew it for up to 99 years. We virtually owned it. But he sold it, left, and we bought it from him at a much reduced rate.

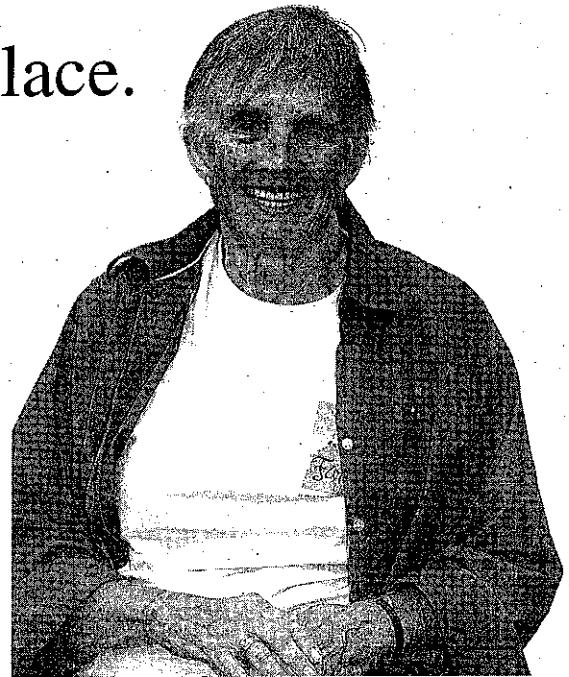
Q: How many people are on the board?

A: 15. (For) more than half, either their parents or grandparents were farmers.

Q: The barn has no cross members. Why did they build it like that?

A: It was architect designed. Everything is chestnut. Most of the uprights are center wood. They have been up since 1914. If you look at them, you don't see any torque. It's a spectacular building, in my opinion. I happen to love architecture.

The top floor was filled floor to ceiling with hay, originally loose hay. There were chutes where the hay was out (to bring to



stacked high.

Up towards the ceiling there's a big grapping hook that's on a track and goes out through a large door. The hay wagons would be downstairs and the hay would be pulled up. That was called the widow maker. It's a wild piece of equipment.

Q: How long have you lived in Suffield?

A: Since 1965. I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. I fell in love with my husband and moved here.

Q: Was Suffield traditionally a farm-based community?

A: It still is, actually. There's an awful lot of land in agricultural production here. There were a number of dairy farms and there are still two or three. We're very used to seeing the Agri-Mark trucks coming in and out.

Q: What do you plan to do with the barn?

A: We eventually want to have people in here and do stuff. We have so many ideas, it's not even funny. We'd like to rent it out for events, because lots of people have asked us about having weddings here. We'd like to have our own things here like the harvest dinner inside here. We can't do it because we don't have a sprinkler system.

Q: How much has been spent so far on renovations?

A: \$1.2 million. We have been very fortunate in receiving grants.

Q: How did the recent harvest dinner go?

from the Country Diner (in Enfield) did it. Local farmers contribute produce, almost all of the produce that's used. We're very fortunate with that. It's our biggest fundraiser of the year. We also did a golf fundraising dinner.

Q: What do you think attracts people to the farm?

A: One exciting part is that there are bald eagles nesting on this property. I think that's what saved the land from developers. Pinnacle (a previous owner) became very distressed at all the things they had to do — all the hoops they had to jump through — because of the nesting bald eagles. They just decided that the town could have it because it wasn't going to be worth their while. Even though they said they were going to keep the barn, some of us didn't quite trust that. It's a 20,000 square foot building, for Pete's sake.

Q: Did you grow up on a farm?

A: I did not, but my father did. He grew up on a ranch in Nebraska. It was a 325,000-acre ranch. It's not in the family any more. The rest of the family now lives in Kansas. It was pretty barren out there. There were two trees out there.

Q: What did you study in school?

A: I was a music major in college, and then I went to graduate school, got a master's degree to be a psychiatric social worker. I still play music though. I play the pipe organ. My husband was a teacher at Suffield Academy, so that's why I came to Suffield. In order to send my kids to