

# Years and years of fun at Fashion Farm

By Jody Grismore Vance

**Russ Becker** makes the homemade ice cream at Fashion Farm in Ligonier.

For those of you unfamiliar with Fashion Farm, it is not a clothing mall, nor design business; it is a restaurant, an “Old Memory House,” a greenhouse, a 200-acre farm, the old Ligonier Jail...and the site of October’s Pumpkin Fantasyland. As to the name – Fashion—well, that relates to a heifer purchased in the 20’s by the founder, **Charles (Charlie) Williams**, Russ Becker’s father-in-law. The animal’s name was Ole Fashion...and the 200-acre farm was her farm.

For those of you unfamiliar with the old-fashioned ice cream machines, they had cranks on them and on hot summer days, family members would take turns turning that crank. Being allowed to crank was almost a rite of passage event – albeit one that was more fun anticipated than performed.

Ask Becker about his ice cream machine while miming the cranking motion, and his response is a hearty chuckle as he himself cranks the air and says, “My ice cream maker is almost to that point because it is 32 years old.” As of this past March, that’s how long Fashion Farm Restaurant has been in business...and it is the old-fashioned, relaxed pace of something like a hand crank ice cream freezer that embodies the essence of what Fashion Farm started out as and what it has come to be.

Regarding that philosophy, Becker says of his father-in-law, “He did a very nice job just communicating to people that you can have fun and you don’t have to spend a lot of money. Just enjoy what is around you—and your environment. We are carrying on: To have a good time, you don’t need much; just make fun with what you’ve got.”

Of the fare at the restaurant, which is open all year, Becker says, “What we pride ourselves on is good quality home cooked food; we do all of our own salads; we make our own ice cream and pies; we make our own cakes.” And, yes, meatloaf is on the menu.

But in the 60’s, before he got the idea for the restaurant, Williams had started growing produce for roadside sales and as Becker tells it, “One day he put two squash together and saw Snoopy.” Noting that his father-in-law had “quite an imagination,” and that the farm produced many varieties of gourds and squash and pumpkins, he adds, “Charlie decided to try to create some animals and features.”

Becker sums up the situation with a grin, “We always thought he was about 10 years ahead of his time.” And along with the gourds and squash and pumpkins, the October display also grew.

“People started to come,” says Becker, “and eventually he had enough time and energy invested putting together displays that he decided he needed to charge something to justify continuing to do it. It’s just grown from that, probably about 100 different displays.”

Most of the planning and work is done by the folks at Fashion Farm themselves. They organize the ideas during the year, but because they are working with perishable produce, they can’t put it together until September. That month is what they call the “rushy” time.

Becker says, “We do have one lady who comes in and does our painting.” That would include such things as the traditional pumpkin Presidents of the U.S. (Actually and more accurately, they are pumpkin-headed presidents, but that seems a tad politically incorrect when you see it in writing.) He explains that they have a different theme each year and remembers, “Last year was Saturday Morning Cartoons. We did the history which started back in the 60’s—some come and gone...Mickey Mouse.”

Other events mesh in with the hundred show gourd, squash and pumpkins displays, such as a car show the first weekend in October and visits from a local llama farm.

Becker mentions that they usually have a couple of kid mazes and talks of some of the activities during the month. He says, “We offer tours for the young people and schools bring their classes and they do a tour. My wife is Patty Pumpkin and she takes them through and explains and tells stories about what is involved in the season. They get a hayride and they get a homemade pumpkin ice cream cone or doughnut.”

He sums up the event and the month: “Kids have a real good time.” And that seems to be the point, along with the fact that they are having a good time with the simple things on the farm, no whistles and bells and neon flashing lights.

Reflecting on our time, he says, “Our society is such that with young people, it’s always gratification. We try to slow that down a little—if you can—and give them some time to reflect about (more simple things.)

“Life goes by quickly and, of course, you don’t understand when you’re ten or fifteen or 25 even...but as we get older, we understand that.” It is a statement punctuated with a hearty chuckle.

He says, “A lot of people don’t have the exposure to farming and so we brought together enough of the atmosphere, including the hayride out into fields, to get an actual sense of country. We work hard to get people to relax and enjoy a nice day at the farm. Our goal is to have activities that people would enjoy and not have to spend a lot of money.” On the average, 15-20,000 people come during the month.

There is a book in which people can leave comments, and a lot of them do, such as “This is my 25th year. My grandmother brought me and now I’m bringing my grandchildren.” Becker says, “We get an awful lot of that. When people come, it’s a destination for them, and they think about us because we’ve been here doing it a long time.”

Part of the old-fashioned atmosphere that is available to visitors from spring until the end of October is “This Ole House.” Becker says, “My (in-law’s) used to live in the house and it’s probably 120 years old. Their family has been savers and so they have a lot of “memories” as they call them. People can walk through it; it’s no charge.” You will walk back in time and **June Williams**, Becker’s mother-in-law, will be there most days to talk with you about days gone by.

If you get a chance, take a look at the dining area to the right of the entrance – it’s the original granary. Becker says, “This land was all timber when they settled here and they did things with the wood – it was a cheap commodity.” He explains that the walls of the room are native cut one by fives, sitting one on top of another like a deck of cards. He says it was good insulation against temperature and rats couldn’t chew through it. Now, that’s atmosphere.

And if you’re up for more or want to explore again on another day, they’ll give you directions to the Radio Museum in Ligonier – which Becker calls “a little jewel”—and Stone’s Trace, south of Ligonier on U.S. 33, where his son and daughter-in-law fire up a brick oven during that festival at the beginning of September.

Russ and **Patty Becker** have been joined at Fashion Farm in the past few years by their son, **Jason**, who is enlarging the greenhouse/gardening aspect of the business.

Fashion Farm is located at 1680 Lincolnway West, Ligonier.