

ON THE HOMESTEAD

For those who grew up gazing out bedroom windows at Indiana bean fields or hiding within rows of towering cornstalks during exhilarating games of flashlight tag (that was technically cheating, but that's another story), agriculture is synonymous with Indiana history.

For some, it's an integral part of their family's livelihood as well.

By Matt Ottinger

Ninety-two Indiana families were honored by the Indiana State Department of Agriculture and then-Lt. Gov. Eric Holcomb in August with Hoosier Homestead Awards. Four earned the most prestigious designation as Bicentennial Award winners, meaning the farm had been in the family for at least 200 years and counting. Those winners included:

- Byrne family (farm founded in 1808 in Harrison County)
- Porter family (farm founded in 1811 in Fayette County)
- Mathew family (farm founded in 1816 in Posey County)
- Saltzman family (farm also founded in 1816 in Posey County)

Revolutionary journeys

The Byrne family farm lies just northeast of Corydon and now houses three generations of the family on its premises.

“Charles Byrn (the family name was spelled differently then) migrated here in 1806,” explains owner Gary Byrne. “He came from North Carolina and his father fought in the Revolutionary War, and was deeded 640 acres down there around 1787. Once (the father) died, they split the farm up among the six boys. He sold that around 1805 and migrated this direction. Four of the brothers came this way.”

Byrne adds that Charles fought alongside his own brother in the Battle of Tippecanoe in 1811 and is buried on the farm.

Creighton Porter, now 87 years old, also reflects on his journeyman ancestor, Joshua Porter, who secured his family's farm near Connersville in 1811.

“He came from Virginia,” notes Porter, who has called the farm home for his entire life. “We always thought it was because it was hilly around here and there's a creek nearby, so maybe it reminded him of where he came from.”

The Spoor Farm spanned 80 acres near Salem in Washington County. Shown in 1922, it was purchased by J.A. Spoor, chairman of the Union Stock Yards and Transit Company in Chicago. He ultimately turned it over to Purdue University for improvement and reorganization (*J.C. Allen and Purdue University photo*).

Agriculture Remains a Family Tradition

Creighton and his brother own the land, while his nephews handle farming its corn, beans and hay.

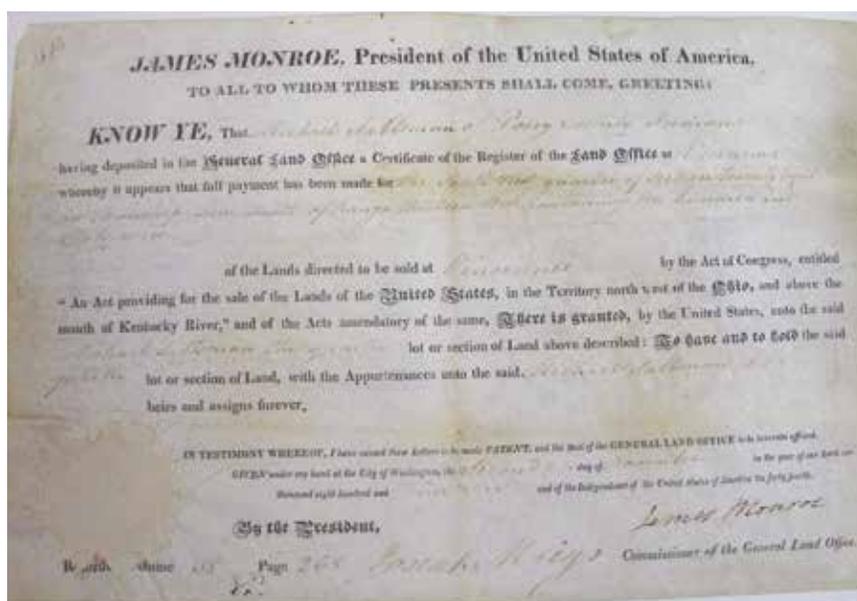
Linda (Saltzman) McCall was among those accepting the award for the Saltzman family. The Posey County farm now spans about 76 acres, although 640 acres originally belonged to the family.

“The Rappites from Pennsylvania, led by Frederick Rapp, were the ones who settled New Harmony,” she relays, adding that several families decided to make the trek and build a new life. “So when Father Rapp started scouting out a new location, a lot of farmers who weren’t part of the Harmonists community decided to come with them to seek the new frontier as well.

“In 1816, they came down the river in flat boats with their families,” she adds.

She lives in Illinois now and a nearby farmer takes care of the Saltzman family land, which produces soybeans, corn and sometimes wheat.

“Initially, it had corn and for a long time we had pigs, cows and chickens on our farm. That was our meat,” reflects McCall, who grew up just a mile from the farm where she spent many hours working.



Linda (Saltzman) McCall still has the sheepskin deed for her family's farm, signed by President James Monroe. “The story is that Michael Saltzman walked to Vincennes to get the deed,” she reveals, adding, “it’s amazing it’s in such good shape.”



Representatives (from left) of the Saltzman, Porter and Byrne families were on hand in August to receive their Hoosier Homestead Bicentennial Awards.

In the hay day

McCall considers how life has evolved for the modern farmer, as technology has changed the mechanisms and the speed at which crops can be harvested.

“When I was young, we had two old tractors and wagons that carried hay out to the animals,” she reminisces. “Grandpa had a team of mules he used in the fields. We didn’t have big farm equipment. Now, they can go in and get rid of our crops in just a matter of a day. Back then it was small combines and small pickers. Part of our job as kids was to go out with our mom with feedbags and gather the corn we could find in the fields. That gave us more milk money; it was very different.”

R. Douglas Hurt, professor and head of the history department at Purdue University, contends agriculture has had a monumental impact on manufacturing in Indiana as it has prompted creative thinking and innovation that has changed the world.

“Agriculture feeds so many things, whether it’s the manufacturing of ethanol, corn starch or selling corn and soybeans to pharmaceutical manufacturers for fillers and coatings,” he points out, “or whether it’s livestock in the pork packing industry; poultry; corn syrup; the multiplicity of things that can be extracted from components of Indiana agriculture.”

“An investment here and an investment there – if they were all to disappear, the state would have a difficult time sustaining itself,” he adds. “The contribution to the economy, not just in jobs, but dollars generated that can be invested in other projects is phenomenal.”

When asked about the challenges facing family farms through the years, McCall quickly responds, “Weather.” It’s a sentiment that still resonates today.

“One of the bottom lines of farming is

nobody can control the weather,” Hurt elaborates. “So it doesn’t matter in some respects about policy and crop insurance; those things can only make up for disasters in part. The weather makes it a high-risk business and it will be. That’s the nature of the game and they understand that. Some farmers have ruined their health worrying about the weather. It’s just part of the job, but most of them wouldn’t trade it for anything else.”

Seeds of change

As family members pursue other professional endeavors and commodity prices drop, smaller farms become less of a means to generate income and more about carrying on a legacy.

“If I was there and trying to live off of 70 acres, I couldn’t do it,” McCall explains. “It wouldn’t support the cost of a new tractor or combine.”

Hurt, an author who consulted on Ken Burns’ documentary series, “The Dust Bowl,” is a student of the economic realities of agriculture. He offers his perspective on consolidation, another factor that has impacted family farming.

“Part of the issue on consolidation is that this is the result of the success of Indiana farmers,” he contends. “High productivity, despite American agricultural policy, has often driven prices down and has created income levels that children don’t particularly want to be linked to anymore. The other thing is places like Purdue and land grant colleges in the state give young men and women opportunities they wouldn’t have had before.”

“If you look back to the 1880s,” he continues, “with the agricultural education and other forms of higher education improving in the state, it became axiomatic that if you educated your children, you would lose them. They would have training and

knowledge that would allow them to find higher paying jobs. So consolidation is one of the responses to that, along with technology.”

Yet maintaining a small family farm still has its benefits.

“We use it to supplement income,” Byrne offers. “We’re not a big ag business. We all have other jobs. It’s a way to pay for property taxes and keep the farm in the family.”

As far as the future, Hurt anticipates a continuing evolution.

“As a historian, I may be a bad person to ask about the future,” he quips. “But based on the past as prologue, I think we’ll have greater consolidation and reliance on biotechnology, and greater concerns with international trade – both problems and opportunities.”

Hurt offers that much of what happens to Indiana farmers “will be determined by forces beyond their control in terms of the world market, the price of wheat and corn in Argentina and that type of thing. It’s a high-risk business, but one that’s been successful for Indiana farmers.”

Deep roots

Like the others honored, Byrne appreciates not just the Homestead Award from the state, but those who came before him.

“Being the state’s Bicentennial, it was a good year to do it,” he remarks. “All I did was get the paperwork together, but for our ancestors to keep it in the family all these years has meant a lot to the family.”

McCall concurs, recalling her days picking up hay, feeding animals and milking cows alongside her family.

“I was really proud to (receive the award),” she concludes. “The farm was always such a big part of our lives. My grandparents were so proud that the farm had been in our family for many years.”