

Friends of Carson Road Woods, Inc.

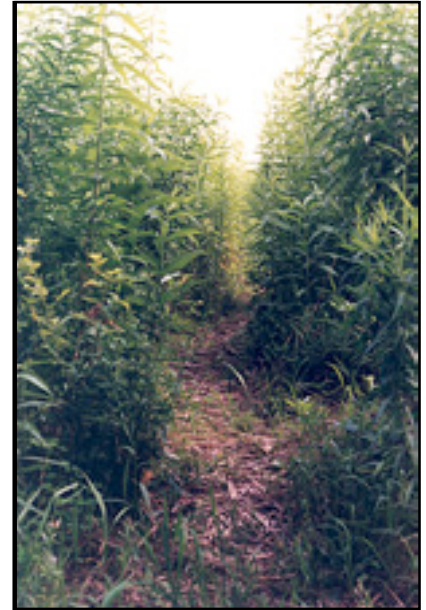
LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP, NEW JERSEY

FROM CARSON ROAD WOODS TO YOUR GROCERS AND KITCHENS *OCTOBER 6, 2005*

Distant sounds of motors and running machinery came across the fields of Carson Road Woods last week. Someone must be cutting the fields at last, I thought. This has long been expected as the fields of the Woods have badly overgrown with weeds and knotted grasses towering more than six feet in height.

Making my way to the northern fields, as I rounded the peach orchard, exhaust from a tractor's smokestack made clear that my intuition was correct. Someone had begun to cut the fields. What I hadn't expected was the armada of farm equipment brought to do the job. Arrayed along the edge of the field were mowers, spreaders, tractors, a baler, forklift, flatbed truck used to haul the wide load machinery, and a well-worn station wagon. All told, some dozen or so pieces of farm equipment necessary to cut, bale, stack, and ship the Woods' grasses to market.

What to many visitors of the Woods may appear to be useless overgrowth is actually a commodity valued by one particular farmer from New Hope, Pennsylvania. Valued enough to haul a dozen pieces of heavy machinery more than 25 miles over back roads to Carson Road Woods.



Overgrowth on the Fields

Credit: Ben Brickner



**Linda Stoops Manners
and Sam Stoops**

Credit: Bob Hunsicker

I approached the staging area where the farmer, Samuel Stoops, Jr., was working on the large tractor and his sister, Linda Stoops Manners, was organizing equipment in the station wagon. Members of the Stoops family are old-time farmers. Several have worked for such notables as Paul Whiteman, Fred Waring, Moss Hart, and many others farmers in the New Hope area.

When I arrived on the scene, Sam was struggling to hitch his tractor to the combine baler, a match not easily made. He first had to elevate the ten-ton baler, placing blocks under the jack to gain additional height, and then delicately maneuver the tractor to exactly below the baler's pin, where the hitch would be made. Linda guided this lengthy operation by visually spotting the lineup and using hand signals to correct each precision move Sam made with his tractor.

The hitch was completed by securing the connection with a redundant bolt and safety chain and connecting the baler's electric and hydraulic lines to the tractor. This was hard, backbreaking labor! Throughout the process, Sam and Linda played several different roles. They were farmers, engineers, electricians, hydraulics experts, and repairpersons all in one.



The Baler at Work
Credit: Bob Hunsicker

Once the fields were mowed, a double rake gathered the fallen grass into straight rows for the baler to follow. As the baler slowly lumbered along these rows, it scooped the cut grasses into a large internal chamber where they were stuffed into a rectangular shape. Industrial-strength twine was mechanically strung around these masses of grass, forming large bales that crawled out from the back of the unit every 200 feet or so. Once a bale had emerged in its entirety, it plopped off the back of the machine and onto the ground. Each bale weighs more than one-half ton and contains over 100 cubic feet of organic matter.

Recent crops have been sown: corn, soybean, and winter wheat. It has been many years since the fields were harvested for its grasses and overgrowth. The bales produced this year will be sold to farmers in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, “Mushroom Capital of the World,” and used for compost. The grasses will be mixed with other fibers and fertilizers to maintain a moist bed for mushrooms, which will be grown in the dark and marketed here at home and around the world.

I have seen the fields farmed many times during the past three decades, but I’ve never seen an operation of this scale.

When Carson Road Woods was preserved in 2001, a half-million dollars were contributed by the State’s Farmland Preservation Program. As a condition of this donation, ±35 acres of the Woods must forever remain open and available for agricultural use. Today that has led to the harvesting of the fields’ grass. Next week, the planting of winter wheat by a second farmer. Next year, maybe corn or soybean or...?



Bales of Hay on Carson Road Woods
Credit: Bob Hunsicker

Carson Road Woods has an agricultural history that spans three hundred years (and still counting). Many of those who have grown up in central New Jersey—children especially—may never have experienced up close the activities that put food on our tables. The events of the past week, and those that will follow during the next month, are yet another way in which Carson Road Woods is an asset to our community.

Sincerely,
Bob Hunsicker, president
Friends of Carson Road Woods

Please note: agricultural activities should continue most afternoons for the next week or two. Directions to the preserve and a map of its hiking trails can be found at, <http://www.carsonroadwoods.org/map.html>.