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Gentleman Farms

OF THE NORTH SHORE

BY SUE MASARACCHIA-ROBERTS

While many North Shore residents pass these historic family farms, most may not know of the history they hold – from a farm founded by the creator of Chicago’s “L” system, to appearances by cowboy film stars to truck farming experts speaking at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, these local farms hold a lot of history...



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ELAWA FARM

Between Lake Forest and Lake Bluff lie the remnants of a pastoral way of life. Elawa Farm is one of the few remaining well-preserved “gentlemen’s” farms around.

Once part of an estate owned by meat packing magnate A. Watson Armour, it was considered his country home. It spanned 125 acres and was created for his pleasure. New York architect Alfred Hopkins, a leading “estate farm” expert, designed the complex. The estate is laid out symmetrically, with all the necessary farming functions separated, an example of “farm group” architecture that includes four courtyards and a formal garden.

On this property, the Armour home was to be designed by David Adler, who designed the two gatehouse wings and a garage, however, the home was never built. . A tunnel, meant to protect the family from weather, connects the two gatehouses, which were used as a single family residence.

Elawa’s name is derived from combining the names of Elsa and A Watson Armour and – was, for a time, also referred to as LeWa Farm for Leilia and Wallace Carroll, who purchased the property in 1954. Wallace’s father, Barry Carroll, grew up on the property and Carroll family members remained on the property until its sale in 1998.

HAWTHORN MELLODY FARM

Many area baby boomers remember childhood trips to Hawthorn Melody Farm, but few know its roots.

Like Elawa’s Armour, Samuel Insull was also a gentleman farmer. A former apprentice to Thomas Edison, Insull was instrumental in creating Commonwealth Edison, General Electric and local railroad lines, including Chicago’s “L” system. In 1914, he built a home designed by noted architect Benjamin Marshall, in what is now Vernon Hills. Renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen was hired to design the grounds; however, Insull lost his fortune and his estate, along with his reputation, in 1932 and left the country. The long-vacant property was sold, in 1937, to John and Julia Cuneo.

“This was the era of well-to-do businessmen who moved north and built big farms,” said John Byrne, the Cuneo operations manager and historian who worked for the Cuneo estate for 33 years. Byrne’s grandfather worked for Insull and his father worked for the Cuneos for 40 years. Local area farms were absorbed into the various gentlemen farm estates. “Armour began the trend, [securing] more than 4,000 acres. Cuneo, at his peak, owned a little over 2,000 acres.”

Making his fortune as owner of the very successful Cuneo Printing Press, Cuneo loved to live lavishly and never overlooked opportunities to make more money. “Even though he thought of farming as a hobby, he always did things right,” said Byrne. “He learned [everything] about farming.” As a

created. Wildlife Discovery Center (WDC) curator Rob Carmichael explained, "The farm features a beautiful garden, a market and a kitchen where produce grown from the garden is prepared for sale."

Located near the property is the Middlefork Savanna. Executive Director, Joanne Miller, explained, "[Its] the highest tall grass savanna in the U.S. [Our] award-winning nature center indoor/outdoor exhibit is home to [one] of the most spectacular collections of reptiles, birds of prey and other animals. It emphasizes global conservation. There's really something for everyone to enjoy whether that's gardening, shopping, cooking classes, hiking, biking, and in our case, enjoying the amazing animals." She added, "We follow organic practices for our vegetables and sell them, along with our flowers and kitchen-baked items, three days a week."

Current Lake Forest Preservation Foundation President Paul Bergmann said, "This is very much an operating farm. Our organic produce and [WDC] are among [many] components that make [Elawa] really special."



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along the North Shore.

Cuneo named it Hawthorn-Melody, to acknowledge the merger of an Insu dairy and one that belonged to Armour. In 1949, Cuneo built a state-of-the-art milking parlor with a viewing gallery that became so popular, "people parked up and down Milwaukee Avenue on Sundays to watch them milk," said Byrne. Cuneo capitalized on its popularity as a destination and built a children's zoo and other attractions. A steam engine ride and 'Hawthorn Gulch Frontier Town' were opened in 1955; actor William Boyd (playing fictional cowboy hero Hopalong Cassidy) participated in opening day. The park offered entertainment like pony and Conestoga wagon rides and Wil West shows. Celebrities like Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis and Nat King Cole appeared in ads. The farm became such a popular tourist attraction, drew more than 400,000 visitors each summer.

Cuneo sold the dairy in 1968 and closed the park in 1970. He developed Hawthorn Mall, among other like properties. By Cuneo's death in 1977, only 175 acres remained in his trust.

The remaining estate exists today as a museum gifted to Loyola University Chicago. However, for those who had the chance to visit, the farm lives on as a pleasant memory.



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Wagner Farm



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Long before the gentleman farmers began migrating north, German families immigrated to the North Shore. In the 1850s, Johann Wagner's family was among them. By 1898, Wagner owned approximately 91 acres along what are now Lake and Wagner Road. In 1902, his youngest son, Thomas, bought a 40-acre dairy and truck farm now known as Wagner Farm.

Thomas Wagner served as Northfield Township Road Commissioner and owned a gravel business, which he passed on to his sons. Of the five Wagner children, three remained on the farm their entire lives. In the 1980s, the local Citizens Organized for the Wagners (COWS) campaigned nationally to save the farm. When Thomas' youngest child died in 1997, her will specified the farm should be sold and its proceeds placed in trust for Our Lady of Perpetual Help

Church in Glenview. The church, which her parents helped found, sold the farm's remaining 18 acres to the park district. All the buildings from the Wagner farm remain intact today. This farm tells their story. "This is one of the only museums in the U.S. that talks about truck farming," said Todd Price, the farm's director. "This is all about where food comes from— interpretively and educationally. This is our mission. We like to involve people, [so] groups like the 4H are a perfect fit."

Having a history, education and public service background, 11 years ago Price created the Clovers, a local 4H group. "4H members becom

They learn to work, to get dirty, to keep records, to forecast and to deal with markets. It's great for kids to take ownership and learn these lessons. This emulates a real farm in every way." He added, "The animals are well taken care of."

The farm serves the community. People can take classes or attend an event – like the "historic dinners" program in the winter, or participate in a community garden. It also offers a "ground breaking program" with the North Suburban Special Education Department (NSSED), which has its own garden and alternative onsite school. "A museum division in a park district is unusual," said Price, "but Glenview feels it is worthwhile." His program is so unique, the farm team was asked to speak about truck farming at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC, two years ago. "The farm has a lot of great little stories," Price added. "Our mission is to let people know and appreciate where food comes from and better understand our history and heritage. We think it is important."

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