



agriculture

today



It's so much more than just participating at county fairs

By Sharon Stone

4-H is the largest youth development organization in Michigan, with more than 200,000 youth between the ages of 5 and 19 participating. It is part of the Michigan State University Extension.

Jim MacCaughan of Fenton has been active involved with 4-H his

entire life. His older brother showed chickens and rabbits, his dad was involved and now his four kids are involved.

Some people tend to think that 4-H activities center around county fairs. MacCaughan said, "4-H is way deeper than county fairs. It's about family. It's something I grew up with. Parents are

involved." He said showing animals at a county fair is just a small aspect of the 4-H program.

Years ago, students were able to take home economics courses that taught sewing, cooking and more. He said those life skills aren't being taught in schools and if you don't

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Michigan FFA is growing future leaders

Prepares students to fulfill the growing diversity and new opportunities in the industry of agriculture

By Sharon Stone

With nearly half of the student population enrolled in the Future Farmers of America (FFA) program at Byron High School, it's easily deemed a successful educational program.

FFA was founded by a group of young farmers in 1928. Their mission was to prepare future generations for the challenges of feeding a growing population. They taught us that agriculture is more than planting and harvesting — it's a science, it's a business and it's an art.

FFA is a dynamic youth organization that changes lives and prepares members for premier leadership, personal growth and career success through agricultural education. FFA develops members' potential and helps them discover their talent through hands-on experiences, which give members the tools to achieve real-world success.

Members are future chemists, veterinarians, government officials, entrepreneurs, bankers, international business leaders, teachers and premier professionals in many career fields.

Tate Forbush teaches the FFA program at Byron High School. Since the school district welcomed the FFA program in 1934, Tate is just its fifth advisor. He said the program was tough to maintain during World War II, but since

that time, it's been stable and holding its own.

Right now, 110 of the total 260 high school students are taking FFA classes.

Forbush said while 4-H Clubs are community based, the FFA program is school based with leadership and agriculture education.

The three components are classroom time, hands-on experiences and leadership. He said all three are important. Byron offers six classes in agriculture education so that the students can take them all four years.

Forbush said the old saying of "cows, plow and sows" has evolved. FFA has the land and equipment to farm, manage crops, and to learn safety. They

have begun a five-week contest for raising chickens to compete against other FFA chapters. The students will learn experiments and compiling data.

The group has baby pigs (sows) that are three weeks old. Forbush said the students will care for them until August when they feature them at the Shiawassee County Fair. "It's a great experience of caring," he said.

Other activities include maintaining a greenhouse, planting hanging plants and flats for a plant sale this spring, landscaping, as well as agriculture business, personal finance, credit, loans investing and marketing courses.

FFA classes are appropriate for every student. Forbush said

“It’s definitely a lot of fun and it’s made my high school experience better.”

Jenna Anderson

Byron High School junior,
FFA member

Byron's program is evenly divided with girls and boys. He's noticed the boys are more hands on while the girls are taking on leadership roles.

Jenna Anderson, a junior at Byron High School, has been active with FFA since the seventh grade. "I've learned a lot of leadership skills,"

she said. "I used to be shy, but with opportunities for contests, I've gotten more outgoing."

Anderson raised five pigs and two goats. She also has a Continental Giant rabbit, which weighs approximately 30 pounds. She plans to show it at the Shiawassee County Fair this summer. The pandemic affected the program more at the beginning prompting fundraisers to be canceled. She said it's better now.

She sees herself going into a con-



Jenna Anderson, a junior at Byron High School, has been active with FFA since the seventh grade. She's raised pigs, goats, rabbits, chickens and turkeys. Submitted photo

servation type of profession, maybe a conservation officer with the DNR. She's also exploring options at Michigan State University since it has a well known agriculture program.

"It's definitely a lot of fun and it's made my high school experience better," she said.

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No shut downs on a dairy farm

Gramer Farms in Deerfield Township adapts, grows despite a year-long pandemic

By Sharon Stone

For 66 years, the Gramer family of Deerfield Township has owned and operated a dairy farm. They currently own about 600 acres and farm on a total of 1,200 acres.

Albert Gramer Jr. said right now they have anywhere from 475 to 500 cows ranging from one day old to full grown.

Gramer said the dairy farm is run by family. From his parents Albert Sr. and Tammy Gramer and his uncle, Roy Gramer and a host of siblings, cousins and children, the farm produces approximately 15,000 to 16,000 pounds of milk per day.

Gramer said he and his brother Matt

Gramer do most these days since his parents and uncle are semi-retired and live south during the winter months. His sons, Jack, a freshman at Linden High School and Owen, 10, work weekends doing whatever is needed. His 8-year-old daughter Evalyn and his wife, Courtney, are the calf feeders. Also working the dairy farm are cousin Josh Ochs, family member Jacob Wright and one non-family member Adam Lott.

The Times interviewed Albert and Matt Gramer in 2019 when there was much in the news about milk prices. Currently, he said milk prices have not really changed in the past four years. He said milk prices usually follow gasoline prices when they go up. "We're not really seeing it. We'll be okay," he said. They can receive anywhere from \$12 to \$15 per 100 pounds of milk produced. While consumers

“Helping out is a huge part of us.”

Albert Gramer Jr.
Gramer Dairy Farm of
Deerfield Township



The Gramer Farms in Deerfield Township has between 475 and 500 dairy cows. The family run dairy farm produces 15,000 to 16,000 pounds of milk per day.

Submitted photo

buy milk by the gallon, farmers are paid by the pound.

To keep costs down, Gramer said they grow all of their own feed. That is typically the biggest cost for a dairy farm. He said everything is done in-house.

All of the milk produced on the Gramer farm goes to the Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA), a co-op that they belong to in Ovid. From there, it all depends on supply and demand. For example, when schools are

in session, milk is cartoned and shipped to the schools. Heavier creamers go to where it's needed.

And if cows could talk, they'd tell you that they didn't notice any pandemic.

When asked about the COVID-19 pandemic and running the dairy farm, Gramer said, "Our lives don't change." He said they did stay together and kept to themselves to run the farm, but nothing changes for a farm. "You have to

See **GRAMER DAIRY** on 25



Owen Gramer, 10, works around the dairy farm on weekends. Here he is using a Bobcat to push feed up to the cows. Submitted photo

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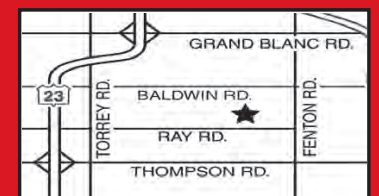
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Granges

Historically, they have served as a center of rural life in many agricultural communities

Compiled by Sharon Stone

Local granges serve as a center of rural life in many agricultural communities. People who live outside such communities may be unfamiliar with granges, including what they are.

The most basic definition of a grange is an outlying farm or land with a manor building on the property. When first developed in 12th century Britain, granges were properties that may have been owned by a lord, who chose to live on the property or leased it to others. Other granges were held by the church, mainly by monasteries.

The grange definition and system was modified when the concept was brought to North America. After the Civil War in the United States, Oliver Kelley, the commissioner of the Department of



The Atlas Grange Hall on Perry Road in Atlas is on the National Register of Historic Places. *Submitted photo*

Agriculture, realized while touring the region that poor farmers in the South bore the brunt of the war's devastation. Kelley noted outdated farming practices that were disorganized and largely ineffectual. He considered an organization that could bring farmers together across the country with a spirit of mutual agricultural cooperation.

Out of this idea the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (also called The Grange) was established as a nonprofit organization in 1867. The goal was helping rural American families with a strong emphasis on issues related

to agriculture.

The first grange (Grange #1) was founded in 1868 in Fredonia, New York. Other granges soon sprung up across the country.

The organization operates on four tiers: community, county or district, state, and national level. It is the oldest American agricultural advocacy group with a national scope.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., it has membership in the hundreds of thousands.

According to The Grange, their mission is to "strengthen individuals, families and communities through grassroots action, service, education, advocacy, and agriculture awareness."

In addition to agricultural advocacy, The Grange has been involved with a number of legislative and practical initiatives. For example, it currently is aiming to find ways to reduce the cost of Medicare as well as helping to reform the U.S. Postal Service.

It also is advocating for open auctions of spectrum frequencies used for wireless technology to provide greater access to high-speed wireless technology to rural areas.

Various grange halls and centers are located across the country, and these facilities host events and provide gathering spots for families.

Tracing their origins to 12th century Britain, granges remain a central component of agricultural life in the 21st century.

Michigan is home to one grange, the Atlas Grange Hall in Atlas. It's on Perry Road and has served as a Grange Hall, a town hall and a post office. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982. According to landmarkhunter.com, its period of significant was 1850 to 1874.

Michigan 4-H introduces virtual embryology series

To support teachers and parents

Spring is the perfect time to introduce youth to embryology, the study of the development of embryos.

Michigan State University Extension is making this easier than ever before through its newly launched Michigan 4-H Embryology Course, a free online course.

The program is located on the D2L (Desire2Learn) platform. By participating in this course, students will be able to:

- Identify the parts of an egg and their functions
- Explain what is required to hatch an egg, how it hatches naturally and artificially
- Describe different methods to observe a developing embryo and different stages of development
- List what a chick needs to live and how to care for them
- Explain how record keeping is important in science

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GRAMER DAIRY

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milk the cows,” he said. “We still have to do everything. We have to feed and clean them. Selling milk, it’s all essential. It’s dairy. There are no shut downs.”

Trucks did come to the farm every day to pick up milk and this supports the five families running the business.

Gramer has seen pros and cons with using the internet more for Zoom meetings and ordering parts. While doing things online saves time and fuel, the in-person connection is lost on Zoom meetings to learn about new products and procedures. He’s also seen the down side of kids in general not interacting with other kids.

Having a high-schooler and a 10-year-old, he’s seen the school closures first hand. He added that his son, Jack, started back in person four days a week beginning March 8 and they were grateful for that. His younger son and daughter have gone more in-person, but alternating schedules with other students have kept some of their cousins missing each other at school.

With the farm, Gramer said they feel fortunate that the kids were all out interacting with family members and helping as usual.

“Helping out is a huge part of us,” Gramer said. “Family is number one.” He said because they are all family, when one part of the family needs a vacation, the others are willing to help out. “We (Albert and Matt) alternate weekends to get time off. We do spring break. We still go out,” he said.



Brothers Albert Gramer Sr. and Roy Gramer established the Gramer Farms 66 years ago. **Submitted photo**



Cows at the Gramer Farms in Deerfield Township eat feed, which is grown on the family’s farm. **Submitted photo**

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4-H

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have a family member to teach you those things, where do you turn? He said this is where 4-H comes in. Girls and boys can learn all of those life skills.

MacCaughan always enjoyed the opportunity to go to MSU for Expo Days, where kids could stay a few days and take classes. There would be 4-H kids from across Michigan there.

MacCaughan was very involved with showing birds, such as chickens, pigeons and waterfowl. When he was just 16, he was approached at a fair to be a judge. That took his interest to the next level. The pay was next to nothing, but he realized judges judge for the love of the kids.

Currently, he has a couple hundred chickens and between 100 and 150 pigeons. All four of his kids, ranging in age from 10 to 16, are active with 4-H, which makes for busy days when you add in sports that they participate in.

"It's unbelievable what 4-H can do for kids," he said. Without realizing they are learning how municipal meetings work, the kids are attending meetings with an agenda where topics are proposed, dis-



(Left photo) Grace MacCaughan and her brother, Leo, hold their champion pigeons. (Right photo) Isabella MacCaughan shows off her sewing award, which are golden scissors. Submitted photo



cussed and voted on.

For kids that don't have access to farms or livestock, MacCaughan said they can learn to show dogs and cats. "4-H teaches kids responsibility. That's the goal, to make good, productive citizens of the U.S."

If you or your children would like to get involved with 4-H, every county in Michigan has MSU Extension agents that can help. You could check out Michigan 4-H on Facebook. Locally, MacCaughan said those interested could stop by Tractor Supply Company (TSC) off Owen Road or Family Farm and Home on Silver Parkway to find out more about 4-H. He's at Family Farm and Home so much the employees know his name. He said he's also taught clinics there.

"4-H, it's beyond just a county fair," he said.

For more information on joining a local 4-H club, visit canr.msu.edu/4h.

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Work ethic, drive make for successful farm

■ Dwight Eichelberg shares history of farm and popular Eichelberg corn, pumpkins

By Sharon Stone

You'd be hard pressed to find someone from the tri-county area who hasn't had an ear of Eichelberg Farm corn. Since 1978 when he first started planting corn on his Linden Road property in Fenton Township, Dwight Eichelberg, 77, has gained a reputation for himself and his expanding vegetable stand.

Last year he farmed on 18 to 20 acres. He's using more land this year, up to 25 acres to keep up with demand. Last year's growing season was up 50 See **FARM** on 28

“If you have no drive, forget it. It's a business. You've got to stay on top of things, deal with the weather.”

Dwight Eichelberg
Eichelberg Farm owner



(Above) Dwight Eichelberg, owner of Eichelberg Farm in Fenton Township, shows off his pumpkin patch. (Below) Eichelberg repairs a fence to help keep the critters out of his cornfield.



A hearty and colorful display of extra long handled pumpkins can be seen from the road as you drive by Eichelberg Farm in the fall.



(Above) Dwight Eichelberg loads up a tractor full of sweet corn. (Below) Second only to the sweet corn are the tomatoes grown at Eichelberg Farm.



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FINANCES

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or gym membership). If money is tight, cancel non-essential subscription services temporarily. You can always restart them when things get better. The silver lining of this pandemic is that since most of us are practicing social distancing to minimize contagion, you may already be saving money by not going out.

If your credit card debt is high, see if any of your existing cards are offering low interest rates on balance transfers. Transfer the balance from the highest card to a lower interest card and pay more than the minimum whenever possible. Also, until you have paid off the debt, only use your credit card for emergencies.

Another important task is to beef

up your emergency savings or start an emergency savings account if you haven't done so. Ideally, you want to save at least three months of your take-home pay. You can start with as little as \$5 a week. Simply save \$5 consistently each week and when you think you can add a little more, increase your deposit. To make this easier, set up an automatic transfer from your checking account. It's easy to do on Dort Financial Credit Union's website DortOnline.org, but if you need help, just contact them at 800-521-3796.

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FARM

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percent and Eichelberg attributes that increase to more people cooking at home because of the pandemic.

Last summer, there were days when his parking lot wasn't big enough for all of the customers.

Eichelberg's sweet corn is the number one crop, followed closely by tomatoes and pumpkins. They also grow green beans, squash and peppers. Eichelberg's extra long handled pumpkins in all sorts of colors are his favorite items to grow and sell.

Eichelberg has not always been a farmer. He was a teacher for Flint schools for 31 years. He said one of his best art students was Terry Crews, actor, activist and artist among other things.

He and his wife Marlene moved out to the country (Fenton Township) in the late '70s and he retired from teaching in 1996. His vegetable farming started small and has grown steadily to what it is today.

In the late '80s, he installed an irrigation system and in 2002, fencing was added.

When he first started selling sweet corn, it was 65 cents per dozen. He will be selling a dozen for \$7 this year. He said farms on the west side of the state are selling corn for \$10 per dozen and in Rhode Island, corn is selling for \$12 a dozen.

It takes Eichelberg and a handful of people to maintain the farm. His daughter and two sons have helped over the years, but he does not expect any family to take over Eichelberg Farm when he wants to retire. Eichelberg admits to doing most of the work and doing a lot of picking and spending time working on his knees.

He planted a small two-row section of sweet corn insulated with plastic sheeting. He doesn't sell this corn,

but gives it to his closest friends and family. He will start planting corn to sell around April 15. Staggered planting will continue throughout the summer to keep the corn coming in. It takes between 70 to 80 days for corn to be ready for picking.

Eichelberg grows 10 varieties of corn and uses only the best varieties he can find. His used to have a favorite that came from Peru, but it's no longer available. He said all of his varieties are "pretty good."

Being a small farm, technology over the years has focused on fertilizers, which has improved and become more specific to needs. Fungicides have become more available, less toxic and more organic. No GMOs (genetically modified organisms) are used at Eichelberg Farm.

One product Eichelberg is excited to test out this year is for bird control, which has always been a major problem. It's a \$20,000 experimental machine that interrupts the communication between flocks of birds and they fly away, with no harm to them. "The bird pattern has gotten better, but some years it was horrible," he said.

Eichelberg is happy with how his extra long handled pumpkins have become so colorful and popular. He's said he's proud of the fall decorations he has displayed at the Fenton Township hall. He said last year's harvest was the best and he's noticed older people really tend to like all of the different colors of pumpkins.

Looking ahead to this season, he said he can already work the ground since it's been so dry and we've had a lot of sunshine. He compares the current weather to that of South Dakota. He remembers the flooding of 2019 when he was nearly drowned out and couldn't start his planting until May of that year. "That was a horrible, rough year," he said.

When asked if he would advise anyone to get into farming, Eichelberg said that person would definitely have to have the right work ethic and drive. "It's a lot of work, with books to keep," he said. "If you have no drive, forget it. It's a business. You've got to stay on top of things, deal with the weather."

When Eichelberg Farm is open this spring, summer and fall, be sure to check out all the vegetables as well as the colorful pumpkins.

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