REMEMBERING RUETENIK GARDENS

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REMEMBERING RUETENIK GARDENS

PURPOSE

This booklet is an attempt, in words and pictures, to preserve the memory of Ruetenik Gardens, a large vegetable farm that operated in northern Trumbull and southern Ashtabula Counties for approximately 50 years, from 1925-1975. It has been over 30 years since the farm ended production, and a time will come when there will be no one left who recalls its existence. It is hoped that this document will serve to retain a small portion of our local history. Although it is not a scholarly account, it was written with an effort to be as accurate as possible. There are a few references to published works, but the majority of the content, collected from several sources, is based primarily on memory, and any errors of fact are unintentional.

Tim Rodgers
Hubbard, Ohio
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- Harry Lucik – Photograph of original Ruetenik Gardens packaging
- Tim Rodgers – Rodgers family photographs

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- Bill and Virginia Ruetenik Phillippi and family
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- Tim Rodgers
Sources consulted:

-The Western Reserve Chronicle, December 12, 1912.
-The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers website (http://www.lrp.usace.army.mil/rec/lakes/mosquito.htm)
-The Orwell Newsletter, February 2, 1950.
-Additional unidentifiable newspaper clipping (possibly from predecessors of the Warren Tribune Chronicle) from early 20th century.

A note about the pictures:

The quality of the photographs used in this document varies greatly. Some are from old newspapers, some were taken with old box cameras, some with digital cameras, and several were actually made from slides and old 16mm movies.
REMEMBERING RUETENIK GARDENS

For nearly half a century, a large vegetable growing operation existed in northern Trumbull County that grew and shipped tons of produce to nearby cities and, at times, employed scores of local residents. The farm, known as Ruetenik Gardens, was located in the northeast section of North Bloomfield Township and extended northward into Orwell Township in southern Ashtabula County, covering approximately 1,200 acres. Figure 1 shows the farm's approximate location.

Figure 1 - The shaded area shows the approximate location of Ruetenik Gardens in northern North Bloomfield Township and southern Orwell Township. (Not done to scale)

Throughout its history, this farm produced dry and green onions, head and leaf lettuce, celery, cabbage, spinach, turnips, parsnips, carrots, cauliflower, and rhubarb, as well as several other crops. Ruetenik's also grew Christmas trees for many years. Typical crops grown in northeast Ohio are corn, wheat, oats, and soybeans, but a special type of rich, organic soil found in this area, referred to as "muck," allowed truck crops to be raised successfully. The following brief account, gathered from both formal and informal sources, will give a little history, background, and information about what was once one of the most successful businesses in the area. It is an attempt to preserve a little local history. Where possible, sources are cited and every effort has been made to be accurate.
A SWAMP, A FOREST, AND A DITCH

The history of Ruetenik Gardens actually begins with geologic events that formed the topography of northeast Ohio. The area of North Bloomfield Township (and Orwell) which the farm occupied was rendered remarkably flat by the actions of the glaciers that receded thousands of years ago. Because the area was so flat and therefore poorly drained, areas of standing water were formed that were conducive to the growth of various types of plant life. One such plant was the tamarack tree, a deciduous pine that grows tall and straight in swamplike areas. According to the National Audubon Society, Native Americans used the tamarack's roots to sew birch bark into canoes, and colonists used the roots for joining ship ribs to deck timbers. Historical maps dating from the mid nineteenth century, such as the one below, show much of eastern North Bloomfield Township marked as the "Tamarack Swamp."

Figure 2 - This mid-1800s map of Bloomfield Township shows the "Tamarack Swamp" in the shaded areas at the right (east). This map, along with similar maps of the rest of the townships in Trumbull County, can be viewed at the Local History Department of the Warren-Trumbull County Public Library, Warren, Ohio.

Later, this area was referred to as the "Bloomfield Swamp" and eventually as just the "Swamp." Finally, local residents began calling it the "Muck." According to local historian Harriet Taylor Upton in her account of Bloomfield Township in A Twentieth Century History of Trumbull County, Ohio (Lewis Publishing, Chicago, 1909), this swamp area was virtually impenetrable. Taylor writes: "The word 'swamp' drove terror to the hearts of most children, because there were dreadful tales told of men and animals getting into quicksand and being drawn down to death. In the early days, the Bloomfield
Swamp, in some places, could not be crossed even by horses, but now these swamps are so drained that in some seasons of the year there is no suggestion of swamp. In the early days, huckleberries and whortleberries were found in great abundance here and here pigeons flocked in great numbers and were killed for food. People in the southern part of the county often saw large flocks going over to the Bloomfield swamps."

Local legends grew about the dense growth harboring rattlesnakes and quicksand, and stories were told about people who entered the swamp, never to return. There were also stories about Native Americans who lived on areas in the swamp called "islands" and were able to navigate the swamp in search of the plentiful game. In 19th Century Voices of Trumbull County, Ohio (Closson Press, 1993, Grace Calvin Allison, ed.) there are oral histories that tell of the swamp’s connection to wild pigeons, the Underground Railroad, and there is even a remarkable story about a young girl traveling on horseback who was lost in the swamp for five days and was later rescued.

At some point, possibly as late as the mid 1800s, the tamarack forest disappeared, possibly due to fire, leaving behind a swampy area resembling a peat bog. This bog contained a rich, black organic soil that had been produced by the decomposition of generations of swamp vegetation. The Swamp was mostly ignored and considered of little value to the young community. On December 12, 1912, a newspaper article in the Western Reserve Chronicle announced that this was about to change. The paper reported that a group of investors, mostly from the Cleveland area, had "secured possession of the land east of Lockwood known as the Bloomfield Swamp" with the intention of draining it in preparation for growing truck crops. Approximately 6,000 acres were acquired in northern Bloomfield and southern Orwell Townships. The Bloomfield Development Company, headed by J.L. Free, hired the Central Dredging Company of Cleveland to dig a ditch about 30 feet wide and seven feet deep. This ditch was to run from south of the "center road" between Bloomfield and Greene, north to Orwell, and when finished would cover about seven total miles. A raft and a boat house for the workers were constructed, and a large, steam-powered dredging machine was assembled, and work was begun (see Figures 3 & 4). The estimated cost of draining the Swamp was $30,000.00, and work was projected to take less than a year. The newspaper article goes into considerable detail, describing the dredging machine and the boat house. The reporter even interviewed the housekeeper/cook, Mrs. H.O. Rush, who related stories about feeding the hungry workers.

Figures 3 & 4 - At left is the steam powered dredge used in the construction of the Dredge Ditch. At right is the Boat House where ditch workers lived (from Western Reserve Chronicle, 12-12-12).
One especially interesting passage from the article states: “The Bloomfield Swamp has been an institution among the citizens of that portion of Trumbull County as long as the oldest inhabitant can remember, and he [Mr. G.W. Shively, the superintendent of the project] even recalls his forefathers speaking of it. Many are the interesting stories that have been handed down from one generation to another concerning the swamp. It is the general belief that it was at one time a lake, but the rising of the water has brought in earth, and the trees, shrubbery, and grass have grown, withered and died, all of which has tended to raise the level of the swamp and drain the water into only a few portions of the swamp. In the spring of the year when the spring rains come, and the frost comes up out of the ground, there is considerably more water in the swamp than there is at the present time” (Western Reserve Chronicle, 12-12-12). The article goes on to state that the muck soil at the northern end near Orwell measured from five to seven feet deep and was covered with cattails and tall grass.

From this same article, we learn that “Stories of Indians are also connected with the swamp. In the southern part, about two miles from the center road, there are a number of islands, the largest of which is known as Mound Island. It is so termed by reason of the fact that on the island there are located a number of mounds, built saucer-like, having a diameter of about 40 feet across the top and about five feet high. Tradition has it that the mounds were used by the Indians and that they built fires in the center of them and then slept around on the edge, and thus kept warm. The mounds have long since been dug up with the hope that some Indian relics would be found, but the search availed little. In one mound, the searchers found a number of huge logs laid criss-cross over one another, and underneath they found what they thought were human bones. The logs were so large and were so laid that it was impossible to move them and further search was not made. The islands are composed of gravel and it is there that a number of years ago gravel of an excellent quantity was taken out and used for commercial purposes“ (Western Reserve Chronicle, 12-12-12).

On a side note that may be of interest to current residents of Trumbull County, this Dredge Ditch was constructed to drain northward into Rock Creek, the Grand River, and finally Lake Erie. Most of the creeks and streams that lie near the ditch, however, including Mosquito Creek that drains Mosquito Creek Lake and parts of the Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area, drain to the south, entering the Mahoning River and eventually, the Ohio and then the Mississippi. Water in the ditch moves very slowly, and it is easy to see why this was an ideal place for the formation of a swamp. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers states on their website (http://www.lrp.usace.army.mil/rec/lakes/mosquito.htm) that: “A feature unique to Mosquito Creek Lake is its use of an uncontrolled natural spillway. The natural spillway is located at the upper end of the lake in a low-lying reach of the Mosquito Creek-Grand River Divide. The elevation of the spillway at the point of the divide is such that if an impoundment of floodwaters should fill the lake to an elevation of 904 feet above sea level, the southerly outflow of the lake would be reversed. The outflow would then be discharged through the natural spillway into a tributary of the Grand River, which flows north into Lake Erie.” In all probability, much of that “discharge” would be through the Dredge Ditch. The ditch still carries water today and is visible especially from State Route 87, just east of Penniman Road and from Moore Road in Orwell Township. The Dredge Ditch, sometimes referred to as the Canal, Snyder’s Ditch, or Snyder’s Creek was completed, probably by the end of 1913, and work began to clear the swamp of growth and stumps to expose the soil so that farming could take place. It was obvious that successful farming would depend on the efficiency of the ditch to remove water from what had been a swamp. Today, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Wildlife, controls over 9,000 acres near what would be the southern extremity of the Dredge Ditch—the Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area.

According to old, unidentifiable newspaper clippings from the early or mid 1920s (possibly the Western Reserve Chronicle or Tribune Chronicle – exact dates unknown), the newly drained land was
divided into sections and rented to individual farmers. Crops raised included potatoes, celery, asparagus, strawberries, spinach, head lettuce, and especially onions. In fact, according to one article, the area came to be known as the “Onion Patch.” Produce was trucked from the farm, and eventually, a rail siding was constructed on the Pennsylvania Railroad, which lay about a half a mile to the west. According to these newspaper reports, as many as 130 car loads of produce were shipped in a good year. The articles talk about how land that once sold for $10 per acre was selling for $500 per acre and how farmers who rented the land were making substantial profits from the muck. Eventually, this area came to be known as the Ohio Muck Farming Company, and although many of the 6,000 acres originally purchased by the investors had been sold, about 1,000 acres had been retained.

From the 1920s to the 1950s, this farm operated successfully with a number of directors and under several different names. In the 1930s and 1940s, Fisher Foods of Cleveland owned the property and operated it under the name “The Orwell Gardens Company” (*Orwell Newsletter*, Feb. 2, 1950). One of the directors of this company was Martin Ruetenik, a prominent figure in agriculture in the Cleveland area, noted for his pioneer work in growing vegetables under glass. Ruetenik, referred to as the “Celery King,” was a member of the Ohio Agricultural Hall of Fame, president of Lincoln Savings & Banking Company, and the first mayor of Brooklyn Heights. (In Brooklyn Heights, a Cleveland suburb, the Ohio Historical Society has erected a marker at 826 East Schaaf Road that recognizes Ruetenik’s contributions to greenhouse growing.) The Ruetenik family had been in farming since 1883, when the Reverend Herman J. Ruetenik, Martin’s father, started a small farm in the Cleveland area.

**RUETENIK GARDENS IS ESTABLISHED**

According to information provided by “The Seventy-fifth Anniversary Brochure,” printed by the Ruetenik family in 1958, Martin Ruetenik occasionally found it necessary to travel from Cleveland to the farm in the Swamp to check on operations of the Ohio Muck Farming Company. At this point, however, the local Ruetenik Gardens still did not exist. On many of these journeys, Martin’s son, Howard, would accompany him to the farm. Howard also had a keen interest in agriculture, and when he learned that some 225 acres just south of the Ohio Muck Farming Company in North Bloomfield Township were to become available, much of it muck land, he became even more interested. Howard was able to purchase that property in 1926 at sheriff’s sale. He immediately set about testing the soil and laying plans for fertilizing, liming, and planting that spring. Using implements temporarily borrowed from his father’s Cleveland farm, he started the North Bloomfield/Orwell Ruetenik Gardens. (Note: At one time, there were four separate farms known as Ruetenik Gardens, owned and operated by members of the Ruetenik family. In addition to the farm in North Bloomfield/Orwell, there were farms in Cleveland, Wooster, and Vermilion. The Cleveland farm was the oldest, dating back to 1883.)

The “Anniversary Brochure” tells that at first, Howard Ruetenik and his employees were busy building a solid roadway into the farm, clearing additional land, developing more drainage ditches, and eventually installing permanent drainage tiles. When the property was purchased, there were two families living on the farm in small houses, and these families were retained under contract to grow onions on shares. Ruetenik raised onions and carrots in the early years, and the acreage that was not muck soil, referred to as upland, was planted in Christmas trees. Chinese cabbage, cauliflower, and rhubarb were also grown in the muck. Eventually, Chinese cabbage and cauliflower were dropped because of club root disease, and when rhubarb “forcing” was no longer profitable, production of that crop was discontinued as well. Two greenhouses were built to start celery plants each spring, and permanent irrigation lines were added after the successful drilling of a large-volume well in 1935. Packing rooms were built starting in 1929, and many additions and modifications followed over the
years. Two large (15,000 bushels each) walk-in coolers were built in the 1930s. Much of the equipment used to harvest, wash, and package produce was designed and built on the farm. A crop sprayer was purchased and modified to meet the farm’s needs, and in the 1950s, a liquid fertilizer plant and liquid fertilizer spreader were constructed. (A number of pictures of the early years of the farm appear later.)

Howard Ruetenik continued the family tradition of agricultural innovator. He designed and engineered much of the equipment that served his farm over the years, especially the equipment used to harvest and wash root crops. He implemented a profit sharing plan for employees similar to one developed by his father. Full-time employees were allowed to contribute to the financial structure of the farm, and their wages were considered the same as capital in the yearly distribution of profits. He directly oversaw farm operations from the 1920s to the 1950s, constantly looking for ways to improve the efficiency of planting, harvesting, packaging, and shipping vegetables. For many years, he and his wife and four daughters lived in Orwell where Howard served as village mayor for a time. In about 1955, the management of the farm was turned over to Mr. Bill Phillippi, Howard’s son-in-law. Although no longer involved in daily operations, Howard continued to make frequent visits to the farm from his home in Vermilion, sometimes by air, flying a single engine plane which he landed on the north end of the farm on one of the larger fields which served as an airstrip. He eventually retired to the warmth and sunshine of Arizona.
THE CROPS GROW AND SO DOES THE FARM

In 1950, the old Ohio Muck Farming Company described earlier (sometimes known as Fisher Foods/Orwell Gardens), which consisted of close to 1,000 acres, was purchased by Howard Ruetenik, and at that point, his original 225 acres grew to about 1,225. The acquisition of this property provided, in addition to a couple of hundred acres of muck, a 300 foot long root storage building, a small walk-in cooler, and an onion storage building. The onion storage building was made up of a number of large bins through which air could be forced by fans, curing and drying the onions. These facilities allowed for a significant increase in the production of onions and root crops such as carrots and parsnips. Several of the smaller buildings, including some old greenhouses, were torn down. Seven houses, which could be rented to employees, also came with the “new” farm.

This additional acreage had been previously planted with rows of willows to act as windbreaks for the young crops. One of the first priorities was to remove the willows with a newly purchased Caterpillar bulldozer. Shortly thereafter, a system of tile lines was installed to improve drainage. The farm’s production capacity was greatly increased, and additional employees were hired. Although the employee roster underwent frequent changes, manager Bill Phillippi had the long-time services of three key individuals. Maynard Berry was responsible for building and maintaining much of the Farm’s equipment, and Frank Benak kept all trucks and tractors in running order. The person with whom most temporary and seasonal employees had the most contact, however, was Mike Lucik, the field foreman. Mike was in charge of much of the planting, weeding, and harvesting of the vegetables.

Figures 6 & 7 - Field Foreman Mike Lucik is shown here in photos taken in the late 1940s. At left, he supervises the "Kid Gang" and at right, he stands beside the bus used to transport employees to the fields. (Photo - Joan Lucik Wildman)
There were a number of other full-time employees who worked year round. In the summer and fall months, the employee roster swelled as there was need for hand weeding and harvesting crops such as green onions, leaf lettuce, celery, and turnips. Local young people were able to find employment here during summer months, but when their numbers were insufficient, a bus was run to the Warren/Niles area Monday through Saturday during the peak growing season, and many women and children were brought to the farm to fill the need. During the months of July and August, 50 to 75 field workers were employed at times in addition to the regular crew.

**WORKING ON THE FARM**

What was it like to work on a muck farm? Over the decades that Rutenik Gardens operated, hundreds of young people worked in what was referred to as the “Kid Gang” under Mike Lucik’s supervision. If you happened to be one of those kids, your memory of working on the Muck probably consists of something like this: If you did not live in the immediate area of North Bloomfield or Orwell, you might have caught the farm’s bus in Warren, Niles, Champion, or Bristolville. You would have worked either an eight or nine hour day, and weather permitting, you would have worked six days per week. You would have been paid either an hourly wage or a “piecework” wage depending on what task you were performing. You would have been transported from the farm’s main building or washhouse to the fields in an old school bus. Your job would have been thinning lettuce (lettuce was planted in solid rows but had to be thinned so that plants could properly grow into “heads,” about six inches apart), skinning and bunching green onions, trimming celery, cutting spinach, or topping turnips. Another job would have been pulling weeds, lots of weeds. (As the years went by, more and more varieties of weeds were controlled by the application of herbicides, but effective as these chemicals were, some weeds always managed to survive, and they had to be pulled by hand.) For most of the day, you would have been down on your hands and knees, crawling in the muck. The muck, when wet, would stick to your hands and knees so that at the end of the day, you would have to wash yourself off and scrape the soil from your pant legs before going home. If conditions were dry, you would breathe in plenty of dust during the day that would seep out of yours eyes and nose during the evening, long after you had taken a bath or shower. If you had been skinning and bunching onions, the smell of onions on your fingers could linger for days after you had been away from the onion fields.

If you received hourly pay, you may have begun for 25 cents an hour in the 1940s or 1950s. By the 1960s, hourly wages were increased to about 50 cents an hour. Employees who returned each summer could expect a raise of about five cents an hour each year. When bunching onions or topping turnips, workers were often paid piecework. The worker was issued a black and white checkered card with his or her name, and after bunching a “crate” of onions (usually 25 or 30 bunches) or finishing a crate of turnips, a special paper punch was used (usually by the field foreman) on the checkered card to show the payroll department that you had earned a specified amount. In the early 1960s, a “punch” was equivalent to 25 cents. The faster you worked, the more money you made. In the early 1960s, the average pay for two 40 hour weeks was about $45 to $50.

If you could handle a knife and there were not enough older women in the “Women’s Gang” to fill an order, you might have been called on to cut lettuce or spinach, trim celery, or top turnips. Again, you would have been on your knees in the muck, wet or dry. The produce was placed in crates or baskets as it was harvested, and periodically, the “field truck” would come along to pick up these containers for transport to the washhouse. The next two photos show workers from the 1930s cutting spinach when the field truck was a team of horses and a wagon. The original Rutenik
washhouse/packing shed stands in the background. An equipment storage building is partly visible to the right.

Figure 8 - In this photo, from the 1930s, workers cut spinach. In the background is the original Ruetenik washhouse, built around 1929. (Photo - Ruetenik family)

Figure 9 - Spinach is transported by horse and wagon to the washhouse in the 1930s. (Photo - Ruetenik family)

Working in the fields produced thirst, and drinking water was furnished in one of two ways. If you were working at the south end of the farm, there was a stationary irrigation system with a "riser" in each of the fields where, after turning a valve, you would get a broad spout of cold well water from the farm's main well for drinking or hand washing. If you happened to be working in the wide open spaces
of the north area of the farm, a portable water tank furnished your water. (At one point, the field bus was equipped with its own water tank and drinking fountain.) The tank water was not as cool as the water from the irrigation lines, but if you were thirsty, it did the job.

In the summer months, the fields of black muck were extremely hot because muck absorbs heat. Your knees would become tough and calloused (if you stuck with the job for more than just a day or two!) from the heat and the crawling. Nothing was known about sun damage to the skin in those days, and some employees actually used suntan oil to add to their tans. Boys would often remove their shirts. Sunburn was a problem at the start of the summer, but after a few days, the regular employees had developed what was thought to be healthy tans. Still, wide brimmed hats and long-sleeved shirts were the fashion for many.

Then, there was the matter of weather. Normally, the field crews did not work in the rain, and sometimes, a rain storm would mean that you would have the afternoon off. If a thunderstorm would approach, the foreman would order everyone into the bus, away from the pipes of the irrigation lines. Often, the 40 or 50 people who had been sweating hard and skinning onions in the sun would be drenched in rain before reaching the bus. Imagine the odor that arose in that bus – sweat and onions!

At 12:00 noon, workers were transported to the main building for lunch. Lunch break was only 30 minutes, and there were only two restrooms – one for men and one for women. You would wash up as best as you could (possibly from a faucet near one of the washers), proceed to the lunch rack, pick up your bag or lunch box, and head out to the picnic tables under a cluster of oak trees in the “circle” outside the main building.

The restrooms were at the main building, but what happened if you needed the facility and it was not lunch time? For many young people, this was their first experience with an outhouse. There were a couple of permanent outhouses in the fields, but because the crews moved around the considerable acreage of the farm, it was necessary to have “portables” that could follow the workers. In later years, movable outhouses were built out of galvanized culvert pipes that were stood on end. A door was cut into the pipe, a small seat and baffle were added inside, a hole was dug in the ground underneath, and here, nature’s call could be answered.

If the farm was extremely busy and washhouse workers were needed, you might get a promotion to work indoors where you would strap on a black rubber apron and work on one of the washers. Lettuce was weighed, “dipped” in a special tub, lids were attached, and the baskets were stacked on flats. The flats were then wheeled to the walk-in cooler where your body would receive a shock, going from temperatures in the 90s to temperatures in the 30s and then back to the 90s. Onions and celery were dipped in a tub and laid on a conveyor that moved them through a high pressure spray of water. The stalks or bunches were then packed in baskets and crates and moved into the coolers. On a hot August afternoon, the washhouse was a welcome alternative to the heat of the fields.

If you were employed later into the fall, possibly on Saturdays or on school vacations, you might have worked in the washhouse on the root washer, sorting and trimming turnips, carrots, or parsnips. Although some of the root crops were shipped in boxes, most were first packaged in one pound plastic bags and then shipped in boxes. Packaging was done in an assembly line, some workers weighing the produce and others adding and removing bags from a specially designed revolving table. Another worker stapled the bags and still another filled the boxes, which were stacked on flats and moved into the cooler. Meanwhile, at the north end of the farm in the onion storage building, workers were sorting, sizing, weighing, and bagging dry onions. Trucks were loaded and shipments were usually made to Cleveland and Pittsburgh markets on most days of the week, including Sundays.

Work on the farm was at times difficult, and by nature, it was dirty and usually very hot unless you happened to be working in the spring, fall, or winter (and then it was very cold). It is generally
assumed that hard work never hurt anyone, and so it could be said about working on the Muck. Kids had the opportunity to learn the value of work while earning money. For many, this was their first job, and it may well have convinced them that they should stay in school; a lot of lessons can be learned while working as a farm laborer. Also, kids and adults from many backgrounds learned how to work together, and for the most part, everybody got along rather well.

Earlier, mention was made of the employee profit sharing plan. During the later years of operation, a bonus for Kid Gang members was added. Any young person who had perfect attendance on days when there was work received a cash bonus at the end of the year.

Figure 10 - General Manager Bill Phillippi is shown here presenting bonus checks to members of the Kid Gang who had perfect attendance for the year on days when there was work. Mr. Reece from the Employment Agency looks on from the right. (Photo – Tribune Chronicle)

For many years, the farm offered its employees, especially its younger employees, a company picnic at Conneaut Lake Park in Pennsylvania. Transportation by the farm bus was provided, and tickets for rides and concessions were handed out at the park. The picnic was usually at the end of the summer season just before school started and after the event, the number of young people on the job dropped significantly. Conneaut Lake Park boasted one of America’s finest wooden roller coasters along with a number of other classic amusement park rides. It was a fun-filled day. Unfortunately, Conneaut Lake Park, like Ruetenik Gardens, is no longer in operation.

But what if you were not a young employee? Those who were 18 years of age or older might have been employed driving a field truck, a tractor, or some other type of equipment. The land had to be plowed and disked in preparation for planting. Seeds had to be planted, cultivated, tilled, sprayed, fertilized, and eventually harvested. Much of this work was done with specialized equipment, as mentioned earlier, that was designed and built on the farm. An example would be the root harvesters. Some early versions of the root harvesters are seen on the next page.
Figures 11 & 12 - The machine on the left, often referred to as the "carrot digger," was used in the 1940s. At right, a group of employees is shown on a later version (1950s) of the root harvester (Photos - Joan Lucik Wildman, Tim Rodgers)

Figure 13 - Here's another view of the 1950s root harvester. Experience had shown that the "all conditions" capabilities of a crawler tractor were needed to harvest root crops, especially parsnips which can be harvested throughout the winter months. The size, weight, and power of the Caterpillar D2 (seen above) were ideal for this application. (Photo - Phillippi/Rutenik family)
Figure 14 – Each year, improvements and modifications were made to the root harvester. This photo shows an even later version (1960s-1970s) of that machine. Wagons with forklift boxes had replaced the small crates, and various components of the harvester had been combined into one Caterpillar-mounted unit which required fewer workers and greatly improved production. (Photo – Phillippi family)

Figure 15 – This shows the root harvester from another angle. The crop being harvested is parsnips. A handful of workers could harvest several hundred bushels per hour. Eventually, the machine was fitted with a canvas canopy to protect workers during cold, wet weather. (Photo – Phillippi family)
The harvesting of root crops lasted into the late fall, and in the case of parsnips, continued throughout the winter. The dry onion harvest took place in late summer and early fall. With the first heavy freezes, the harvesting of lettuce, celery, spinach, green onions, and eventually turnips ceased. During the winter months, attention turned to washing, weighing, packaging, and shipping stored vegetables. This was done with a smaller crew of mostly adults, many year-round, full-time employees. Occasionally, workers were still bussed in from the Warren area, depending on need, and a smaller van was used in place of the bus. The farm also employed a couple of full-time truck drivers who worked throughout most of the year, delivering produce to Cleveland and Pittsburgh and occasionally to Cincinnati and Philadelphia. There was always something to do. In addition to working directly with the crops, there was the constant need for general upkeep. Crates had to be repaired, grass and weeds had to be cut, ditches and roadways had to be maintained, and equipment had to be serviced. One day you might be digging up a broken tile line, and the following day you might be setting up portable irrigation lines or painting the doors on a storage building. You might even have been selected to help move one of the portable outhouses! Some jobs were repetitive and boring; others could be interesting and challenging. A credit to management, the farm always had a manicured look. All equipment was put away each evening and no trash could be found - anywhere. Employees were required to live by the rule: “A place for everything and everything in its place.”
PRODUCING A CROP – AN EXAMPLE

Here is an example of what it took to produce one crop. Parsnips were one of Ruetenik's main staples. The photo below, from 1968, shows several acres of that crop. You might be surprised to learn that the green tops of parsnips can grow to over two feet in height and that the roots, the part that is eaten, are "hilled" to produce a long, straight, healthy growth. Like most vegetables, parsnips are subject to damage from insects and fungi, and the farmer must constantly care for them. They take several months to mature and can be harvested throughout the winter months, soil conditions permitting. (Some consumers claim they prefer the flavor of parsnips that were frozen before harvest.) Parsnips are planted early in the spring and do not mature until late summer or early fall. The soil must be prepared by plowing and diskng, seeds must be planted, and when the crop emerges, it must be protected from wind damage. Weeds must be controlled, and preventive measures must be taken to prohibit damage from insects or disease. The crop is fertilized, sprayed, tilled, hilled, and cultivated. At harvest time, the roots are dug up (by machine) and stored. They must then be washed and sorted and packaged for shipment. And throughout the growing season, the farmer constantly watches the sky, hoping for just the right amount of sun and rain. Those who have never been connected with agriculture do not know the amount of expense, work, and worry that goes into raising a crop. Ruetenik employees soon learned.

Figure 18 - This photo, taken in 1968, shows about 20 acres of mid-summer parsnips. By the time they had reached this stage, hundreds of man hours had already gone into their care. The fields shown in this photo were nearly a half mile in length. (Photo - Tim Rodgers)

PRODUCTION CONTINUES

In the 1950s and 1960s, the farm operated efficiently. Additional acreage was cleared, tiled, and put into use. The Dredge Ditch was cleaned and widened with a newly acquired dragline, and the drainage tile system was upgraded. New and better equipment was purchased to harvest and package produce, cooling equipment was modernized, additional storage and processing buildings were constructed, and additional acreage was rented from surrounding farms for the raising of turnips. A new
root harvester was designed and built, more modern tractors and implements were acquired, and a new onion harvester was purchased. Also, the truck fleet was frequently updated. Saving countless hours of back-breaking work, a couple of forklifts greatly improved productivity.

One area of operations that was allowed to decline and eventually cease was the labor intensive business of growing Christmas trees. For many years, the upland, or mineral soil, was put to good use growing evergreens for the holidays. The trees, once planted, took many years to mature for market, and during that time, they had to be trimmed and shaped, the grass and weeds had to be mowed, and the trees, like vegetables, were subject to a variety of diseases and sometimes required the application of various pesticides. (In the early years, sheep were employed to keep the weeds and grass trimmed in the Christmas trees; however, they were not reliable employees and had to be let go.) In addition, in the late 1950s, many Americans were willing to forgo the live tree at Christmas for first, aluminum trees that were illuminated by colored light wheels, and later, by the artificial trees that are still popular today. In the early 1960s, the planting of Christmas trees at Ruetenik Gardens ceased. Some of the upland soil previously used to grow trees was fenced, and a few head of beef cattle were raised. Also, some of the upland acreage and areas of the muck that had seen erosion and deterioration were used for growing wheat, oats, corn, and hay. Vegetables raised in the 1960s included leaf lettuce, green onions, celery, parsnips, carrots, and turnips. In the early 1970s, the raising of blue grass sod was begun.

CHANGES

During the 1950s and 1960s, every acre of ground was put to use. Although weather conditions (and occasional pests and diseases) made growing vegetables a constant challenge, the farm experienced a great deal of success. But agriculture and the marketing of vegetables were changing. The huge farms in states like California and Florida were sending in produce twelve months of the year by refrigerated trucks that traveled swiftly over the newly constructed interstate highway system. Frozen foods gained in popularity. It became increasingly difficult to find employees because in those days, jobs in industry such as the steel mills, Packard Electric, and the new General Motors Assembly facility in Lordstown were available, and they paid much more than farm work. One of the biggest challenges faced by the farm, however, was a simple act of nature; muck, highly organic, decomposes over time and literally disappears – about one inch per year. It does not last forever. The rich, deep, black soil that had sustained vegetable growing operations for decades just was not what it once was. In addition to this natural breakdown, muck is subject to both wind and water erosion, and it can burn and smolder for months on end. According to the “old timers,” the area that lies south of State Route 87, now the Mosquito Creek Wildlife Area, specifically the Wood Duck Marsh, contained some of the best muck soil in the entire Swamp, but it burned decades ago, shrouding North Bloomfield in dark clouds of smoke for several weeks. Anyone who worked at Ruetenik Gardens knows that employees were constantly warned about carelessly discarded cigarettes and matches. Muck fires are not raging infernos; they simply smolder, and the muck turns to ashes, producing an odor a little like that of burning leaves. They are difficult to extinguish. By the early 1970s, much of the muck at Ruetenik’s had disappeared due to wind, water, and natural decomposition. Combining all of these factors with weather, both friend and enemy to the farmer, production difficulties mounted.

Ruetenik Gardens ceased operations in 1975 when a group of investors purchased the property from Howard Ruetenik, and the farm became known as Grand Valley Enterprises. Most of the vegetable processing equipment was sold at auction by the new owners, and plans were made to begin the construction of lakes to create a commercial fish farm. The remaining muck soil would be processed and sold as topsoil, and bluegrass sod would be raised for a time as well. These plans were
eventually abandoned in the 1980s. When Grand Valley Enterprises ceased operations, a business called Redbrush Materials operated for a while. A company called PVP Industries acquired several acres near the site of the former washhouse and set up a processing plant for perlite and vermiculite. They are still in business today. Much of the acreage of the old Ohio Muck Farming Company became a sporting clay/hunting facility known as Grand Valley Hunting Ranch, but they closed in early 2008. Efforts to create a dump and landfill on the property in the 1990s were unsuccessful due to the efforts of local residents, the County Health Department, and the ruling of a judge in Common Pleas Court. Currently, some of the land is rented to a neighboring farmer for grain production and some is simply returning to swampy, wetland status. A few acres along Penniman Road have been divided and sold as individual lots. What does the future hold for the remaining acreage? This question cannot be answered. Today, there is little evidence remaining of what was once the Bloomfield Swamp and no evidence of what was once Ruefenik Gardens.

It is interesting to note that three of Bill and Virginia Ruefenik Phillip’s children continued the family’s agricultural tradition. Sons Bill, Paul, and Tom all went on to successfully operate vegetable muck farms in central Wisconsin.

What happened to Ruefenik Gardens has happened and still is happening to countless farms across America. Change is inevitable, and nothing can bring back the growing of vegetables to northern Trumbull County. What we can do, however, is remember that in the history of this area, a large role was played by Ruefenik Gardens and its workers. A time will come when no former employees remain to tell the story. It is hoped that the community will not forget the farm and its many contributions to life in this part of Ohio.

**REMEMBERING RUETENIK GARDENS WITH PICTURES**

Some additional photos can give a better sense of what Ruefenik Gardens looked like through the years. The following snapshots include the Dredge Ditch, the crops, some of the equipment, and even some of the people. Please read on.

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Figure 19 – Howard Ruefenik wrote that one of his first priorities in the 1920s was to lay the foundation of a solid road into the farm. This is the main entrance off Penniman Road (looking east – opposite Flagg Road East) in about 1929. Later paved with a chip and tar surface, this road was traveled by hundreds of employees over the years and tons of produce were trucked over it to market. (Photo - Ruefenik family)
The Dredge Ditch

This story about Ruetenik Gardens began with information about the Tamarack or Bloomfield Swamp and how it was drained by dredging. Here are a couple of pictures of the Dredge Ditch, a kind of "before and after" from its early years. The ditch was originally created to furnish drainage of excess water from the cropland. A secondary purpose was to provide irrigation during the dry crop growing season. A dam was constructed, and the waters of the ditch could be backed up, allowing for the operation of a portable irrigation system.

Figure 20 - Shortly after Howard Ruetenik bought his original 225 acres in 1926, he discovered that the Dredge Ditch, built around 1912, was not doing its job. According to information provided in Ruetenik’s "Anniversary Brochure," property owners along the ditch hired an excavator to clean the ditch in the late 1920s. Contrast the condition of the ditch in the photo above with that below. (Photo – Ruetenik family)

Figure 21 - Water in the Dredge Ditch moved (and still moves) very slowly. It was essential that the channel be as clean and wide as possible. This is the excavator referred to above. (Photo – Ruetenik family)
In the late 1950s, the farm purchased a dragline which along with the company’s bulldozer cleaned several miles of the ditch, from the farm’s southern border to the northern property line at Moore Road in Orwell. As the ditch was cleaned, other improvements were made to the tile lines and lateral ditches. The next photo shows what the ditch looked like after these upgrades.

![Image of the cleaned ditch](image)

**Figure 22**-Taken around 1960, this photo shows some of the work that was done to upgrade the Dredge Ditch. The maintenance of the ditch was crucial to the farm’s operation. (Photo - Tim Rodgers)

### Onions

From old newspaper clippings and the stories told by the “old timers,” onions were always grown on the Muck, sometimes referred to as the “Onion Patch.” Dry onions (or bulb onions, as opposed to green onions) were planted in early spring and did not mature until late August or September. Like the parsnips described earlier, onions have a long growing season during which they must be cultivated, weeded, and treated for insects and fungus. And because they were grown in the wide open spaces of the muck lands, the young plants had to be protected from wind damage. (When the willow tree windbreaks were removed, the farm eventually eased wind problems by planting a fast growing grass crop, like oats or barley, between the rows of onions. This crop would germinate and emerge first, reducing the movement of dry soil as well as the effects of the wind at ground level. Unfortunately, once the onions were up and growing, eliminating the oats and barley offered another challenge!) When the onions reached maturity at the end of the growing season, the tops would “go down” and they would begin to dry. Then, they were ready for harvest.

When Ruetenik Gardens expanded in 1950, the additional acreage allowed the planting of 60 to 70 acres of dry onions each year. The harvesting that was once done by hand, in the field, was now done by two mechanized onion harvesters. Powered by gasoline engines and pulled by tractors, these harvesters lifted the onions from the ground and ran them through a series of rotating knives that...
removed their tops. These machines could harvest and "top" many tons of onions each day. Over the years, the onions were first loaded into crates, then into forklift boxes, and finally into gravity box wagons for transport to the onion storage building. The use of the gravity box wagons meant that more work could be done faster and with fewer workers. At the onion storage building, conveyors moved the onions to the bins where they were deposited for additional drying and curing while they awaited processing for shipment. In the 1960s, an addition to the onion storage facility was built to accommodate modern sizing, grading, weighing, and packaging equipment. Thousands of pounds of onions could be processed each week in this one building. Onions were usually shipped in red mesh bags of varying weight, up to 50 pounds. The facility had modern lighting, and it was heated, a fact greatly appreciated by employees; and, because the onions were now stored indoors with the benefit of circulating air, shipping could continue into winter months, depending on the size of the crop. Here is a little Ruetenik onion history in pictures, Figures 23-36.

Figure 23 - During the 1920s, onions were grown on the farm in shares. This is one of the cottages (on the main entrance road) occupied by onion growers. (Photo – Ruetenik family)

Figures 24 & 25 - Onions curing in the field and stacked in crates to dry, around 1929. The onion storage facility acquired in 1950 allowed the farm to greatly expand the onion crop. (Photo – Ruetenik family)
Figure 26 – In the early years, (1920s/1930s) the sorting and grading of onions was done in the field. (Photo – Ruetenik family)

Figure 27 - Here onions are screened, weighed, and bagged right in the field, in the late 1920s/early 1930s. (Photo – Ruetenik family)
Figure 28 – The hand harvesting of onions eventually gave way to harvesting by machines. Here, an early version of an onion harvester or “topper” lifts dry onions from the fields in the 1950’s. Two large rotating discs slid along under the onions, severed their roots, and tossed them up onto a conveyor that lifted them to the revolving knife rollers that removed their tops. They were then loaded into crates and transported to storage. (Photo – Phillippi/Ruetenik family)

Figures 29 & 30 – A more modern onion harvester was purchased in the 1960s. Here, employees harvest, top, and crate onions for transport to the onion storage building. The worker in the photo at the left moves the onions over the revolving knife rollers, making sure that the tops have been severed. At right, a worker oversees the loading of a forklift crate or box. Dry, sunny weather, as seen in the photos above, was needed for the onion harvest. (Photos – Phillippi family)