

THE DIEDRICH FAMILY

For many Perinton families, cutting the yearly Christmas tree at Normandie Farms on Howell Road was a tradition, and for two generations of Diedrichs, working that farm was a tradition.

In the late 19th century a number of German immigrants settled in the Rochester area and often met for social occasions and reunions. At one event in Hilton Bertha Steffen, the oldest daughter of Fred and Minnie Steffen of Perinton, met William Diedrich. The two were married December 12, 1906, and moved to the Steffen farm on East Whitney Road. William helped Fred on his 200 acres, 10 of which were muckland that produced, among other crops, celery, onions, and carrots. Bertha and Minnie took care of the many household chores such as serving breakfasts of fried salt pork, fried eggs, potatoes and bread to the family and the hired hands. Son Norman was born there in 1908.

By 1910, William and Bertha were able to purchase their own farm of 42 acres on Howell Road where shortly thereafter, Bertha gave birth to a daughter, Iona. There were few conveniences on the farm. The family used an outhouse, carried water in from the well, and heated the house with a coal stove. Lighting was from kerosene lanterns. There was no refrigeration so pork was smoked, salted or made into sausage, and beef was only available in the cold weather when a frozen carcass could be kept in the barn. Chicken was regularly available.

The Diedrichs added to their farmstead when they purchased an additional 24 acres across the road. The family raised tomatoes for the canning factory, and hay, oats, wheat, and vegetables, which were sold at the public market. They also kept several horses, a few cows, and some chickens. Norman enjoyed the wheat harvest, finding it the cleanest, most pleasant joy on the farm and he allowed that the hay harvest was not bad.

Norman and Iona walked the $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile to school until a lady in Fairport let them use her Canadian pony (about $\frac{2}{3}$ the size of a regular one) in exchange for its care. For 7th and 8th grades, they drove the four miles into the village of Fairport and, as promised, took care of the pony, which meant bringing a bag of hay and a sack of oats with them to school and feeding the pony at noon. By their junior and senior years, they were driving a car (an Oakland) to school. After high school, Iona graduated from the Rochester School of Commerce and worked for the Mechanics Institute (RIT), the Pierce Oil Company, and Nance's Mustard before joining Rochester Instrument Systems. At the same time she continued to be involved with the family farm and with the Grange. Norman also graduated from high school and became fully involved in the family farm business, which at that time involved a number of greenhouses where they raised tomato plants. At one time the Diedrich farm produced 1.5 million of those plants for the canning factories. Norm would be involved in farming for the next 60+ years.

During his grade school years, Norman had begun hunting and trapping, an activity he engaged in for most of the rest of his life. Norman recounted that he found a muskrat while cutting firewood and sold it for \$1.50, thus starting him on what turned out to be a well-paying hobby. As a senior in high school one February he conveniently caught the chicken pox and made up to \$40 a day trapping and selling muskrat pelts. At the age of 18 he purchased his first car, a Chevy, with \$750 in muskrat money. In his later years, Norman would range much further afield for his hunting.

While coming home from the public market one day, probably in 1930, Norman Dietrich met an acquaintance and the prettiest girl I had ever seen. Norman and Florence Button, who was from Wellsville and a school teacher, were married on June 23, 1931, the groom's 23rd birthday. The newlyweds build a house nearby on Howell Road family property. The house was a two-story colonial with gumwood trim and hardwood floors that left them owing \$1500 to the bank which they paid off the following year and that was the only mortgage they ever had.

In their early years together Florence continued teaching school and Norman tended to the tomato plants and the chickens. At one point two dozen eggs brought only 25 cents at the public market. Again, their diet was supplemented by Norman's trapping and hunting skills which added deer and rabbit to the table. Income was supplemented by trapping and selling fox pelts (until the bottom fell out of the market and the pelts brought only 50 cents apiece).

By the mid 1930s two daughters, Joyce and Sylvia, had joined the family and the Diedrichs continued to supply area canneries with tomato plants. When Norman's draft number came up at the beginning of World War II, he was sent home with orders to continue to produce his 1.5 million tomato plants. In the late 1940s Egypt's Curtis Canning Company contracted with the Dietrichs to grow 50 tons of Boston Marrow Squash at \$20 per ton. That crop served the family well until the price dropped to \$12 a ton. At that point they stopped planting squash and decided to plant Christmas trees instead, a crop for which they would become well-known. By the early 1950s they stopped growing tomatoes, as the price was declining, and started to grow and sell bedding plants. Within 10 years they were selling to retailers from as far away as Watertown.

For the Diedrichs, the shift from vegetable farming to the plant business was successful. The bedding plant business eventually led to the creation of Bedding Plants, Inc., an organization of growers from around the country who served as a clearing house for all sorts of information related to the cultivation of bedding plants. Norman served three terms on the Board of Directors and saw the organization become known world-wide, traveling to Europe, New Zealand, and Australia. The need for top soil for the plants led the Diedrichs to purchase a 45-acre plot of land on the edge of Fairport village. They trucked a good amount of the soil to their farm, cleared the trees from the land and planted successful crops of wheat, squash, and beans on 20 acres of the land. This plot was eventually sold and developed as Fairport Manor.

The Normandie Farm's Christmas tree business thrived. There were 12 varieties of trees (which took 12 to 15 years to mature). At the height of the business, the length of Howell Road was full of cars on December weekends and over 3,000 trees were sold during the season. Where the first 500 trees sold for between \$1.50 and \$4.00, in the last few years, trees sold for \$20 and \$30 each. In addition, Florence made wreaths, sometimes 400-500 per year.

The growing seasons for bedding plants and Christmas trees complemented each other. Bedding plants needed care from late winter to early summer; trees were fertilized and trimmed in summer and harvested in November and December. This schedule allowed time for the Dietrichs to travel and for Norman to hunt in places near home like the Adirondacks, and as far afield as Alaska and Africa.

Returning to his love of hunting, Norm Diedrich traveled the country and the world in search of game big and small. For over 10 years, he hunted moose in Ontario, bringing home at least half a moose each year and claiming that moose is better eating than beef. After Ontario Province banned American hunters, Norman looked to Alaska. He flew to Fairbanks and then to a camp about 200 miles from Prudhoe Bay (shortly after oil had been discovered there). The camp was equipped with three tents, one for sleeping and eating, one for outfitters, and one for provisions. His first quarry was a ram, then a caribou. The ram's head was stuffed and kept as a trophy. It was not, however, the last trophy collected by Norm Diedrich.

In 1971 at the age of 63, he arrived in Churchill, Manitoba, to hunt polar bear. From there he set out for Coral Harbor and then went off by sled with two Eskimo guides to seek his prey. After 10 days out and surviving snow and wind, Norman was rewarded with a 10 year old polar bear, whose skin (and head) was made into a rug. Subsequent trips to Alaska and Wyoming brought more caribou, moose, and elk which provided both meat and trophies. In their 70s, both Norman and Florence traveled to Africa. While there, Norman collected cape buffalo, zebra, and three other trophies. By this time, they had put an addition on the house just for the

trophies! And Norman was able to introduce the north and the hunt to his grandson before his knees gave out and his hunting days were over. (Norman received two new knees in 1993).

Despite their many travels, Norman and Florence loved their community. Norman served the Perinton community as town councilman from 1948 to 1959. He also was a member of the Fairport Grange, the Rotary Club (with 17 years of perfect attendance), and was a Mason.

The Diedrichs closed their greenhouses in 1977, but continued to grow and sell Christmas trees until 1994. Having probably spent more than half his life outdoors, Norman did not want to see his land sold for development. As a result, in 1992, the Diedrichs agreed to sell the land to the Town of Perinton. Part of the land will remain open and part will be developed into a park.

At the end of his book of reminiscences Norm Diedrich says, "The tree plantation and the greenhouses, along with my other endeavors made a little empire that it was fun to manage, but finally my knees gave out, and it was sad to see it all crumble; however, it has been a long and happy life and I wouldn't change it for anything I see now. After living in our house for over 60 years, we sold it to our grandson, Bruce Yoder and moved to a good apartment complex [the Highlands], where we get good food and are comfortable."

Florence Button Diedrich died in 2003 and was followed in 2005 by Norman at the age of 96.



Wedding photo of Norman & Florence Diedrich

A portion of the material for the Diedrich Family columns comes from *One man's Life in the 1900's* by Norman A. Diedrich, published in 1999.