



(From left) daughter Amber, father David and his father, William Parsons, gather on the front lawn of their centennial farm. (Photo by Laurie Lounsbury)

Honoring a century of family farming

By Laurie Lounsbury

William Parsons rubs a deeply tanned, rugged hand across his chin when he talks about the tornado that nearly destroyed his family farm.

"I was out planting beans when the storm came up," he says. "Hailstones the size of golf balls were pelting the horses and cattle."

After the hail came a devastating tornado that came dangerously close to destroying the farm house where William was born.

"It took the barn and scattered it all over this farm and the neighbor's farm," he recalls. "Took all the crops too. There wasn't a spear of grass left on that field."

The date was June 23, 1943, a day that Parsons, now 85, won't likely forget. The farm he'd bought from his father, George Parsons, was 50 years old — exactly half as old as it is today.

The George Parsons farm received its centennial status this year, honored by the Michigan Historical Commission as a farm continuously owned by the same family for 100 years.

Reflecting the typically stoic

ways of the farming community, William said they were able to bounce back after the tornado.

"We gathered up the pieces of the barn and put it back together. The neighbors helped," William said. "Course we didn't do much farming that year. After we put the barn back together, we got busy and grew buckwheat."

According to William, buckwheat was the only crop they could grow in a short amount of time. It wasn't a popular crop with the consumers.

"If they didn't like buckwheat, they got a chance to like it again, whether they wanted to or not," William said with a chuckle.

Over 100 years, the Parsons family has done whatever was necessary to maintain a family farm.

During World War II, William stayed home and grew beans, potatoes and peas. His father had invested in a thrashing machine, and the two men found themselves thrashing beans for farmers from East Port to Charlevoix.

Although George Parsons wasn't wild about milking cows and the dairy business, they always had a

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few cattle on hand.

With the arrival of electricity in 1938, cow-milking became more palatable to the senior Parsons.

"He always said, 'When electricity comes in, I'm getting a milking machine.' He got one a month after we got electricity," William said.

The arrival of electricity changed the face of farming in northern Michigan. Jobs previously done by hand could be done with machines.

"It changed the total life of the country," William said. "We used to can everything. Now we put it all in the freezer."

With electricity, and stricter government standards, farming became more specialized.

"We used to do everything. We raised turkey and chickens, made maple syrup. Every Saturday, we went to Charlevoix and sold eggs. We could take a can of cream to town and sell it. Government regulations did away with that," William said.

In 1977, William's son David

bought the farm from his dad and continued the family farming tradition. Today, the primary crop is hay for horse customers. In the winter, David also does auto body work.

"Diversification isn't what different crops you grow on the farm anymore," David said. "It's what you do along with farming."

Of William Parsons' four children, David was the only one who chose to stay in farming.

"It's a tough way to make a living compared to other occupations," David said. "But I can't think of any other place I'd rather live or

"They like to say, 'Oh, the good old times.' I'll take the times now any day."

— William Parsons, talking about how hard farming was before electricity.

anything else I'd rather do, so I guess I'll stick it out."

Neither William or David can predict the future of the family farm when David is ready to hang up his pitch fork.

"I wonder about it myself," William said. "David's boy is really not too interested in farming. And if they're not interested in it, they'll never make a go of it."

As the senior farmer, William likes to reminisce about the old

days, but wouldn't trade them for today. He doesn't miss having to go outside to the privy, nor does he miss going out to pump water for a cold drink.

"They like to say, 'Oh, the good old times.' I'll take the times now any day," William said.

Over the Fourth of July weekend, the Parsons hosted a family reunion, with 150 family members attending.