

The Passing Scene: Rose Hill Farm, Red Hook's Oldest Family Business

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“It’s a bittersweet time for us,” muses David Fraleigh, taking in the rolling hills, ponds and ancient maple trees lining the narrow lane into Rose Hill Farm, in the Town of Red Hook. “There are days I want to sell and days that I don’t.” It’s understandable.



Figure 1. Sign for Rose Hill, Red Hook's oldest continuously owned and run family business. Photograph. Collection of David Fraleigh.

Six generations ago, Peter Fraleigh (1773-??) founded the farm. Rose Hill is Red Hook's oldest continuously owned and run family business (Figure 1). In 2001, the New York State Agricultural Society recognized it as one of the state's ten Bicentennial Family Farms, the only fruit farm so honored.

Under the stewardship of David and his wife Karen, it has become a favored Hudson Valley “pick your own” destination, especially inviting for Karen's delicious homemade pies and jars of jam. Sadly, the seventh generation of Fraleighs is not interested in farming.

Rose Hill Farm is up for sale.

It is only fitting then that we salute the family's perseverance, dedication and savvy business sense over more than two centuries. The first Fraleigh to arrive was Peter's grandfather, an indentured immigrant from Palatine Germany who settled in Rhinebeck and by 1719 had worked his way up to freeholder status, leasing a farm on the Beekman Patent.

Evidently, life in the New World agreed with the Fraleighs, enough so that on May 1, 1798, Peter was able to buy the 92 acres that he and Hele-

na Kuhn (his second wife) would name “Rose Hill” upon their marriage in 1812.

George William (1816–1866) succeeded his father, marrying Regina Waldorf in 1839. The New York State Census for 1865 lists them and five children as resident on the farm that year, producing 50 tons of hay, 20 bushels each of oats and rye, 337 bushels of apples, 500 pounds of butter, 2,200 pounds of pork, and 30 pounds of wool.

John Alfred (1841–1914), their industrious second son and the farm’s next steward, took over upon his father’s death. In 1871, he married Lucy Irene Curtis (1845–1913) and they began to diversify, starting a long-running door-to-door milk route in the Village of Red Hook, and adding a third story and plumbing to the farmhouse to accommodate summer boarders.



Figure 2. Elmore (1909–1995) and Ruth (1913–1995) Fraleigh, c. 1916, on Rose Hill Farm’s maple-shaded lane. Photograph. Collection of David Fraleigh.

Stays on scenic farms like Rose Hill, within easy rail distance of New York City, were popular with late-19th Century vacationers. In the *Red Hook Journal* for the 1894 season, the Fraleighs advertised Rose Hill as “pleasantly located at an elevation. Perfectly healthy, plenty of shade, extended views in all directions... hot and cold water throughout the house.”

John and Lucy’s children, Curtis (1872–1944) and Rosalie (1875–1956), grew up in the bustle of late-century Rose Hill. They delivered the milk before school, tended to the “guests” (as boarders were termed), and looked after the farm’s numerous quacking, clucking, mooing, neighing, barking, oinking, and baaing two- and four-footed denizens.

Typical of Fraleigh men, Curtis married later in life—at 35, in 1907. With his father’s death on the eve of World War I, he and his wife, Fannie Keys Elmore (1884–1954) ushered the farm into the twentieth century, including welcoming the fifth generation—son Elmore (1909–1995) and daughter Ruth (1913–1995) – into the world (Figure 2).

On the business side, they stopped dairying, ended the milk route, and expanded fruit production, especially apples. They continued hosting city folk, including a “Miss Elizabeth Smith,” whom the *Rhinebeck Gazette Advertiser/ Red Hook News* of July 10, 1920, noted “has been spending her vacation at Rose Hill Farm as a guest of Mrs. Curtis Fraleigh.”



Figure 3. *The fourth and fifth Fraleigh generations gather in the 1930s on Rose Hill Farm, Left to right, top: Dr. Harvey Losee, Curtis Fraleigh, John Losee, Rosalie Fraleigh, Fannie E. Fraleigh; bottom: Elmore Fraleigh, Ruth Fraleigh, Lawrence Losee. Photograph. Collection of David Fraleigh.*

As the Jazz Age, “talkies” and the Roaring Twenties stormed through America—even Red Hook!—young Elmore ventured off for four years of math and physics and a degree from Wesleyan University. But in 1931 with jobs hard to find in the Depression, he was back on the farm with his father, raising sheep, some poultry, and more apples and other fruit (Figure 3).

Father and son successfully managed Rose Hill through the ‘30s and World War II. Curtis passed on in 1944 and Elmore took the reins, marrying Barbara Saxon Rutherford (1917–2007) in 1945. The next year he added twenty acres of new orchards, beginning a rise to the top of local fruit production that was to culminate in his being named Grand Champion fruit grower of the 1973 Dutchess County Fair.

To supplement farm income, Elmore served as a Red Hook town justice for some 20 years, worked at the Red Hook Cold Storage and at the post office, and drove a Red Hook Central School bus. He was a

member of the Farm Bureau, Red Hook Grange, and the Hendrick Hudson Masonic Lodge.

Before leaving for Cornell and a degree in fruit production, Elmore and Barbara's middle child, David, struck a deal with his father about the future of Rose Hill. "'It's either me or the sheep,' I told my Dad," David recounts, smiling. "I hated them!"

David took over in 1979, first selling apples only wholesale. He and Karen were married in 1984 and that first year together they planted 3,500 dwarf trees – in three days! They switched to "pick-your-own" in 1994, starting with a retail fruit stand. They planted more "reachable" apple trees, added peaches, cherries, strawberries, blueberries, pumpkins—practically anything to satisfy what David says is "people's amazing desire to reconnect with the land."

Despite lamenting that they have very little time now other than to put out fires, David and Karen agree they're right in line with their ancestors: "We offer the complete family experience."

"We want people to come here to see where their fruit comes from and who grows it. That's been our direction."

In 1998, they sold the development rights to the farm under an arrangement worked out with the Scenic Hudson Land Trust. "We're only stewards," says David. "There was nothing better we could do for Red Hook."

And what of the future? "It will take a pretty rare person to appreciate what's here. We'll see how it all shakes out."