



RAY EPPLER FAMILY

Potato Power

BY TAMARA STEVENS

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RAY EPPLER

Potato Power



Petoskey's Eppler family pioneers of powerful potato production in Emmet County

By Tamara Stevens

Driving southbound on Eppler Road, which is located about half a mile southwest of Petoskey, the rolling hills lead to an 80-plus acre farm that has been a significant part of the history of Emmet County and of Northern Michigan as a whole.

The sprawling hillside and fields around the white house and red barn

are calm and quiet on a summer day in 2022, with crops swaying in the almost constant breezes off Lake Michigan, which is visible from the top of the hill to the north of the house. The tranquil bucolic scene belies the activity once seen on the Eppler farm for two generations.

Raymond "Ray" and Martha "Marty" Eppler have lived on the farm at 1812 Eppler Road since their marriage in 1966. Ray is 83 and Marty is 80.

"Ray has lived in this house his whole life," Marty said, knowing that not many people can make such a claim.

Ray's grandfather, John Eppler, was born August 20, 1859. He came to Northern Michigan in 1883 from the Utica/Detroit area having heard there

was good farmland "up here," Ray explained. His grandfather first worked on a farm north of the current Eppler homestead. While working there, John met and married a young woman from "the farm across the road," Ray said.

Clara Fogelsonger (the young woman) married John Eppler in February of 1887. She was born January 29, 1867, in Saginaw, Michigan. Her family moved to Petoskey when she was seven years old. Her father operated a small sawmill before purchasing acreage in Resort Township, not too far away from what is now the Eppler property.

John and Clara had ten children — five boys and five girls. Ray is named after his father, Ray Sr. Ray Sr. was born November 15, 1889, the second oldest of the ten children.



In 1919, Ray Sr. bought the 80-acre farm with the house and barn from the Behan-Darling families. The farm had been a vegetable seed farm, selling seeds out of a catalog to farmers across the country. In the 1930s, the family added an enclosed porch and other modifications to the original portion of the house using wood trim and doors ordered from Sears and Roebuck. Ray is not sure when the original house was built, but he knew it was a well-established farm before his father bought it.

Ray Sr.'s brothers, Clayton and Guy Eppler, each bought neighboring farms. In 1913, a major rainstorm washed out the road where it joined U.S. 31 highway. Because of this, the road was called "Washout Road." When Ray's father began the seed potato farming business, no one wanted to drive out to the farm on a road named "Washout Road." So, in the early 1950s, the road's name was fittingly changed to "Eppler Road." Having more than one Eppler family living on the same road played a role in that decision.

The house shows the loving care that has maintained it all these years. It

appears to be brand new; however, there are vestiges of years gone by. Ray describes the cistern that is in the basement below the kitchen. Rainwater would travel along the eave troughs on the roof down to the cistern. At one time, there were two staircases leading up to the bedrooms on the second floor: one staircase for the family, another for the hired farmhands. The house also had three chimneys to accommodate the three wood-burning stoves that provided heat to the five bedrooms and a woodstove on the main floor. Marty recalls that they cut firewood for many years.

"It's a centennial farm without the certification," Ray said. In 2019, the Eppler family had an unofficial centennial celebration to honor the family farm.

Ray's aunt, Mildred Rehkopf, his father's youngest sibling, methodically researched and chronicled the Eppler family genealogy and history, lovingly preserving it with many photographs, obituaries, descriptions and stories. Ray's father was integral in Mildred's upbringing, as well as several other of his siblings.

John Eppler died at the age of 50 from an accident. While unloading firewood from a horse-drawn sleigh, he fell and struck his head on the icy ground. After a long convalescence and surgery, John passed away September 5, 1909. His wife, Clara, died 10 years later in 1919. Ray Sr. was 20 years old when John died.

At the age of 20, Ray Sr. assumed guardianship of his three youngest siblings, Viola, Stella and Mildred. Mildred was only two years old at that time.

This bachelor did a super job of being a guardian to his three young sisters, according to the Epplers.

It wasn't until Ray Sr. was 43 years old that he married Louise Bathke. They had three children — two girls, Mary Lou and Aileen, and one son, Raymond. (While his father was alive, Ray went by Raymond to avoid confusion.)

On a beautiful fall evening in 1966, shortly after Ray and Marty married, the agricultural community "chevalried" them (a surprise reception for newlyweds). Family and friends arrived at the Eppler home, making

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Ray and Marty Eppler on their wedding day in 1966



The Eppler family: Ray, Marty, Maria, Kristin and Greg

a lot of noise by banging pots. They all brought food and games to play and stayed until the wee hours of the morning. It was a memorable night, and those neighbors became longtime friends of the Epplers.

Ray Sr. and Louise moved out of the farmhouse and built a home at 2585 Sterzik Road, just around the corner from the property. The Sterzik house was built on the site where John and Clara Eppler had their first home in 1887 which burned down in 1892. After the fire, John and Clara had moved to a home on 40 acres east of the burned house.

Today, Ray and Marty continue to live in the house where Ray grew up. They raised their own family of two girls and

a boy in the same home. Their eldest daughter, Maria, lives in Chicago. Their second daughter, Kristin, is a teacher in Petoskey. Their son, Greg, lives in Pickney, near East Lansing. Ray and Marty have five grandchildren.

After purchasing the farm, which had been a vegetable seed farm, in 1919, Ray Sr. focused on

growing potatoes and selling seed potatoes. The potatoes were sold and shipped to farmers from across the country.

“In the 1920s, potatoes were an important crop,” Ray said. Growing potatoes in Northern Michigan was a good crop to grow, Ray said, because the soil was rich and provided an abundant

yield. Potato farming is extremely labor-intensive, Ray explained. Every member of the family helped out, but the operation required more help. Ray, Sr., hired farmhands each year, providing employment to nearby families. Over the years since then, most potato farms have transitioned to growing corn or hay. Nowadays, most potatoes are grown on large, industrial farms such as Kitchen Farms in Mancelona.

From the 1920s until the early 1960s, Ray Sr. didn't just grow potatoes. He also won awards for his potato production. The family archives contain many photos of Ray Sr. receiving trophies and accolades year after year for the quality of his crop, as well as the quantity. Ray Sr. was a proud member of the Michigan Potato Club, an aus-

The Emmet County Graphic

FIFTY-SEVENTH YEAR • Five Cents Per Copy • HARBOR SPRINGS, MICHIGAN, THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1933 • 6 Pages • No. 40 Whole No. 2939

EMMET POTATO GROWERS BEST IN STATE

PETOSKEY PLANS SIXTH CARNIVAL For Winter Celebration 3 Days Next Week CORONATION OF QUEEN NEXT THURSDAY NIGHT Ball at High School Friday Evening, March Gras and Figure Skating

Pioneer Couple Celebrates Fortieth Anniversary Here

WORD ON \$2,000 EXPECTED TODAY

Michigan Winter Queen

MANY AWARDED HIGH HONORS

Program arrangements have been completed for the Sixth Annual Michigan Winter Carnival and regional spots were held in Petoskey Thursday, Friday and Saturday of carnival week.

Celebrating their fortieth wedding anniversary yesterday Mr. and Mrs. John W. and Mrs. Mary E. ...

R. D. Tripp Goes to Cadillac to Confer with Burdick ...

Wish expectations of obtaining final assurance that Emmet county will be granted \$5,000,000 welfare highway ...

Dale Nichols, Pullman, First in Honor Rural Class, Others Follow

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and awards were presented.

Ray said 1964 was the year the last potatoes were grown on the farm. His father was 75 years old. Ray and his father discussed the future of the farm, whether they should continue growing potatoes or transition to dairy cattle. Ray had attended Michigan State University, and the university provided a template of a contract for "fathers and sons" to use when transferring a farm from one generation to another. The Epplers utilized the contract to chart out the details of how they would continue to operate a profitable farm, what the expectations were, and how they would transition ownership from Ray Sr. to Ray.

"We farmed in partnership for several years," Ray said. The agreement was in place before Ray and Marty were married in 1966. Ray began acquiring property for a dairy farm in the late 1950s.

Ray and Marty met for the first time in 1965 at the Lutheran church in Petoskey. Marty (Abel) Eppler grew up on a farm in Cedar Springs, Michigan. Her father graduated from MSU in 1924 where he studied agriculture. Her mother graduated from MSU to become a Home Economics teacher. While attending MSU, her mother saw a notice on a campus bulletin board that a Harbor Springs family was looking for someone to work for them in the summer. Marty's mother got the job and over the years talked to her daughter about the town of the lakeshore. Those stories would play a role in Marty's future.

The Emmet County Graphic front page, Feb. 2, 1933

picious achievement that added the mark of excellence -- a gold standard to the seed potatoes he sold. "It was a big thing," Ray said of his father's achievements. Ray explains that to be a member of the Michigan Potato Club, a grower had to produce 300 bushels of po-

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Marty's family were members of a church in Cedar Springs, Michigan. When Marty went to MSU to study teaching, her roommate was the organist at a Lutheran church in East Lansing. Marty attended church at her roommate's congregation. When Marty graduated from MSU, she saw an advertisement that Petoskey schools were hiring teachers. Being aware of the area because of her mother's experience years before, Marty knew it was a beautiful place to live. She interviewed for the position of kindergarten teacher at Central School in Petoskey. After she got the job, Marty attended church at the Zion Lutheran church, where she and Ray met.

After they were married and moved into the farmhouse where they still live, their first child was born in 1968. Marty stayed home to raise their three children. When the children had been in school a few years, Marty started tutoring in an elementary school. When the youngest child was a senior in high school, Marty went back to teaching first grade full time at Central School in Petoskey.

"Ray was farming all those years and needed our help," Marty said of those years raising the children.

Prior to assuming ownership of the farm and changing from potato production to dairy farming, Ray also attended MSU. He described it as a "short course" in agriculture and farming, a program that is now called "Ag Tech." The program ran from the first of October through February, during the typically slow time on most farms. There he learned soil conservation,

Emmet Spud Growers Rank High in Mich.

Emmet county potato growers won many awards at the state show held during Farmers' Week. Paul Robinson of Pellston was awarded first place in the Chippewa peck class and in the Russet Rural certified seed bushel class. He also placed second in the peck classes for Russet Rurals and Pontiac.

Charles Cetas and Son of Harbor Springs won first in the certified seed bushel class for Katahdin and placed second in the peck class for the same variety. Lynn Ward of Levering, won second in the Sebago peck class and in the class for Sequoia, William Notestine of Petoskey placed third and Barney Krawczyk of Petoskey placed fourth. In the 4-H division, Glenn Ernst of Petoskey won second place on his peck of Russet Rurals.

An award of "Excellent" was won by Howard Ball, Gary Ward, Calvin Ball, Jr., and Fred Ball, all of Levering; and Jack Ernst of Petoskey in the Russet Rural class. An award of "Good" was awarded to Gary Bonter of Pellston, Ray Eppler, Jr. of Petoskey, and Wilfred Sterzik, Jr., of Petoskey on Russet Rural pecks.

Wilfred Sterzik, Jr., received an award of "Good" on a peck of Russet Burbanks and Howard Ball on a peck of Sebago. The county 4-H Club exhibit received an "Excellent" award.

Feb. 9, 1950 article from the Northern Michigan Review

agriculture, animal husbandry, cattle production and more.

He and his father discussed the nature of growing potatoes while trying to grow hay and feed for the dairy operation.

"I couldn't do both anymore, so we agreed on changing to dairy farming," Ray said. "My father was an understanding person."

Ray began with a small dairy farm at first, eventually growing the operation to 30 "or so" Holstein dairy cattle. They employed milking machines for those many cattle, yet the operation depended on all the family members to work, he said. The farm sold milk to the Michigan Milk Producers Association. Every other day, a large truck with a tank arrived at the farm to collect the milk.

"(Ray) was good at determining how much milk a cow would produce, and he read magazines from MSU that had articles on dairy producers from around the county," Marty said.

Ray didn't have a bull on the farm, as he believed they were dangerous to have or be around. Instead, he grew the dairy farm through the practice of artificial insemination. When he studied at MSU, he learned about bovine breeding. He pored over the articles in the MSU publications and sought out the optimum bull genetics for higher milk production in the country by reading the cows' milk production records. Also, the cows were tested each month for milk production.

Ray served for several years on the Emmet County Soil Conservation District, which had the mission to preserve the soil quality in the county and to prevent erosion.

By 1994, Ray sold the last of the dairy cows. He grew corn and hay for a few more years, selling to other dairy



The Eppler family

farms. Eventually, he stopped growing crops and now leases out the land to growers who continue to reap hay and corn.

“Dairy farming is a seven-day-a-week, year-round commitment,” Marty said.

The Epplers found satisfaction in doing all the hard work.

Ray looks back at his youth and remembers fondly working on the potato farm, going to school, and to church on Sundays. Ray found time to serve his country by volunteering in the Army Reserves from 1958 to 1964. He completed basic training at Fort Leonard Wood in south central Missouri. After basic training, he attended weekly meetings in Charlevoix with the ordinance company and met his obligation of two weeks of active duty every year.

The Epplers carried on the routine of

farming and taught their children the satisfaction of hard work and a job well done. In the summers, their children were busy with helping however they could, Ray said. During the school year, though, Marty said their children helped when they could, while still being able to play sports and try out for teams, participate in band, and have other interests outside of farming.

Over the years, both Ray and Marty were involved with volunteering at their church. Ray held offices at the Zion Lutheran Church, including Elder and President of the Congregation. Marty volunteered with the Altar Guild, Sunday School and Vacation Bible School.

Retired now from actively farming, Ray continues to use his knowledge to help other farmers by providing the crop report weekly to the USDA from

April through October. Ray observes the crop conditions, soil moisture and how the crops are looking; are they showing signs of stress from lack of rain, etc., by driving around the county to view crops and farming activities. He includes the information he has gathered in a weekly report he sends to the USDA’s office in Lansing.

Ray and Marty enjoy the peaceful aspects of living on the farm. In late winter, beginning in March each year, they enjoy the sunshine that warms the enclosed porch Ray’s father built onto the house’s southern exposed side years ago. Marty’s gardening skills are evident with beautiful peonies and other blooms along the front of the house. They look forward to traveling to visit their children and grandchildren, and attending their granddaughter, Clare’s, graduation from Petoskey High School. She plans to attend MSU. Clare’s older sister, Madeline, is a junior at MSU, set to graduate in 2024.

The house contains many memories from the two generations who lived in it. During World War II, Ray’s parents kept a world map on one wall of the dining room so they could keep track of all their nephews who were serving in the war. Ray can remember lights out at night for security during the war and rationing of food and supplies. The nightly blackouts meant windows must be covered up so potential enemy bombers could not use houselights as a guide to the Soo Locks.

“Because we farmed, rationing coupons allowed us to get more gasoline and more tires (for tractors) than other citizens,” Ray said.

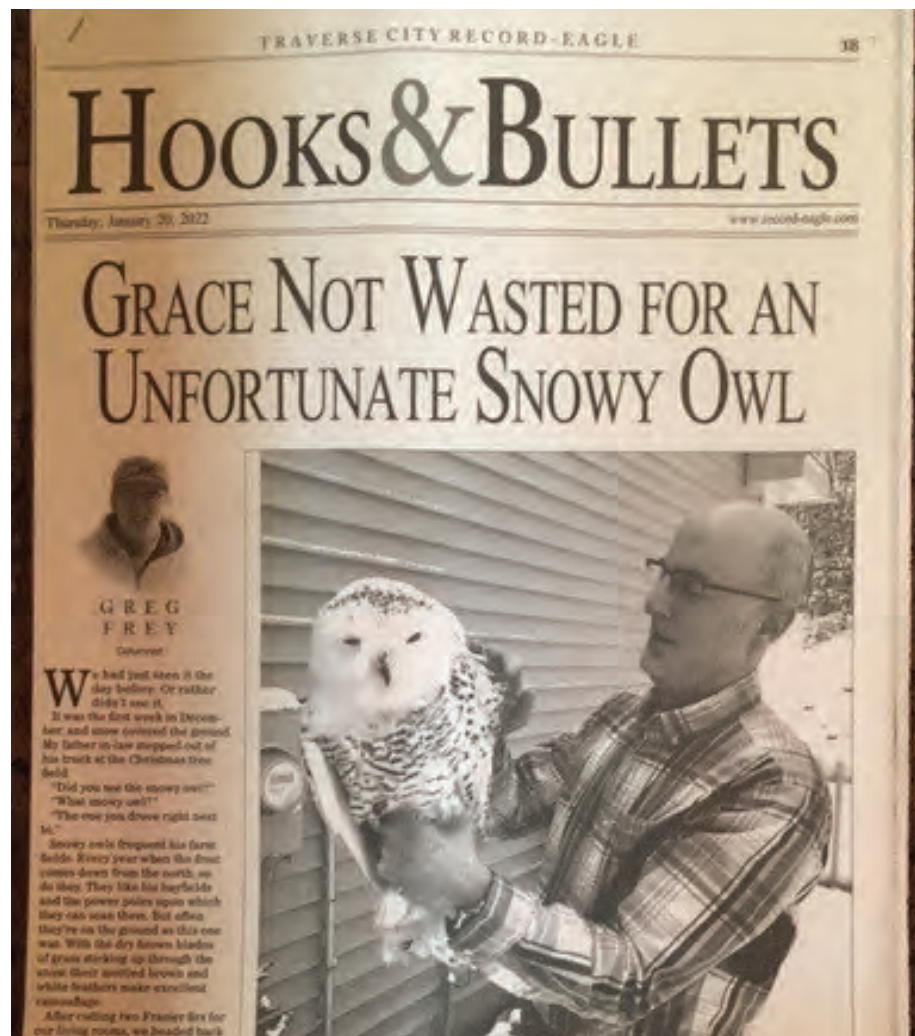
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Ray remembers as a child collecting milkweed seed pods for life preservers during the war. He and his siblings would sit in the hallway of their house during black-outs. They could keep a light on in the hallway to read without violating the rules. All the rationing and going without certain foods such as sugar was part of contributing to the war effort, Marty said.

The Epplers have seen many changes in the landscape of the area over the years. Growing up on the farm, Ray remembers watching the northern lights from the front porch during “lights out at night” during WWII. The increased light pollution from the City of Petoskey and the surrounding developments makes it difficult to see the northern lights these days.

They appreciate the wide-open spaces provided by the 80-plus acres around their house, barn, and the two silos. Those open spaces allowing for commanding views of Lake Michigan and Little Traverse Bay are awe-inspiring from the fields around their home. They can see the ski resorts of Boyne Highlands and Nub’s Nob, which are located on the northern side of the bay. Many natural animals and birds inhabit those open spaces. A winged visitor to the farm received much notoriety during the winter of 2021-2022.

In December 2021, their daughter, Kristin, and son-in-law, Greg Frey, asked if they could get their family’s Christmas tree from the Eppler property. Ray said he could, and he went with Greg to pick out the tree. While they were out on the property, they saw an Arctic owl, often called a “Snowy owl.” They thought



spotting one of the rare raptors was fairly special.

The next morning, Ray saw the owl right by the road. Ray called Greg to tell him. Greg was able to approach it, which seemed odd to them. Once he got to the owl, he realized it had succumbed to exposure and had frozen to death. Ray’s son-in-law, Greg, is a wildlife writer for the Traverse City Record Eagle. Greg tried reaching out to the Department of Natural Resources about the owl. The DNR didn’t have a need for a deceased owl.

They then tried to find an organization that would be interested in

having an intact Arctic owl. They contacted Camp Daggett, a summer camp for boys and girls on Walloon Lake. The camp’s executive director, Andy Hayes, knew a taxidermist — the former executive director, Brent Marlatt. Marlatt was able to preserve the owl, and then Ray donated the owl to Camp Daggett for educational purposes. Frey wrote about the owl’s journey and now the framed article from the Traverse City Record Eagle is displayed with pride in the old farmhouse.

Living on the farm continues to provide satisfaction for Ray and Marty Eppler. 🌿