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Seeking a Better Life: Jewish Poultry Farmers in New Jersey (Photo Essay)

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Seeking A Better Life: Jewish Poultry Farmers in New Jersey
Photographs by Rita Nannini
Text by Stephanie Fins

The plight of the American farmer is a subject that has captured the imagination of generations of photographers. Whether documenting conditions of farm life during the period of agricultural expansion in the 1900s, portraying the human tragedy and ecological devastation of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, or presenting images of contemporary agribusiness, photographers have recognized the importance of preserving a visual record of the changing character of American farm life.

The collaborative photo essay that Rita Nannini and I began in 1979 attempts to capture a recent period in the history of American agriculture—the decline of the small family poultry farm. The photo essay grew from an initial exploration of the experience of one farm family in New Jersey to include limited anthropological interviewing and extensive photography of more than twenty-six families living in several New Jersey counties. The project progressed over a five-year period, although most of the work was completed between 1979 and 1982. By 1984 more than five thousand photographs had been taken, and the final editing for exhibition began.

Rita Nannini, a graduate of Georgetown University, received her photographic training at the Corcoran School of Art, the New School for Social Research, the International Center of Photography, and the Harold Feinstein Workshop. She has been a freelance photographer in New York City since 1977 and has taught photography at the New York Botanical Gardens. She has exhibited at several locations, including the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, the Hophagan Gallery, and the Nahum Goldman Museum of the Jewish Diaspora in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Stephanie Fins, a graduate of Barnard College, received an M.Phil. degree in anthropology from Columbia University, where she is currently a Ph.D. candidate. She was trained in photography at the International Center of Photography and the Harold Feinstein Workshop. Fins now teaches at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and the School of Continuing Education at New York University, and is the Dallin Lecturer at the American Museum of Natural History.

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Our collaboration was influenced by several trends in documentary photography. First, the project recalls the work of the Farm Security Administration photographers, which presented the rural experience of the Depression to a wide audience. Our project was not designed, however, to shape public opinion in support of government policy. Rather, this photo essay serves as an intimate and informal portrait of a little-known and vanishing tradition in American agriculture. Second, the project reflects the photographer's desire to benefit from an exchange of ideas about the photographic process. By incorporating an anthropological perspective, the scope of the project was expanded and the photographic exploration significantly enriched. The collaborative efforts of Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor, Alex Harris and Robert Coles, and Gregory Datsen and Margaret Mead provided insight into the nature of such collaborative efforts and provided inspiration (Taylor and Lange 1939 [1969]; Coles and Harris 1970; Datsen and Mead 1942). Third, the project enabled the photographer to explore a subject in depth over a long period of time. Having spent several years taking photographs of distant locations, Nannini was curious to turn her camera to a subject closer to the New Jersey community she had known as a child. She wanted to capture the small-family-farm experience and provide a record of the few remaining farms.

As American agriculture has shifted to mechanized corporate operations, small-scale poultry farmers who have continued to remain in business seem almost an anomaly in the contemporary agricultural scene. Competition from egg conglomerates, increased production and marketing costs, the spread of suburbanization, and the rising value of farmland for development have made survival increasingly difficult for small poultry farmers in the 1980s, and such farms are quickly becoming economically obsolete.

The poultry farmers who are the focus of this photo essay represent a little-known phenomenon in the history of American agriculture—the Jewish poultry farmer. Jewish farmers constitute a minority within a minority, for Jewish participation in agriculture during the postwar period has been limited. While 17 percent of the total population participated in the agricultural sphere in 1945–1946, for example, less than 2 percent of the Jewish population engaged in agricultural pursuits (Simpson and Yinger 1953:384). Poultry farming was one of the most important branches of farming that Jewish farmers pursued. New Jersey became an important center of Jewish agriculture, and the state has long been recognized as "the cradle and crown of the Jewish farm movement in the United States" (Levine and Miller 1966:59).
Each of the farmers had his own reason for becoming a poultryman. Many saw poultry farming as an alternative to factory work. Some grew up in urban environments and sought a better life in the tranquility they believed the rural environment would provide. Some were refugees from Hitler’s persecution who arrived in the United States in the late 1930s, while others were Holocaust survivors who arrived as displaced persons after World War II. Some of the refugees chose farming because they spoke little or no English. For people faced with mid-life career changes the possibility of relatively high returns on limited initial investments and minimal training made poultry farming particularly attractive.

Often the men were encouraged to become poultry farmers by Jewish philanthropic organizations such as the Jewish Agricultural Society, which provided necessary training and offered loans. The society was formed in 1900 by the Baron de Hirsch Fund, which had been established a decade earlier, in 1891, by Maurice de Hirsch of Germany, to resettle oppressed Jews. The fund began aiding the already established Jewish farm colonists in southern New Jersey. The intention of the Jewish Agricultural Society was to help resettle Jews on farms, thereby intensifying and expanding the agricultural part of the fund’s activities. The society did not foster colonization experiments but, rather, aimed at encouraging individuals to settle on their own farms.

At the height of the industry, in the late 1950s, there were an estimated three thousand Jewish farmers in New Jersey producing three-quarters of the state’s total gross annual income from poultry (Shapiro 1977:304). The farms were located primarily in Vineland, Toms River, Lakewood, Farmingdale, Flemington, and the Perrineville-Freehold area. The Jewish farmers also organized egg marketing cooperatives, food cooperatives, and hatcheries that served both Jewish and non-Jewish farmers.

We have attempted to document the aspects of farm life needed for a visual and verbal understanding of the small-scale poultry farm. The annual cycle of egg production requires almost constant supervision by the farmer. The chickens must be watched for signs of diseases that can quickly spread through a flock; they must be vaccinated, and provided with food and water and good ventilation. The eggs must be collected several times a day by the farmer and his family. After the eggs are collected, they must be taken to the egg room to be processed. The eggs are washed, either manually or automatically, candled to check for abnormalities, sorted by size, and packed for retail or wholesale distribution. In addition to care of the chickens, other tasks associated with poultry farming include routine maintenance work and the disposal of chicken manure. Automation has improved some aspects of poultry farming, enabling some of the farmers to increase the size of the flocks from 5,000 to as large as 50,000 chickens. While the majority of the farmers have operated their farms with family labor, a few have employed farmhands. Vacations from the farm are made difficult by the problem of finding adequate temporary labor replacement on family-staffed farms.

The majority of the farms we visited were family operations with fewer than 50,000 chickens. Several of the farmers were able to make a successful transition to large-scale mechanized production, with up to 500,000 chickens raised at several farm locations. Poultry houses, the succoocoors of chicken coops, held as many as 90,000 chickens in tiered cages that are temperature- and light-controlled to stimulate production. The eggs roll out of the cages and are transported by conveyor belt to a large egg room. Manure drops through the cages and collects below the floor, where it may be stored at the lower level for the production cycle of the flock. The disposal of chicken manure on a large-scale farm can be a serious problem. Surburbanization and the proximity of residential areas may result in complaints about the odor if management is not careful. The independently owned large-scale farms we visited are different from the corporate farms of the south and midwest, which may have several million chickens. The family-run farms have been faced with tough competition from the vast corporate conglomerates.

In the last three decades, since the New Jersey poultry industry reached its peak, Jewish farmers have been witnessing the steady decline of their farms: now only a few active farms remain. The farmers have been caught in the squeeze between rising prices of feed and replacement equipment, and stable egg prices. The difficulties of raising funds to mechanize and increase the scale and efficiency of their operations have contributed to their decline. Many of the farmers are trying to run their farms with equipment that has not been significantly upgraded for more than two decades. Further, stiff competition from the egg conglomerates has cut significantly into business. The uncertainties characteristic of present-day poultry farming have led many farmers to retire early. Some of the farmers have been forced off their farms by foreclosure, some have retired early, some have sold their equipment and now engage in other wage-earning activities on their land, while a smaller number have worked to hold onto their farms until they reach retirement age.
The decline of Jewish involvement in the poultry industry has been rapid. By 1966 the number of Jewish farmers in New Jersey had dropped from 3,000 to approximately 1,000. In the three-county area inhabited by 700 farmers during the industry’s peak, there were only 200 farmers left in 1966 (Levine and Miller 1966). From 1975 to 1980, while feed costs soared, the price of a dozen eggs went from 56 cents to 93 cents and then dropped back to 58 cents. The total production for the state of New Jersey dropped by more than 50 percent during the same five-year period. The gross income from egg production dropped by 25 percent between 1979 and 1980. By 1979, when our project began, many more farmers had been forced out of business and they continued to leave farming throughout the five-year period. Yet a few farmers continued to try to maintain their farms. As one active farmer told us:

You want to know what it’s like? It’s terrible. I work and work and work, and for nothing. With the price of grain, I’m losing money. I’m working for nothing now.

The decline of the small family farms that has characterized the last thirty years in American agriculture has radically changed the character of American rural life. The small family farm has held a place in American life for its contribution to “a pattern of egalitarianism and personal independence” that helps maintain democratic institutions, according to anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (Kline 1981:136). The rapid disappearance of small farms, as a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Agriculture has noted, “implies a disenfranchisement, a separation of the majority of the people from the land” (ibid.).

The agrarian dream did not come true for many of these farmers, yet their persistence and their determination in the face of adversity kept them going during lean years. While some of the farmers were very successful or managed to recoup their losses through the sale of their land, others found their rewards primarily in their closeness to the land. As one retired farmer expressed it:

Nature always opens up a door for you. If you love nature, nature has a way of compensating you. If you see a baby chick one day old and you see how it begins to run and how it begins to play, it gives you a lot of pleasure. Farming isn’t bad because ... human beings are closer to nature than to industry or to anything else.

After a thirty-year commitment to farming, many of the farmers have only their memory of better times in the poultry industry.

References

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- Kline, David
- Levine, H. J., and Benjamin Miller
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- Taylor, Paul S., and Dorothea Lange
Figure 1  Morris Metterman. Howell, 1979.
Figure 2  Harry Golubchick, a retired farmer, sitting on a pumpkin grown on his farm. Summer 1980. If you love nature, nature has a way of compensating you. If you see a baby chick one-day old and you see how it begins to grow faster and how it begins to run and begins to play, it gives you a lot of pleasure (Golubchick).
Figure 3  Morris and Malka Metterman. Howell, summer 1979.
Figure 4  Chickens. Howell, 1979.
Figure 5  Aron Ginzberg. Toms River, summer 1980. You want to know what it’s like? It’s terrible. I work and work and work and for nothing. With the price of grain, I’m losing money. I’m working for nothing now (Ginzberg).

Figure 6  Sam Epstein collecting eggs. Toms River, August 1980.
Figure 8  Morris Mitterman washing eggs. Howell, summer 1979.

Figure 7  Frank Budelman. Lakewood, February 1984. Frank Budelman now raises different-colored chickens that lay colored eggs.
Figure 9  Sam Epstein weighs an egg. Toms River, August 1980.
Figure 10  Dave and Florence Green selling eggs.
Farmingdale, February 1982.
Figure 11  Abraham and Martha Crystal holding all that’s left of their chickens. Norma, November 1980. The Crystals were one of the first Jewish farm families to specialize in egg production in the 1920s. They retired from farming in 1960. They are holding a photograph of two hens, all that remains of the 18,000 chickens they owned.
Figure 12  Harry Golubchick singing opera at home. Toms River, summer 1960.
Figure 13  Jules Lacher with a photograph of himself taken in Europe before World War II. Toms River, February 1982.

Figure 14  Malka and Morris Mettman and family. Howell, July 4, 1979. But to tell you the truth, not to cry, we made a living. We put two kids through college, bought our home, worked hard. . . . Besides, what I had in Europe, thank God for America (Malka Mettman).
Figure 15  Morris Mettermen. Howell, spring 1979.

Figure 16  Sam Epstein puts on his boots before work. Toms River, August 1980. If I would have to start all over again, I wouldn’t do it again. No matter how much money you make you live only one life. . . . The best time of your life you give away to the farm (Epstein).
Figure 17 Robin Kerns puts day-old chicks into cages. Garden State Egg Company, Woodstown, April 1984. The chicks were transported from hatchery to farm in school busses.
Figure 18  Inside caged chicken house. Garden State Egg Company, Woodstown, April 1984. There are no more practicing farms like we had years ago. They’re all out of business. You can’t possibly make it that way. You’ve got to be in this type of production and you have to have the automation . . . it’s a necessary evil (Walter Rosenstock).
Figure 19  Abandoned Coop. Howell, summer 1979.
Figure 20  Women feeding chickens on the range. Early twentieth century. Photo courtesy of American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Mass.
Figure 21  World's largest frying pan. Vineland Poultry and Egg Festival, summer 1957. Photo courtesy of the Poultry Times.
Figure 22  Paul Schneiderman collecting eggs. Flemington, 1950s. Photo courtesy of the Schneiderman family.

Figure 23  Paul Schneiderman burns his coop. Flemington, December 1964. Photo courtesy of the Schneiderman family.