

FEATURE ARTICLE

Looking Back At Wilmette's Farm Stands

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In recent years, Americans have enthusiastically embraced the idea of purchasing locally grown produce. This movement recalls a time in Wilmette when there were many vegetable farms west of Ridge Road. Vegetables such as carrots, beets, melons, tomatoes, and corn were grown. Much of the produce was sold at Chicago's South Water Street Market, a bustling wholesale produce market that began in the 19th century. However, many farmers also sold some of their crops at farm stands on their property. Farm stands were once permitted in residential areas here in Wilmette. The practice gives new meaning to the phrase "farmer's market." Here are the stories of a few of these businesses.

The Peter J. Schneider farm stand was located on Old Glenview Road and Hibbard Road. The first Schneiders immigrated from Prussia (now part of Germany) in 1846 and purchased farmland in New Trier Township. The family sold produce from their farm from at least the 1930s (and possibly before then) into the 1960s. One family member, Richard Schneider, recalled the business in the 1950s: "In front of the cash register was a large single table upon which were displayed featured items like Bing cherries by the pound, blueberries by the pint, or tomatoes that had been wiped of their dust and dirt from the field, and then hand selected for each basket based on their color and uniform size." In the fall, a trailer was often pulled through the fields and loaded up with various types of pumpkins for making pumpkin pies or carving jack-o-lanterns for Halloween. Mrs. Rose Schneider was known for her charming vegetable sculptures that adorned the business each autumn.



P.J. Schneider's Farm Stand, 3100 Old Glenview Road, circa 1966

Another multi-generational farm family was the Rengels who settled in New Trier Township in 1847. Like the Schneiders, the Rengels transported their produce by horse and cart

to sell at the South Water Street Market in the 19th century. According to family lore, William Rengel opened a farm stand at 2722 Old Glenview Road in the 1920s in order to sell some of their produce to local customers. His son, Roman, took over the operation from his father and ran it with his family until he died in 1995. In the 1960s, the Village of Wilmette changed the zoning laws prohibiting farm stands, but the Rengels were grandfathered in until Roman Rengel died. The family was then forced to close the business at the end of 1995.



*Customers at Rengel's Vegetable Stand, circa 1964
Phil Jacobson, photographer*

Hammond Gardens, once at 800 Skokie Boulevard, sold both vegetables and flowers for approximately 70 years before closing in 2001. The stand was once part of the family's farm in that vicinity of west Wilmette. The business was started by Bert Hammond and carried on by his son, Don, until it closed. Although the business survived a number of changes over the decades, including the Great Depression, the advent of post-World War II housing developments in the area, and the loss of much of their land, Don cited economic pressures as the reason he sold the family's remaining land to a townhome developer.



Hammond Gardens Farm Stand, 1980

- Kathy Hussey-Arntson