



Burcham farm on the Maurice River

Burcham Farm (cover story)

By J. Morton Galetto

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For me the Burcham farm's recent history is intertwined with some of my own escapades. In the early 80's we moved to the banks of the Maurice River. We had been married about three years and were in our twenties. Across the river and one reach away was the historic Burcham Farm, home of the Burcham twin sisters Janice and Jeanette, who were born and still lived on the farm.

For me, as for many one-time students of Millville schools, I knew Jeannette as a substitute teacher who could hold her

own against any nonsense that might be dreamt up in a regular teacher's absence. My husband's experience with the Burchams was much different than mine. His father was a friend of 'the girls' and he knew them through the family trucking business. And my husband Peter knew them because of a unique set of needs, such as diking material and building maintenance. Soon after we moved it was time to make a call on 'the girls,' for they needed some rubble to fortify the dike, and thus began about three decades of interactions. My husband's family construction business had a masonry component and it was often necessary for them to tear out concrete foundations or walls, all of which would make excellent fortification for the Burchams' marshland dike, the last remaining example of diked farming in the Delaware Bay region. In fact in the 1990's the Burcham property was designated a Century Farm, having been maintained by the same family for over 100 years.

One day at our home the phone rang and a raspy voice on the other end said, "Is Peter available?" I inquired, "Who's calling?" and Jeanette replied, "The Burcham sisters." Trained from my student days I sprang into action like the drill sergeant had spoken. "Peter, the Burchams are on," I said with appropriate urgency. He said, "Jeanette, we'll be right over." He hung up the phone and had a

knowing smile, one that denoted that I was about to be indoctrinated. So we got in our boat and crossed from the west river bank to the east, for what would be the first of many trips to see 'the girls.'

The sisters greeted us. They were identically dressed in denim shirts, blue jeans, red socks and navy boots: good German gals who put practicality ahead of fashion. It was clear that Jeanette was the spokesperson for business. They struck me as salt of the earth, regular people. But in short course I learned they had a highbrow side. If you got onto a more complex topic this became evident, because Jeanette had a degree in transportation law from the University of Pennsylvania and Janice had a masters in counselling from Columbia. Janice was the head nurse on the USS Sanctuary, and according to my father-in-law Jeanette was the brains behind Burcham Trucking. Shortly after we met, the US government sent Jeanette to China to consult on transportation needs. Her recommendation, typically blunt and practical, was that due to the extremely high population density China should stick to their bicycles or they'd destroy the country.



Jeanette and Janice Burcham (faded blue jeans on right)

It seems that cocktail hour was a farm tradition and I'm not one for ignoring traditions. They explained the history of the dike and brickyard to me. I listened with rapt attention.

At one point the Burchams' farming style was widespread in our region. Marshland properties on both the Maurice and Cohansey were diked along the riverfront. The ground created by the dike was farmed, for marshland is the most fertile soil on the earth and our original settlers, the Swedish and Dutch, were familiar with

this practice of staving off the tide. Dikes were maintained by the Maurice River Banking Company, which was responsible for large-scale undertakings beginning in 1808 and known as reclamation, in which tidal lands were excluded from tidal influence. In 1809 two men paid to have the river diked from its mouth to 15 miles upstream. Prior to truck farming and rail, goods went by water to Philadelphia so farming on the banks of a river was advantageous to shipping. This was much easier, smoother, and faster, and allowed larger quantities of produce to be taken to Philadelphia markets and processing plants. Shipping was advantageous for many other products, and the Burcham property was home to a brick factory from 1865 to 1942 as well. Amaziah Burcham, the Burchams' grandfather, bought the property and took over the brickyard in 1867.

In 1870 the census showed three men working the brick factory while the 1880 census showed 12 employees. A 1904 NJ state geologist wrote of two factories using high quality Cape May clay, one on the east side of Buckshutem and the other on the west side. Amaziah Burcham's son, Frank Burcham, took over the brickyard in 1913.

The Burcham house was built ca. 1870 from clay mined and bricks fired on site. The brick factory's inception was well-

coordinated with Millville's industrial growth. Brick making was seasonally timed such that workers for the brickyard lived at the farm six months of the year and bought their provisions from the Burcham farm store. Today, Burcham bricks are still visible on the backs of building along Millville's High Street, although most façades have changed over time. The sisters told me that the brickyard was finally closed by WWII when men were used for essential war businesses only. The farm continued.

Janice had a leg injury that plagued her for her entire life, inflicted when she was run over by the brick cart at the yard. Jeanette's one arm lacked full strength and thus she primarily tended to the business side of things. Later Janice did most of the heavier chores around the farm. It was common to see her around town collecting produce fit for their pigs but no longer of interest to shoppers. They would joke that the pigs' meal was cooked once a year when the agricultural inspector came. My favorite pig story involved a bowling ball, colored like a watermelon. in the pig sty. The sisters explained that pigs were bright and liked toys, but I guess they weren't bright enough for the bowling pins.

One of their oft used quips was, "The money is in the bank," while pointing to the riverside fortification and saying

“Cadillacs and fur coats.” This was their way of acknowledging that maintaining the dike meant no luxuries, and anything derelict was material for the dike, including wrecked boats and cars. They did not strike me as placing much importance on material goods. They had seen the world and were happy to be back home on the farm. In fact, they only left for necessities and the Army-Navy game in Philadelphia, and of course Jeanette’s school subbing jobs. Each year they invited everyone for sheep shearing: a huge covered dish event that was held when the sheep got their spring outfits. We invited them each year to our holiday party. They never came; it was always we who went east. One year I didn’t ask them and the word got back to me that they felt snubbed. So I called and said, “But you never come.” Their reply, “But we like being asked.”

One of my favorite stories to tell about the Burchams involves Ogden, a Weimeraner, one of their long series of farmyard dogs. If I stopped by on a river tour in the afternoon the girls would bring out lemonade in copper cups. It was a great treat. During our visits Ogden, a formidable beast, would often get up on the picnic table. As was customary, if I gave a tour strictly from the river the captain of the vessel would be instructed to blow his horn and one of the sisters would come out to the porch to wave. On

this particular occasion ‘the girls’ were having a customary afternoon copper cup break at the picnic table when a peregrine falcon flew over. I was on a large vessel with a group of conservationists and I pointed out the peregrine, which was an excellent and rare sighting. They tipped their binoculars skyward with awe. Then I announced, “And on the picnic table by the house on the hill is the *world’s largest Weimaraner* with the Burcham sisters.” All spy glasses lowered to the hillside and there was a noticeable gasp, and no one disputed my claim. ‘The girls,’ dressed identically, flanked Ogden; it was quite a sighting to be sure. When I told the sisters the story at our next cocktail hour there were hearty laughs all around and again no dispute.



Janice at 1988 sheep shearing. In the shade of the tree: Jeanette with Ogden on picnic table.



Pat Witt, lifelong friend and childhood river neighbor of the Burchams, teaches an art class at the farm, circa 2006.

In 2005 Janice passed away and shortly thereafter Jeanette was gone too. When I boat past their house and its iconic spindle-posted porch I picture one of them coming out to wave hello. I also remember them calling me on my cell and reminding me not to throw a boat wake against the dike: *busted*. In memory the wave is like a bittersweet goodbye. And yes, I even miss being firmly corrected for moving too fast. Now the only thing that seems to move too fast is time.

A special thanks to the research and writings of Patricia Bovers Ball who has done countless hours of research about the Burcham Farm. [On the CU website you can find her thesis and much more information on the farm.](#) On Saturday June 29th CU Maurice River will have a campfire and covered dish dinner at the Farm. It is a members'-only event but it's not too late to join our ranks! To join go to

*cumauriceriver.org and to reserve call the
office at 856-300-5331.*