



Iconic silos are still a beautiful part of the Blue Bell landscape today.
Photo by **Alex Lowy, LLC**



Normandy Farms circa 1930 – courtesy of the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society.

BEHIND THE WHITE WALLS OF NORMANDY FARMS – SINCE 1911

By **Russ Bellavance**, President of Wissahickon Valley Historical Society

Whenever you drive along Morris Road or DeKalb Pike, you can't help but notice the white stucco walls and arch-roofed gates of Normandy Farms. Both the name and the architectural design seem completely out of place. We expect German, English and even Welsh names and architecture, but French Norman? We don't see that too often. And why Normandy Farms instead of just Normandy Farm?

As is so often the case, we can attribute the local oddities to one or two people; in this case that person was Ralph Beaver Strassburger. Strassburger was a Naval Academy graduate (class of 1905) who had the good sense to realize that it was just as easy to love a rich woman. He married May Bourne, whose father was president of the Singer Sewing Machine Company.

Like many of us, his in-laws gave the new couple a wedding present. Unlike the rest of us, that present was \$4,000,000. Back in 1911, that was real money!

Although of German heritage, Strassburger loved all things French, and had a pied a terre (that's a townhouse to you and me) in Paris and a beloved estate in Normandy, as well as a racing stable. The Strassburgers began purchasing property in Whitpain, starting with an 83-acre parcel on the northwest corner of Morris and DeKalb, and also began to import the classic Normandy look of white stucco walls and farm buildings.

Usually we think of farms in this area as once having been very large tracts, which were then divided over the years, usually

among children or grandchildren of the original grantee. Normandy Farms went in the other direction, as Strassburger embarked on an active campaign of assembling many farms into his single estate, which is why it is called Normandy Farms, not Normandy Farm. The available properties stretched into lower Gwynedd Township, and at its height the estate was about 1500 acres, with many farmhouses, barns and other buildings. It was the largest farm in Montgomery County.

Strassburger lived at a time when owning newspapers was a path to even greater wealth, social standing and political power. He became the owner of the Norristown Times Herald. Since Norristown is the seat of Montgomery County, Strassburger's influence spread throughout the county, and his estate became a meeting place for the county's movers and shakers. As a marketing scheme, Strassburger created the Fifty Year Club, which was only open to people who had lived in Montgomery County for at least 50 years. Starting in 1925, Strassburger began hosting an annual picnic for the Fifty Year Club at Normandy Farms, and hundreds of members attended these gala events, often walking the six miles from Norristown (where they picked up their picnic tickets) to Normandy Farms. The picnics featured speakers, entertainment and vast quantities of food and drink.

Initially, Strassburger intended to use Normandy Farms primarily to raise thoroughbred racehorses. This changed over the years and he consolidated the racehorse activities at his properties in France. He set a new goal of raising Ayrshire cattle, both for their milk and their meat. He imported a herd of Ayrshires from Scotland and built a milking barn with three large silos. The barn and silos are now prominently featured at the Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center.



Gary Rau of Inverrary found this old post card in a flea market several years ago.

Nothing lasts forever, and in 1947 Strassburger faced the disgrace of being indicted for failure to pay income taxes. He left for his beloved Normandy and never returned to the United States. Following his death in France, his wife and their son Peter returned to Normandy Farms. They were forced to sell off portions of the property, and after her death in 1975, Peter moved away and continued to sell portions of the once grand estate. The portions sold included those tracts that became the Normandy Farms Estates retirement community and - here it comes - the Blue Bell Country Club!

Ralph Strassburger had a brother-in-law, Alexander D. Thayer, who married not one, but two of May Bourne Strassburger's sisters. The brothers-in-law were very competitive, and one measure of their competition was to see who could create the biggest and best farm. Thayer named his Gwynllan (a good Welsh name) and remnants of the Gwynllan farm buildings can be found on the campus of Montgomery County Community College. But that's a story for another day.

This is the eighth in a series of articles about local history brought to you by the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society. If there is a topic you would like to propose for a future article, please contact me at rcbellavance67@gmail.com. If you enjoy these articles, you may want to consider membership in the Society. Please see our website at wvalleyhs.org for more information.



The old milking barn is now a host to weddings and other events at Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center. Photo by **Alex Lowy, LLC**