

# Every Property Has a Story: Sleepy Hollow Farms, now part of Sts. Simon & Jude Church, was an idyllic place to grow up

by Gail O. Guterl, Westtown Township Historical Commission

The snow began falling early on the morning of February 3, 1961. By the time it stopped, 24 hours later, the area was blanketed with 17 inches. Thomas A. "Buck" Riley and neighbors who helped on the farm leapt into action, working in the barns on their property on South Chester Road (Rt. 352) and Rt. 3 (West Chester Pike) putting chains on the back wheels and plows on the front of their John Deere tractors, while the snow fell fast and heavy.

"In those days Westtown Township had no snow removal equipment," remembers Buck. "So we put snow plows on our tractors, drove across our fields to Johnny's Way, and plowed all the local roads. The township roadmaster, Chester Supplee, agreed to pay us \$5/hour to plow local roads. Eventually it went up to \$7/hour. Once the snow stopped, the state would plow the main roads - Routes 3, 926, 352, and 202." These tractors had no enclosed cabs. The drivers were exposed to the elements and the cold. "We'd come home every so often, warm up, eat and drink something hot, put on all the warm dry clothes we could find, and go back out and plow," Buck said. "We'd plow all the way to Rt. 202. But, I tell you, the local roads were plowed and cleared well before the state roads."

This scene was one of many of life on a Westtown Township farm in the 1950s and '60s, where farming was the main occupation for most township residents until the mid-1970s. The Riley family, headed by their step-grandfather David McDaniel and their grandmother, Gertrude Riley McDaniel, owned 235 acres along Rt. 3 (a two-lane road with a trolley down the middle) and Rt. 352 in the township. This area is now home to Sts. Simon & Jude Church and School and the developments of Westtown Farms and houses on Johnny's Way and McDaniel Drive.

## Death & Re-marriage

Gertrude M. Conley married Howard A. Riley, a successful stockbroker, who began his career working in a bowling alley. They lived in Germantown, PA, and had three children: Thomas A., Howard F., and Doris. (Buck

Riley is the son of Thomas A; he and Judge Howard F. "Tuck" Riley Jr., son of Howard F., shared reminiscences of their life on the farm.)

During this happy time of starting a family and being a successful businessman, tragedy struck in 1919. Howard A. died of tuberculosis in March, and two-year-old Doris died in November. Howard's widow inherited about \$500,000 (equivalent to more than \$7 million in 2018 dollars).

For a time, the family lived in the Bellevue Stratford Hotel in Philadelphia, where at some point she met David McDaniel, a Missourian, who had become a Philadelphia motorcycle cop. "He was movie-star handsome, like Clark Gable," Buck remembers.



It is not known how they met, but it is known they got along well. However, there was an impediment to the relationship; Gertrude was a devout Catholic and David was not. "Unbeknownst to my grandmother," Tuck said, "David began instructions to become a Catholic. One day he told my grandmother they needed to go to church at a specific time. It was for his baptism." Soon after, David McDaniel and Gertrude married.

### Down on the Farm

David's dream was to own a farm and raise horses and Angus beef. They began to look around for land and finally purchased two properties in Westtown, combining them into Sleepy Hollow Farms. "They made a deal that they would live on the farm in the summer and in the city in the winter," Buck remembers from family stories. "The first two years she lived out here full-time, she cried most of the time. But then she really began to like it. She began driving horses and raking hay."

Now this was a surprising reversal for a woman, her grandson's say, who loved beautiful things; she played piano by ear, had delicate china, fine glassware, silverware, and original paintings in her house. "She was elegant, but she was a down-to-earth person," Buck said.

### Building a Home

Around 1939, Gertrude and David, who had no children from this marriage, built a stone house on Rt. 3. "My grandmother built and owned several other houses, which are still standing, along S. Chester Road and what would become Johnny's Way and Woodcrest Road," Buck said. "As the family grew and had their own children, they occupied the other houses."

Both men describe living on the farm as idyllic. "There's nothing more wonderful than to grow up on a farm, plant crops, raise horses and cattle. We worked hard all summer long. In fact, once school let out for summer, we'd take our shirts off to work in the fields and, except for church on Sunday, we'd hardly wear a shirt all summer," Buck recalled. Tuck remembers looking out the window of his grandmother's house and "all you'd see is rolling fields, farm buildings, and trees. The stars were much brighter then."

During these years, the Riley's phone number (and everyone else's) was only 5 digits "502R5." Not everyone had a telephone, and they were strictly manual. "I had a friend, Larry Gallagher, and his older sister was a telephone operator," Tuck remembered. "When I'd pick up the phone and hear 'number please' and recognize Joni's voice, I'd say 'Joni, I want to talk to Larry,' and she'd connect me."

Despite the idyllic farm life, several men in the Riley family remember running away from home; home being one of the houses on the family farm. They never went far. "We'd go up the hill to Nana's (Gertrude's) house.

We'd stay with her a few days and then go back down the hill to home," Tuck said.

However, things changed in 1956 with the death of their grandfather of a massive heart attack, when Buck was 16 and Tuck 14. "We took over running the farm," Buck said. "We'd come home from school, tend to the 30 Angus cows and horses, clean out the stalls, and ensure we had enough feed for cows and horses for the week because we'd do all this work before and after school."

Soon after his death, Gertrude moved to another house on the property. Around that time, she deeded 13.5 acres to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. "She wanted them to build a church on the property and name it St. David's in honor of my step-grandfather," said Buck. "Turned out there was already a St. David's in the archdiocese, so in 1961 they built Sts. Simon & Jude Church."

When Gertrude died in 1971, death duties and estate taxes forced the sale of the rest of the property, which was managed by Buck and Tuck. The last parcel was sold in the 1980s. Several housing developments sit on what was the 100-acre farm. The main house of the farm is now the rectory for Sts. Simon & Jude Church. Several old specimen trees, a cedar and a copper beech, planted by David McDaniel still grace the church property. Family members continue to live in some of the houses on S. Chester Road that were part of the original farm created by Gertrude and David.



McDaniel property before Saints Simon & Jude