

ONE LITTLE CORNER

ORIGINALLY WRITTEN BY GARRETT MOORE IN 2011

UPDATED IN 2019

The purpose of this exercise is to chronicle the history of one particular parcel of land, as it applies to the Mid Michigan Old Gas Tractor Association (MMOGTA). Of course, all "land" pre-dates written history, as well as the men who have written it, so this piece will only deal with the century or so that directly impacted the story of the above named organization.

The parcel of interest is located in the southwest corner of Saginaw County, near the geographical center of the Lower Peninsula of the State of Michigan, and wholly within the borders of Brady Township. Topographically, it is indistinct from the flat, fertile farmland that surrounds it on all sides. Politically, the Township (pop. 2234) is almost completely rural, with the exception of the small village of Oakley, near the southeast extremity. With the exception of typical small woodlots in the centers of the 640 acre sections, the majority of the land is actively cultivated, with many residential lots having been sold off from the road frontage and occupied by residents along the mostly asphalted country roads on the perimeter of the sections. By virtue of the many small, meandering creeks and improved County drains, surface water ultimately falls into the Shiawassee River.

On the extreme southeast corner of Section 20 of Brady Twp., at the intersection of Ferden and Brennan Rd, is the 40 acre parcel of interest here. In the 1920's, this parcel of land was partially wooded, partially cultivated, and owned by Dolph and Sally Fuller. The Fullers had moved here from Kentucky and owned and occupied the 60 acres directly east of the above mentioned parcel, as part of a 100 acre farming operation, with their residence located on the northeast corner of that intersection.

With the arrival of the Great Depression, in 1930, the Fuller family found themselves in dire financial straits, which resulted in the forced sale of their land to Jim and Hugh Murray. The Murray brothers had significant financial assets at their disposal, which they used to facilitate the purchase of many "distressed" properties, and it is said that at one time they owned most of Brady Township. As the crippling effects of the Depression began to ease, and more people began to have money to invest, the Murray's were in a position to reap the benefits of their earlier acquisitions. In the late 1930's, this same 40 acre corner, was sold again to a Walter Mitchell, as a part of the entire 100 acre farm, with the additional 60 acres and residence located just east of the intersection. With the Mitchell's purchase, the chain of custody was begun that would to culminate in the present day ownership, since Mr. Mitchell was the Great Uncle of Walt Ritenburg, one of the 6 founding members of the MMOGTA.

At the time of WW II (mid 1940's), Walter Mitchell sold the farm to his son Merlin Mitchell, who was the Uncle of Walt Ritenburg. As Mr. Ritenburg (born in 1934) came of age he

became engaged in the farming operation with his Uncle Merlin. After Ritenburg served a stint in the US Navy, he returned to Brady Twp. and built a home on nearby Ridge Rd. He also resumed the farming partnership with Merlin Mitchell, upon his return, as well as various outside jobs.

In 1959, Ritenburg, wishing to take over more of the farming operations to support his growing family, struck a deal with his Uncle Merlin, to trade the Ridge Rd house as part of a purchase deal that ended in Ritenburg owning the farm and residence at the intersection of Brennan and Ferden Rds. At that point, Ritenburg and his family took up residence on the farm, where he resides to this day.

By the 1960's, Ritenburg was employed at Saginaw Steering Gear, farming, and raising a family that eventually included his wife Ann, and 5 daughters. During all of his years, Walt had nurtured a fondness for the agricultural life, and the many mechanical tools of that trade. He and a few like minded friends had begun to collect and restore antique farm tractors and machinery, just as a hobby. As they often do, the hobby became more and more a passion for Walt and his friends, to the extent that in about 1972, they began to hold neighborhood "Threshing Bee's" just as an opportunity to use their collected tractors and tools.

Perhaps because agriculture had begun to dramatically change during that time frame, moving away from the typical, small neighborhood farm, toward larger, more industrialized operations, the re-enactment of scenes from an earlier time was an instant hit in the area. The annual event, which was held at the farm of another MMOGTA founding member, soon outgrew the small field they had available for the outing.

In 1974, the 6 founding members of the MMOGTA decided it was time to incorporate their group, and others then began to join the association. After 2 years, it was clear that a larger space was needed to accommodate the many spectators who began to look forward to the annual show. Mr. Ritenburg, by now a busy shop worker and part-time farmer, offered to lease a portion (12 acres, in 2 pieces, the first year) of his farm to the group to hold their annual show. The parcel offered was a piece of Walt's west 40, including some open farmland and a portion of the wooded corner of the lot. All were in agreement to the lease.

The early editions of what would become known as the Mid Michigan Old Gas Tractor Show, were primitive, limited by the finances and using only volunteer labor. A large tent was rented for the social area, primitive outdoor restrooms were put in place, water had to be hauled in, and electricity was provided by farm tractors running PTO driven generators.

However primitive or obscure the event might sound to many, it was a huge success, that year and in the years to follow. Ever increasing numbers of spectators began to attend each year. The hobby seemed to be growing in every direction. More and more people had been displaced away from their roots on earlier 20th century farming lives into non-farm activities, and seemed to genuinely appreciate the opportunity to relive some of their earlier life experiences.

After only 2 years, the 12 acres lease had to be expanded to include the entire western half of the 40 acre parcel. As it became clear that this would be an ongoing operation, older unwanted buildings were moved in to house the various aspects and displays that were part of the show. The first was an old grainery, donated by member and neighbor Bob Fulton and put to use on the "Showgrounds", as it was now known. The rustic structure stood in place just behind a pond as it began its second life. In about 1978, the group decided it was time to begin adding our own identity to the old farm, and a large, open sided Pavilion was built, entirely with volunteer labor from the members and friends. A large barn, again donated by Bob Fulton, was cribbed up and mounted on the converted flatbed of a retired beer truck, which was completely obscured by the much longer structure, and driven some four miles to the Showgrounds, where it is still in use today. The scene was an adventure which is still reminisced about today.

With the continuing success of the club for collateral, it became clear that the group would become the permanent occupants of that busy piece of land, and in November 1981, the MMOGTA voted to enter a Land Contract with Walt Ritenburg for the purchase of the west 20 of the 40 acre parcel of land. It was thus officially retired from agricultural production, and dedicated to creating an ever improving platform for producing the MMOGTA Show. The Land contract was paid off in 1993, but in the interim, it had become necessary to begin simultaneously leasing the east half (20 acres) of the parcel to hold the ever-growing display field and activities. In November of 1991, a Land Contract was again entered with Mr. Ritenburg to purchase the east 20 acres of the parcel. This contract was to be completed in November 2010, with Mr. Ritenburg forgiving the last \$7000 of indebtedness in order to facilitate the funding of a new Repair Shop structure for the Club's use in maintaining and repairing their equipment.

In 1996, a Land Contract was entered with neighboring landowner Myra Devereaux to purchase her residence and her 37 acres of wooded property which was adjacent the north perimeter of the 40 acre parcel. Mrs. Devereaux was to retain a life lease of the residence until such time as she wished to move away, while the wooded portion was to be developed by the Association for use as a camping area.

In 2000, a 10 year lease agreement was entered with neighboring landowner Ed Wirostek for use of the 37 acre parcel adjacent the west perimeter of the Showgrounds. This property was dedicated to use as a spectator parking area for events held at the Showgrounds. By this time, the Club had become very active, with events beginning in April and continuing through October taking place on the premises.

During this time period, construction had begun on a large building created to house Steam Powered exhibits and engines on the Showgrounds. Dedicated in honor of an active and influential member, Bev Meyers, the structure has since been expanded twice and is shelter to the sawmill, Tin Shop, Blacksmith shop, and machine shop, as well as numerous stationary Steam Engines and Boilers.

Two wells have been drilled, permanent restrooms and showers have been installed, various Tracks and crop demonstration areas with attendant spectator grandstands have been added, as well as another large scale stationary engine display barn. The original Pavilion has been expanded twice, as well, and a Log Cabin Pioneer Crafts building has been added. A cavernous Quonset style structure was erected on the west edge to house Arts and Crafts Vendors, a Founders building was built to house quilting bees, and a less pretentious chicken coop, donated by member Glenn Meyers was moved in to house a Petting Zoo during the show. During our many events, food services are provided from the kitchen, now housed in a building donated by neighbor Doug Sadilek, and hauled in and renovated by the membership.

At this writing (2011), the MMOGTA has just entered yet another Land Contract with Walt Ritenburg to purchase to westernmost 30 acres of his property which lies east across Brennan Rd. The organization also has an agreement with Walt which provides them with first right of refusal on the final 30 acre eastern portion of the original 100 acre farm.

Present Day Status: Where 36 years ago stood nothing but a cornfield, this isolated 40 acre parcel of farmland, located as it is in completely rural surroundings, has seen an evolution in nature that is rare indeed in similar settings. Active throughout the warmer 6 months of the year, with activities on a weekly and monthly basis, the Showgrounds is annually transformed into the second largest city in Saginaw County during one week in August. Playing host to over 500 camper units, with thousands of spectators visiting each day, boasting nearly 2000 prized antique tractor exhibits, this humble 40 acre farm is the busiest spot in the County during the week of the annual Mid Michigan Old Gas Tractor Show.

2016 Update: MMOGTA completed paying for the western 30 acres of Walt's place in October of 2015 and an agreement was reached to purchase the eastern 30 acres. Walt passed away in December of 2015, but his memory is etched forever in our hearts and in the organization he was the foundation of.

NOVEMBER 2019 Update In September of 2018 MMOGTA completed paying for the eastern approx. 30 acres of Walt's place. The total amount of land owned by MMOGTA now totals 135.93 acres according to Bradley Township records. Including the caretakers house there are 37 permanent structures on the property . The club has over 480 family members.