

The following was presented by Board Member Susie Hunt at the Hall of Distinction Induction Ceremony of the Dover Historical Society, on Sunday, April 28, 2019. This is an article by Jon Baker, staff writer at the Times Reporter.

Norma Johnson

Norma Johnson had deep ties to the land in the Brandywine Valley west of Dover – a place where her family had lived for more than five generations.

She grew up on a farm on State Route 39, went away to college and eventually returned to the Brandywine Valley to help her parents work the land. After she became owner of the property in 1968, she developed a sheep herd and planted trees on hills that had once been pastureland.

As she got older, Johnson came to see the importance of preserving the land so that future generations could enjoy it.

“We agreed on the idea that land needs to be set aside and preserved, a place to go sit on a rock and look at a bug and be yourself,” said her daughter, Susan Covey.

So in 1989, Johnson donated a portion of her farm to the Tuscarawas County Soil and Water Conservation District to develop the Norma Johnson Nature Preserve. After her death in 1998, the remainder of the land was given to the Tuscarawas County Commissioners for all the residents of the county to enjoy.

Today the Norma Johnson Conservation Center is one of the crown jewels of the Tuscarawas County parks system.

Johnson’s grandparents, Benjamin and Sally Johnson, came to the Brandywine Valley in 1826. They had several sons, one of whom was John Ward Johnson. He in turn had a son, Benjamin Byron Johnson, who married Maggie Crile from Chili in Coshocton County. Their farm was known as Crystal Spring Stock Farm, where they raised cattle and had a bottling operation.

Norma’s parents were Jasper Crile Johnson, Byron’s son, and Mildred Catherine Russell.

They purchased the Elmer Casebeer farm that bordered the east side of Byron’s farm. They started off with six registered Holstein cows, a team of mules and some used farm machinery. Peach and apple orchards on the property helped pay for the farm.

Their first child, Norma, was born August 30, 1925, and grew up on the farm that is now the Norma Johnson Center. She had one sister, Marcine Elaine, who died at age 3.

“When you’re a farm kid and you live three miles from town and you don’t have any brothers or sisters, one thing you learn to do is amuse yourself,” her daughter said. “When she was little, she loved books. Her favorite thing was a taking magnifying glass, and laying in the yard watching bugs.”

Johnson loved animals. “In every single picture of my mother, there was a critter in it,” Covey said. “The critters were mom’s friends.”

She attended Lower Brandywine School and graduated from Dover High School in 1944. She attended Heidelberg University in Tiffin on a scholarship. She then attended the Cleveland Institute of Art and studied mathematics at the Flora Stone Mather College for Women (now part of Case Western Reserve University.)

Living in Cleveland in the late 1940’s, Johnson worked a number of jobs – draftsman at the NASA Lewis Research Center, a telephone operator, sewing machine salesman and worked at a photography business. There she met her first husband, Robert Covey, a musician.

The city gave Johnson a different perspective on the world.

“Cleveland has beautiful metropolitan parks,” her daughter said. “When you grow up on a farm, you look at the land different. It’s work. When she got to Cleveland, she got to see woods as a place that when you have a job you’re not wild about, you can go out and be in the parks. She learned to really appreciate recreation and parks.”

After Johnson’s marriage to Robert Covey, they returned to the Brandywine Valley. “They decided they were going to come home and farm, which was tragic in a way,” Susan Covey said. “He was never going to be a farmer. The marriage didn’t go well.”

Norma and Robert divorced in 1961.

Her second husband was Ronald Casebeer, whom she married in 1965. He died in 1981.

In the mid-1960’s, Norma got her teaching certificate. She taught at several schools in Tuscarawas County – English in Midvale, home economics in Tuscarawas and English in Port Washington. “At her class in Tuscarawas, they cooked so much that the faculty would come down and eat in the home economics room instead of the cafeteria,” her daughter said.

In addition to teaching, Johnson was a gifted seamstress, learned to make brooms and devoted much time to raising a flock of sheep. “She was always reinventing herself,” Covey said.

The wool from her sheep herd was so clean that it commanded as much as \$2 to \$3 per pound. People came from all over to buy the fleeces. "She had the herd going almost up to the day she died." Her daughter said.

Johnson lived on her farm in Brandywine Valley until her death on March 1, 1998.