

HISTORY REVEALED

An enlightening, behind-the-scenes view of history in Michigan.

Northland Farm

Here a Chick, There a Chick

by Keasha Palmer

Family heirlooms need not be made of gold and diamonds—sometimes words and pictures are the most valuable of all. And the Northland Farm near Newaygo, Michigan, which was operated by my grandparents during the early twentieth century, offers no exception.

Treasures in the Attic

Growing up, I had always known about my grandparents' business, which began as an idea they hatched in the early 1900s—raising and shipping live baby chicks to people by rail. The business started out as a hobby in the backyard of their house on Fulton Street in Grand Rapids, where Will and Edna Sproul sold chickens and eggs to friends and neighbors. At the time, my grandfather worked for the Pennsylvania Railroad as an accountant. He knew trains had economic and logistical potential—live poultry cars designed to safely transport chickens, ducks, geese, and turkeys had been around since 1888—to expand the growing business beyond the confines of their yard.



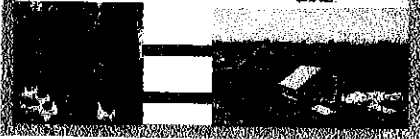
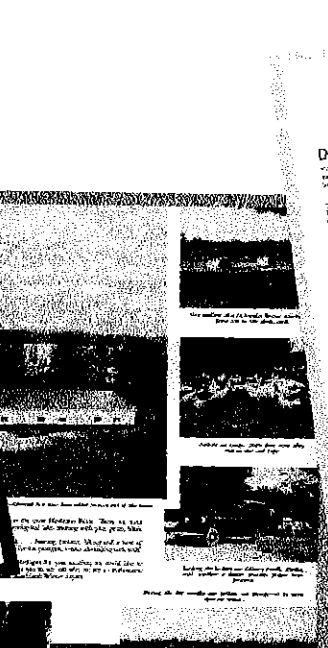
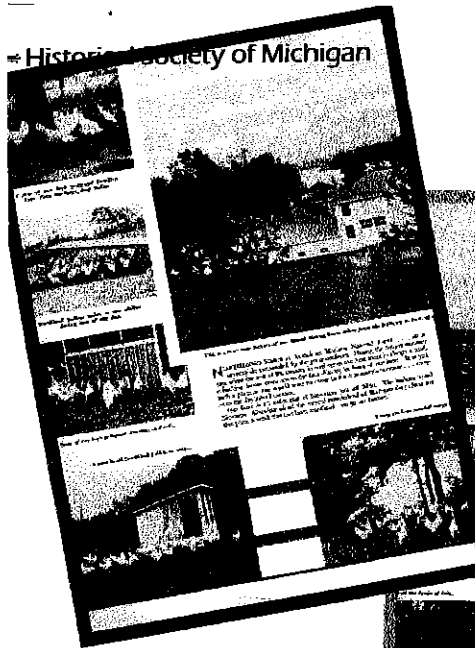
*Will Sproul, founder of Northland Farm.
(Photo courtesy of the author.)*



Sisters Elizabeth and Eleanor Sproul on Northland Farm in the early 1900s. (All photos courtesy of Suzanne Bonadeo, unless otherwise noted.)



Elizabeth and Eleanor Sproul working at Northland Farm in their 20s.



Various pages taken from Northland Farm catalogs over the years. (Images courtesy of the author.)

He was right. For more than 30 years, Northland Farm, as it was later called, operated breeding and hatching facilities on Bill's Lake in Newaygo County, from where hundreds of thousands of baby chicks were shipped by train to customers all over North America, from Texas to far-off provinces in northern Canada.

Because the business was no longer around by the time I was born in 1947, I never really knew a whole lot about it. I remember seeing and still have a picture of my mother, Elizabeth, and her sister Eleanor holding hens when they were about 10 and 12 years old. Another photo depicts them later in their 20s, sitting in the farm's office in my grandparents' home and surrounded by trophies.

I had always been under the impression that Northland's customers were individual families who were seeking a nearby source of meat and eggs, especially during the Great Depression. That, I understood, was how my grandfather made money in those financially difficult years. But, after my mother died in 2007, I found a box full of information in her attic on the family business that changed many of my beliefs.

As I was reading through several brochures and catalogs, I began to realize what a huge and important endeavor the business truly was. I learned that most of the farm's customers were actually commercial poultry raisers with large operations of their own. From an article in the *Grand Rapids Press*, I found that my grandfather was "a pioneer in the shipping of day-old chicks" and that Northland Farm was known for its special breed of "Northern Winter Layers," winning top prizes every year in many national competitions that took place back then.

A Revered Reputation

My grandfather, Will Sproul, knew the importance of high-quality breeding. He was proud of his "great laying strain" and confident in their abilities. His consistently high U.S. Record of Performance (R.O.P.) ranking provided the credibility customers were seeking. The R.O.P. method of rating chickens began in the 1930s when the U.S. Department of Agriculture began overseeing and regulating state poultry operations to create a uniform and official method of grading breeds. The purpose of those efforts was to protect poultry buyers from unscrupulous breeders

who might be inclined to inflate their brood's egg-laying records in order to sell more chickens.

Year after year, Northland received the highest R.O.P. scores. I was surprised to learn that the farm's chicks were all sired by an excellent strain of pedigreed leghorns imported by steamship from England from a highly respected British breeder named Tom Barron. Good breeding was so important to my grandfather that he paid Barron \$1,000 for his starting stock of ten hens and a cockerel.

Described in promotional literature as "pedigreed and progeny tested," the resulting pullets, or young hens, were known for their laying abilities, producing large eggs and lots of them. One first-prize winner in the Central New York Office Egg Laying Contest dropped a record 312 eggs in one year. Northland's meticulous record-keeping methods provided a complete history of each pullet, from the age she began laying to the average size, shape, and color of her eggs.

During that era, Northland worked closely with the Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, known today as Michigan State University, and

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other agricultural and governmental organizations to continually maintain and improve the high quality of the farm's layers.

My grandfather wisely used many letters he received as testimonials in his promotional materials, which, I learned from a *Grand Rapids Press* article, he compiled and wrote himself. Glowing letters from satisfied customers affirmed the superiority of Northland's layers. One read, "During the past eight years, I have purchased between 25,000 and 30,000 chicks from you...the best of any strain we have ever worked with."

In a letter to potential customers, he wrote, "I've been preaching the gospel of good stock for years and I know I'm right," and pointed out that "it doesn't cost any more to feed good layers than it does to feed poor ones. And when you have layers that are full of health and vigor, layers that produce way beyond the average, then and only then, do you make money."

With such sincere, down-home advice, it is little wonder my grandfather's business was such a success. His style was professional and informative but personal and folksy too. I was a marketing and advertising copywriter for more than 30 years, but I had no idea that we had this

link in our lineage. Why didn't my mother ever tell me that?

In one catalog under the heading "Where Northland White Leghorns Live Like Resorters," my grandfather described the setting for his breeding operations thusly: "They can see the clear lake all day and hear the ripple of the blue water all night... nowhere in the entire country will you find a poultry farm operating under such ideal climatic conditions, with all the natural advantages we enjoy." His description of conditions at Northland offers a far cry from the way chickens are raised today.

For more than 30 years, Northland Farm was a thriving entity that put thousands of poultry raisers all over the continent on the road to success. My grandparents never actually lived on the farm—they stayed in Grand Rapids while a manager ran the breeding operations on Bill's Lake. My grandmother handled the books from her home office. As the farm's reputation grew, the demand for Northland winter layers came not only from commercial businesses but also from government institutions and agricultural colleges as well.

Finding Northland Farm

I am so glad that I learned so much more about Northland Farm from that treasure trove of materials in my mother's attic. But I am also sorry that I didn't know all of this before my mom died so I could have asked her more about it. The biggest question I have is, What happened to the business after Grandpa Will died in 1945?

I recall hearing something about one of the Hefferan nephews from my grandmother's side of the family taking the farm over, and my husband thinks that at one point my mom told him that a company

in Holland ended up with it. But, beyond that, we simply don't know—and searching the Internet did not help.

My cousin Betsy Borre, my Aunt Eleanor's daughter, and I had always talked about going to Newaygo County someday to at least try to find the Northland property. Although Betsy had been to the farm in her youth, she was only about ten years old and did not remember anything about where it was.

Finally, on a beautiful fall day in 2016, when she was 78 and I was 69, we made the trip. Betsy's daughter Suze Bonadeo, our family genealogist, was visiting her parents from her home on Beaver Island and came with us. All we really knew for sure was that it was somewhere on Bill's Lake. Suze did a little research on the Newaygo County website prior to our visit, and when we got to the county offices, she looked up the plot number for Northland Farm. She handed that to a county clerk, who in turn gave us the specific address for the property, which we then plugged into Google Maps.

We were all so excited that we were actually going to see where our Grandpa Will oversaw his broods and grew his business all those years ago. Because it was on a lake, we fully expected the property to be developed and populated with cottages. So you can imagine our shock and delight as we drove down the road and saw wide-open spaces with just several buildings, which we immediately recognized from old photos as the chicken coops and hatchery.

But an even bigger thrill was yet to come when we discovered what the property had become—a children's camp. And it is gorgeous. Formerly known as VFW Buddy Poppy Camp, it is now called VFW Camp Trotter



for Children and run by the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) out of Troy, Michigan. The chicken coops have been converted to cabins, and the former farm manager's house, which sits high on the bluff overlooking the lake, is now home to the camp director. The land, buildings, and hill where chickens once roamed freely and happily are all still there in one form or another.

From the camp's website, I learned that the land was donated in 1949 by Ralph Trotter, a veteran of World War I and former VFW Department of Michigan Commander. But how Trotter came to own the land

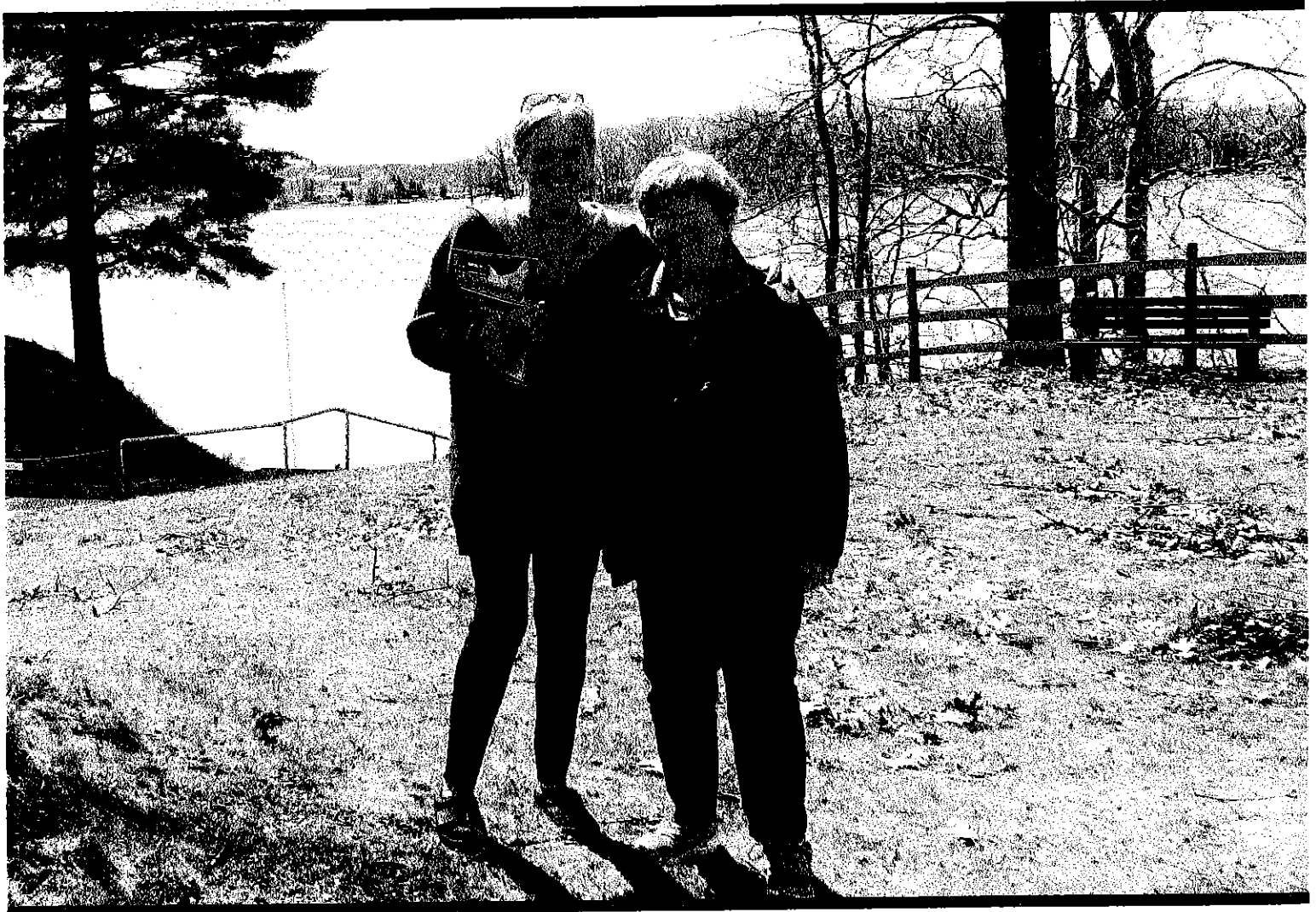
remains part of the mystery. Maybe my grandmother's nephew sold it to him when or if the Holland company took over.

Although this is all we know so far, I'm sure we can learn more if I continue my research. My next step, I think, will be to check out the Kent County records under the Northland Farm name to see what I can come up with from that.

But, even if I don't find out what happened to the business after 1945, I'm so happy that my mom cared enough to hang on to those materials for nearly 100 years—and that I found those treasures in her attic.

What this experience has taught me most of all is that my grandparents were creative, industrious, hardworking, and successful entrepreneurs—and that my siblings and cousins and I all come from pretty good stock ourselves. 📖

Keasha Palmer is a lifelong West Michigan resident and semi-retired freelance writer whose work has appeared in a variety of publications, including *Michigan History* magazine.



The author (left) and cousin Betsy Borre in 2016 at the previous site of Northland Farm.