

# Halpern documents the changing face of agriculture

On July 24, the Livingston Manor Public Library hosted Dr. Ellen McHale, executive director of the New York Folklore Society, and Benjamin Halpern, photographer, to speak about their cooperative project entitled "Farm and Field: The Rural Folk Arts of the Catskill Region." Halpern's documentary-style photographs of agricultural life in Sullivan and Delaware Counties is currently on display at the library. The exhibit and accompanying programs are supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

BY FRANK RIZZO

Benjamin Halpern has never "worked the field with his hand" or "put his back to the plow," but the farming life has always held a fascination for him.

"Some of my earliest memories have to do with the farms that used to be around Livingston Manor and at one time were quite prevalent right here in Sullivan County," Halpern recalled in his talk at the library.

But as he made his way up the grades at the Livingston Manor CS, he heard from one classmate after another that their family dairy farm had closed.

"By the time I was a senior in high school, I had no more classmates who lived on active dairy farms," Halpern, who graduated in '76, told his audience. "It was no longer profitable for the creameries to send their trucks down to this part of Sullivan County."

Photography had always been his love and his hobby, and on his trips home from

the University of Illinois, Halpern began to photograph farms. "I realized that they were disappearing, not only from Sullivan County, but everywhere," he said.

After half a decade spent as an electrical engineer, Halpern decided to switch careers and became a full time commercial and documentary photographer.

"It was a tool I used to document the changes in the landscape," he said.

He stepped up his documentation of the declining farming industry in the '90s, as the pace of change quickened.

Though he and his wife Olga live in Champaign, Illinois, Halpern frequently travels back to his hometown, and has done documentary studies of both the Manor and its century-plus old synagogue, Agudas Achim.

Halpern is grateful to the Cornell Cooperative Extension of both Delaware County and Sullivan County for their help, advice and introduction to area farmers.

He recalled meeting with former CCE Sullivan County Executive Director Joe Walsh, who was interested in the idea of documenting the changing dairy farm industry with not only photographs, but also oral histories.

Halpern and the CCE applied for a USDA grant to finance such a project, but lost out to another Sullivan County applicant.

Halpern is currently seeking grants to carry on the project.

In the meanwhile you can see his photographs at the Livingston Manor Public Library, on Main St. across from the firehouse.

Halpern also heard from



BEN HALPERN PHOTO

Adam Diehl, left, feeds wood into the furnace as Ed Loughrey checks the condition of the boiling sap in the evaporator. The hot sap is judged ready to draw, as syrup, when the temperature nears 219°F, indicating a sufficiently high concentration of sugar.



BEN HALPERN PHOTO

Dr. Joe Nebzydowski of the Youngsville Veterinary Clinic, prepares an injection for an animal at a local farm. Typical of many large animal veterinarians, Dr. Joe transports a portable 'office' on the back of his truck.



BEN HALPERN PHOTO

Peter Diehl is part of a long farming tradition. The Diehls have been working their homestead farm, located between Callicoon and Jeffersonville, since 1842.



BEN HALPERN PHOTO

Peter Diehl attends to one of his hives. Though dairy farming is still at the heart of the farm operation, the Diehls have added maple syrup and honey production, which they sell in their store/farmstand.

Liberty Public Library Director Marjorie Linko, who is planning to run the exhibit from Aug. 24 through Sept. 19.

In addition, CCE Sullivan County will show off the photographs at the Ag Day event at the Harvest Festival at Bethel Woods on September 20.

## TO THE MANOR BORN

Regarding his ancestry, Halpern wrote, "My grandpar-

ents, Mottel, 'Max', and Manya, 'Mary' Sorkin came to Livingston Manor in April, 1908, with their infant daughter, Leya. They were the second Jewish family to settle permanently in Livingston Manor, the first being the family of Max Schwartz, a butcher. Both families were of Russian origin. My grandparents opened a tailor shop that eventually evolved into Sorkin's Dept. Store, a fixture

on Main Street that remained in operation until 1996. My mother, Belle, was born in 1915, and married my father, Walter Halpern in 1953. They operated the store together, until my father's passing in 1995."



PHOTOGRAPH BY OLGA HALPERN, AUGUST, 2015

Ben Halpern holds a field view camera, and writes, "the one shown here is used to expose 4"x5" sheets of film. It permits the user a wide range of capabilities when composing and focusing the image, and was commonly used in the field of architectural photography.



BEN HALPERN PHOTO

Donna Ackermann of the Ackermann Farm on Muller Rd. in Cocheton gets ready to climb into a tractor to get some farm chores done.

## The photographer

Benjamin Halpern is currently employed as a freelance photographer in Champaign, Illinois. He has developed a strong interest in American history and folklore, which he strives to record and depict through his photography. Ben graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University of Illinois in 1980 and 1982, respectively, with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in electrical engineering.

From 1982 to 1987 Ben worked as an electrical engineer at the University of Illinois' Urbana-Champaign Campus. In mid-1987, after nearly 15 years as an amateur, he decided to pursue photography as a full-time career.

Through his work, Ben strives to shed new light on the subjects and people he photographs, and create a connection with the viewing audience that leads to renewed sense of appreciation for people and place.

Some of Ben's exhibits/assignments include:

Color documentary of important sites of Jewish history in Sullivan County, New York, under a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities, June, 1996

"Agudas Achim: Spiritual Home to Five Generations," Central Synagogue, New York City, January - March, 1998, and University of Illinois Levis Faculty Center, Urbana, Illinois, April - May, 1997.

"Livingston Manor, New York: My Home Town", Champaign Public Library, Champaign, Illinois, April, 1987.

"Farm and Field: Agricultural Heritage of the Catskill Region", New York Folklore Society, Schenectady, New York, and Cornell University Cooperative Extension of Delaware County, New York, March, 2014 - December, 2014.

"Steelmaking in Jefferson County, Ohio: Photographs of the industrial landscape and footprint of the steel industry in Steubenville and Mingo Junction," Eastern Gateway Community College, October, 2013, Public Library Of Steubenville and Jefferson County, Ohio, December, 2013 - April, 2014.