

Mini-Golf has come to the Valley

Meindert and Willemke VandenAkker would never have imagined.

Coming from the Netherlands in the late 1800's, they settled in the "West End" of Whitinsville and went to work for the famed Whittin Machine Works. The west end of town was woods then, a quiet respite from Industrial center the town had become. Their son, Joseph also went to work in the mill, but just long enough to afford to build an 8-stall barn and purchase a small herd of Holstein cattle. Joseph was born in 1902. and over the next 50 years, from about 1920 to 1968, Vandenakker, along with his sons, Maynard and George, operated West End Dairy, delivering milk to Northbridge, Sutton, Uxbridge and Millville. At the height of its operation, the dairy comprised approximately two hundred head of cattle and three hundred acres of farmland in Northbridge and Sutton – one of the largest operations of its kind in the Blackstone Valley. In 1968, West End switched to wholesale milk production and continued the dairy operation through 1987.

In the 1990's, the farm was passed to the fourth generation of VandenAkkers and was divided up among several family members. Greg VandenAkker acquired the original farmhouse, barn and a 30-acre parcel of land. "We had to make some decisions," says Greg. "One option was to sell the land to developers for housing. We didn't want to do that. So we had to come up with other ways to make the land work for us."

Greg and his wife Rebecca VandenAkker opened West End Creamery in 1999, an ice cream parlor, in part to honor the family dairy farming tradition, and in part out of economic reality. "Small, New England dairy farming is almost a relic of the past," says Greg. "You just can not survive operating this farm the way my parents and grandparents did. You either find a specialized niche market or diversify into other non-farming uses. Creating the Creamery was our way to preserve the farm and the open space", he said.

In addition to running West End Creamery, Greg and Rebecca, along with their father George, bale hay and raise animals on their section of the farm.

They also have limited the commercial development of the farm to just the three or four acres fronting Purgatory Road and Route 146. "We believe in a balanced approach which will allow us to continue the farm, limit the development to a small portion of the property and preserve the natural beauty of the area," he says.

On July 1, 2006 West End Creamery opened the first Miniature Golf attraction in the Blackstone Valley, adjacent to the Creamery. This latest expansion is another example of the growing impact the tourism is having on the Blackstone Valley economy. Long an area of economic blight, the Blackstone Valley has emerged as an attractive "heritage tourism" destination. "The VandenAkkers understand tourism," says Martha Wetzel, the Director of Tourism for the Blackstone Valley Chamber of Commerce. "They've created a venue that encourages families to enjoy the benefits of summer while complementing the landscape of their farm and contributing to the economic vitality of the region." Already people are enjoying the recreational benefits of canoeing and kayaking the Blackstone River, and soon the Blackstone River Bikeway will be open, allowing off-road bicycling and running trails from Worcester to Providence.

Perhaps Meindert and Willemke wouldn't understand what's happened to what was thick, uninhabited woodland. But certainly, with no small amount of amazement, they would be proud.

"The Blackstone Valley has such a rich heritage. I believe it's important to preserve that", Greg summarized. One day, I hope to see my children working right here, farming this land and running the store," says Greg.

And so it should be.