

Field To Fork Feast - A Grass Roots Project

by Lynne Belluscio

On September 3, a hundred people are paying \$100 each to sit down to a dinner including wine and dessert in an alfalfa field on the Stein farm on Hebard Road in LeRoy. It is one of several fund raising events to support LeRoy and Bergen's quest to become America's Best Community.

The dinner, which is called "Field to Fork Feast" will be a unique opportunity to enjoy the bountiful harvest from our local farms. The menu is being designed by local chef extraordinaire - and organizer of Grace's Kitchen - Selby Davis. The food is being prepared by local caterer extraordinaire - D&R Depot. The farm products are being donated by our local agricultural community - extraordinaire. And the alfalfa field - -- well lets just say it will be an extraordinary experience!

An alfalfa field doesn't sound too exciting, so maybe we could use the other name for alfalfa - - "lucerne." In fact Europe, Australia, and most of the rest of the world call it lucerne. It is an extraordinary crop. It is believed to have originated in the far east and was known to the ancient Greeks and Romans. Today it is one of the most - - if not the most important forage crops used for feeding livestock.

There is evidence that some Colonial farmers in the Northeastern United States, in the 1790s were growing small amounts of alfalfa, but it was not widely known. Surprisingly, the introduction of alfalfa - and the name of alfalfa, came to California from South America about the time of the gold rush in 1849. The use of alfalfa moved east during the 19th century. It was difficult to grow in the colder climate of the Northern Plains and Canada, but plant scientists were able to develop varieties that can adapt to colder weather.

Alfalfa is a perennial plant, which means that it grows year after year and although plants usually live eight to ten years, it has been known to survive for up to twenty years. Around here,

alfalfa fields are usually part of crop rotation and after a couple of years, the alfalfa is plowed under, enriching the soil. It is in the pea family, and it is a legume, which means that unlike many other crops, such as corn that takes nutrients from the ground, alfalfa adds nutrients.

Alfalfa can be harvested and used in several ways. It can be cut, dried and baled like hay. It can be cut and placed into a silo, or a bank storage, and allowed to ferment as ensilage which is very nutritional for cattle. It can also be processed into dry feed.

In the 1940s, LeRoy had an alfalfa plant. It was located in the huge stone building on Church Street - the former malt processing building. (It was torn down long ago.) Jessie Moulton was the manager of the alfalfa plant and he was also the first president of the Rotary Club.

Our files do not have a lot of information about the alfalfa plant or when it closed, but it was just one of many agricultural related businesses in town which included a canning factory, flour mills, apple and fruit drying facilities, and LeRoy Plow Company. Industry in LeRoy was closely related to agriculture. Which brings us back to the alfalfa field.

Today, LeRoy's largest economic factor is its agriculture. For every "farmer" there are 14 additional related jobs. But to sustain the agricultural base and provide stability and make plans for the future, our agricultural community needs agricultural



Alfalfa field and hay loader in LeRoy. Photo - 1940 Book.

related industry.

All of that information needs to be included in an economic revitalization plan - - - and that is being done, because LeRoy and Bergen were selected to be a part of the America's Best Community program sponsored by Frontier Communications, Dish Network, the Weather Channel, and CoBank.

It costs a lot of money to have an economic revitalization plan written, and LeRoy and Bergen were given ... yes given ... \$50,000 to pay for the plan. But we have to raise an additional \$15,000 to reach \$65,000.

Some of that \$15,000 has already been pledged. The Town of Bergen and the Village of LeRoy have put in \$2,000 each. The

Town of LeRoy will be pledging a couple of thousand. And we are counting on raising \$5,000 with the Field to Fork Feast. We are also planning another fund raiser called "Invest in the Best" which will be announced soon.

All of this demonstrates to the America's Best Communities judges, that we are committed. We have the ability to pull our communities together for a common cause. And that it is a grass roots project. And did you know that alfalfa roots can grow to nearly 40 feet into the ground? Now that is a grass roots fact!

Tickets to Field to Fork Feast are still available by contacting Sam Vagg at 993-5555 or svagg@bhc.com for information.



Alfalfa plant on Church Street 1940.