

Fairview Evergreen: *The First 100 Years*

by D. Garth Hetz (FEN President 1975-2002, retired 2003)

Fairview Evergreen Nurseries was founded by my grandfather, Frank Carson Hetz. He was raised on a farm in Franklin Township in southwestern Erie County, but in the early 1900s he was living, with his wife Mary and their four children, in Erie, where he was a house painter by trade. By 1909 he'd been painting houses for fifteen years, and he made a reasonably good living for his young family. He was 33 years old. Unfortunately his health seemed to be deteriorating, and finally a doctor told him that he should stop painting – that he was probably allergic to the lead in the paints he was using.

Being a farm boy by birth, Frank wondered if he could make a living back on the farm, so he started to pay close attention to the prices farm produce was bringing at the old Erie Central Market. At Christmas time in 1909, so the story goes, Frank took his daughter



Christmas trees – how we got our start.
Frank Hetz and son Leroy, circa 1920.

Mildred to shop for a Christmas tree. He was amazed at the prices they were bringing – 75 cents to a dollar for a good tree. When he counted the rings at the base of the cut

tree, he saw that they were only 8 years old. A person with a few thousand of these a year to sell could do very well for himself. His dream was born – he would raise Christmas trees!

All he needed was some land in the country, and he found it in Fairview, only a few miles north of where he had been born. He was somehow able to borrow what was, for those days, the tremendous sum of \$20,000. To the great amusement of the Fairview townspeople, he purchased the town communal cow pasture – 36 acres of gently rolling ground with a small stream running through it. He started planting spruce, fir, and pine seeds in seed beds in the back yard of his home on Raspberry Street in Erie, and in the meantime worked frantically to get the new land in Fairview ready to plant his seedlings.

With lumber reclaimed from a Billy Sunday revival tabernacle he built a barn on the Fairview property. In the fall of 1911 some of the land was ready to plant, and a few Christmas tree seedlings were planted. The barn was finished in 1912, and the Hetz family moved to Fairview to live, in the barn, until they could finish their house the following year.

Times were tough. The whole family worked long, hard hours to make ends meet. They raised vegetables and berries to sell, they raised chickens and cows, and they sold maple syrup. All the while they took care

of their precious Christmas trees, waiting for the day when they'd be large enough to sell. In 1917 the youngest of Frank and Mary's five children, Neil, was born. It was also around that time when the first of Frank's trees were finally ready to sell. He



Farm #1, our first ornamental stock planting.

started to sell them, but not just for Christmas trees as he'd expected. By a stroke of good luck there was a shortage of ornamental evergreens to go around people's houses, and suddenly, right after World War I there was a large demand for them. Sales spurred by this new demand allowed the nursery to expand, and in late 1921 Frank purchased the land across from his homestead, 71 acres, the best farm in Fairview.

From the beginning all of the four older children, Mildred, Charles, Leroy, and Clifford, had helped at the nursery. In 1928 Frank formed a partnership with them. By now the business included both retail and wholesale customers. In an effort to increase efficiency, the nursery began to use machinery and mechanical tools extensively. If they couldn't buy them the way they wanted them, they modified them or fabricated them locally.

When the depression of the 1930s hit, the nursery grew everything that might possibly sell – evergreens, trees, flowers, vines, even



Frank C. Hetz and Mary Wagenman Hetz married, 1901



1911
Frank C. Hetz founds Fairview Evergreen Nursery



First Christmas tree plantings ready for sale

1921 – Farm #2 purchased, 71 acres; expansion of ornamental nursery stock for retail and wholesale



First Catalog 1928



fruit trees. Fortunately the business had been out of debt for many years, so although sales were not great, the business survived.

As more land became available, the business expanded. An early 1940s catalog proudly announced, "We are in the nursery business alone – no outside interests or control. We operate 400 acres of which 300 are planted to nursery stock." From the very beginning Frank Hetz had a passion for quality. That meant not selling anything that wouldn't grow for the customer. The product mix might change, but it all had to be A-1 stock. A beef cattle operation was already providing manure to ensure that the nursery stock had good roots as well as good tops.

When the U.S. became involved in World War II, the work force, which had been over 40 men, was cut in half as men went to the service or to work in the factories supporting the war effort. Since more and more nursery stock was being sold at wholesale, in large quantities, the family decided to go out of the retail business and sell wholesale only, to the nursery trade. Their decision enabled the partners to cut down on the number of varieties grown, and concentrate on the quality production of the best varieties. To combat the labor shortage and maximize efficiency, the company focused on adding more and better equipment, and for the first time hired migrant workers from Puerto Rico. The first root-pruner for the row crops of landscape sized evergreens was built in 1948. When the first B&B digging machines were built a few years later, their use was made possible by the increased fibrous root system developed by root pruning the plants in the field.

The business was doing quite well by the 1950s, when suddenly, on January 22nd 1952, Charles Hetz suffered a massive heart attack and died moments after speaking at a conference of the Indiana Association of Nurserymen at Purdue University. Although the partners didn't have official titles, Charlie was the de facto C.E.O., and his untimely passing caused no small disruption for the business. Neil Hetz and Mildred Bendure were forced into more major roles in management. Fortunately, all the remaining partners were able to pull together and keep things on the right track. Two years later, on May 13, 1954, Frank Hetz passed away after a short illness, at the age of 77. He had retired a few years earlier – for one day. When his wife, Mary, gave him a list of jobs to do around the house on his first

officially retired day, he was back out in his beloved seed beds the next morning. He had lived to see his dream come to fruition. He was the founder of one of the most successful nurseries in the United States, and had seen it through good times and bad for more than forty years. His legacy of hard work and attention to detail is the foundation upon which Fairview Evergreen Nurseries has existed for one hundred years.

By the late 1950s Frank's grandsons began to work full time at FEN. The first was Frank Bendure, son of Mildred Hetz Bendure. By 1961 Teddy Hetz and Robert "Bob" Hetz, sons of Leroy Hetz, were on board, as was Garth Hetz, son of Clifford Hetz. The remaining four original partners, Leroy, Clifford, and Neil Hetz, and Mildred Hetz Bendure, had been looking for a way to get the next generation involved in the business. They decided to form a corporation, and on January 9, 1961, fifty years after Fairview Evergreen Nursery was founded, Fairview Evergreen Nurseries, Inc. was born. The four second generation partners were the original incorporators, and each owned one quarter of the shares. The original by-laws stated in article 4, "Ownership of stock is limited to direct line descendants of Frank C. and Mary M. Hetz." Now shares of the business could be transferred to the third generation. By the early 1970s, with the addition of Paul Bendure, Stephen Hetz, Richard Hetz, and Christine Hetz Phillips, eight third generation shareholder-employees were active in the company. All seven of Frank C. Hetz's living grandsons and one granddaughter made Fairview Evergreen their career choice.

Having second and third generation family members working together made for an interesting time. The second generation was used to working six days a week, ten hours a day. The business was pretty much their life, along with the Fairview Methodist Church for social occasions. The third generation had other interests, which didn't necessarily include working sixty hour weeks all year! The board of directors included all the shareholders, each having an equal vote. If a vote were taken that didn't please the second generation shareholders, they would demand a "stockholder" vote, which, since they still controlled the majority of the shares, would tip any contentious decisions toward their way of thinking. The third generation had to fight hard for "perks" like taking Saturday afternoons off in the summer!

Generational differences notwithstanding, the business prospered. The third generation had many good ideas for moving the company forward. Frank Bendure, for instance, was instrumental in perfecting the 'diggers' – tractors fitted with hydraulically-powered

INTRODUCTION

To my friends, old and new:
I am in the Nursery business alone—no company or corporation.

I own the land upon which I grow my stock.
My terms are cash unless satisfactory arrangement is made before shipment.

All stock is dug and shipped direct from field; no stock stored for months in mouldy cellars.

Large trees are shipped with ba!! and burlap.
I charge for boxing at actual cost.

Stock is guaranteed to be true to name. While I exercise the greatest care to have stock true to name, I will in no case be liable for any sum greater than the purchase price.

All stock selected and marked by customer at the nursery will be charged for at its actual value; prices in this catalogue will not govern such stock.

All spreading trees will be measured by spread not height.

I have some varieties of Evergreens up to ten feet in height. If interested in large trees write for prices.
Copy of Certificate of Inspection with every order.

Fairview Evergreen Nursery
F. C. HETZ, Proprietor
FAIRVIEW, ERIE COUNTY, PA.

1928 – Frank Hetz forms partnership with sons Charles, Leroy, Clifford, and daughter Mildred



First Office – 1934



Depression Era belt-tightening and diversification of growing crops

WWII Era; labor shortage; streamlined product mix, increased production



FEN Catalog 1944

Post-war business expansion; housing boom; widening customer base

1948 – First migrant workers hired from Puerto Rico

1930

1935

1940

1945

1950

cylindrical 'buckets' to dig B&B evergreens. Now we could dig thousands of evergreens a day instead of hundreds, and dig them with a consistent quality almost unheard of in that day. The interstate high-



1942. Charlie Hetz stands in a beautiful field of Irish Junipers.

way system was being built, and Fairview was one of the exits on I-90. Suddenly it was easy to ship tractor trailer loads of plants to places like Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City in the west, and east to Buffalo, Rochester, even New York City. The move to the suburbs was in full swing, and all those beautiful new homes needed beautiful plants for their landscapes. We didn't ever get into the trucking business ourselves, but instead depended on some reliable local haulers to deliver for us. Harry Younger, Glenn Hannah, Frank Sabol, Chuck Lander, all of the truckers who hauled for us were more than just truckers, they were our ambassadors to our customers. Frank Sabol's sons continue to haul for us today, working so reliably and knowledgeably that our customers often consider them to be an extension of our company.

Given our new-found ability to dig and deliver much more nursery stock, we needed to upgrade our loading facilities. We built a new loading dock, purchased fork lifts, and implemented a new system of bringing B&B evergreens from the fields on pallets to the loading dock. 'Haul-in' trucks that could carry four to six pallets were used to bring plants into the loading area from the fields where they were dug. One truck could bring in 150 to 200 B&B evergreens. Fork lifts would unload the pallets from the trucks, and the same pallets full of trees could then be driven into the tractor trailers from the back, unloaded, and stacked to be reused. The tractor trailers could hold 700 or so B&B evergreens, stacked lying sidewise like cordwood. Fairview Evergreen was certainly among the first, if not the first, to mechanize the digging and delivery process in this way, and it gave us

a competitive advantage for many years. Not only was the quality of the plants delivered excellent, the number of employees needed to produce this kind of quality plants was significantly less than the norm for that time.

As the demand for quality nursery stock increased, we attempted to keep up with it by planting more. Since it is virtually impossible to buy huge tracts of viable nursery land in Erie County along the lake plain, we resorted to buying smaller farms, increasingly far from our base in Fairview. In 1973 we were able to purchase 480 acres of mostly good land in Girard Township from the U.S. Steel Company, land which had been purchased by Andrew Carnegie in the late 1800's for a possible steel mill. Ironically, several years later, U.S. Steel almost did build a mill, across the road from where we had bought their property. We battled them at hearing after hearing, hoping to stop the project. In the end they bought Marathon Oil Company with the billion dollars they had earmarked for the steel mill, and we were saved.

We opted to go the route of slow growth rather than trying to double our production as some suggested. We had become so famous for our quality Taxus, from Capitata to Densiformis, that we were constantly sold out in the 1970's. Taxus was king – we had to allocate them even to our best customers so that everyone would get at least some of them. We went to trade shows with nothing to sell. We gradually increased production, but it must be remembered that it takes from eight to twelve years to grow a good quality, saleable Taxus plant.

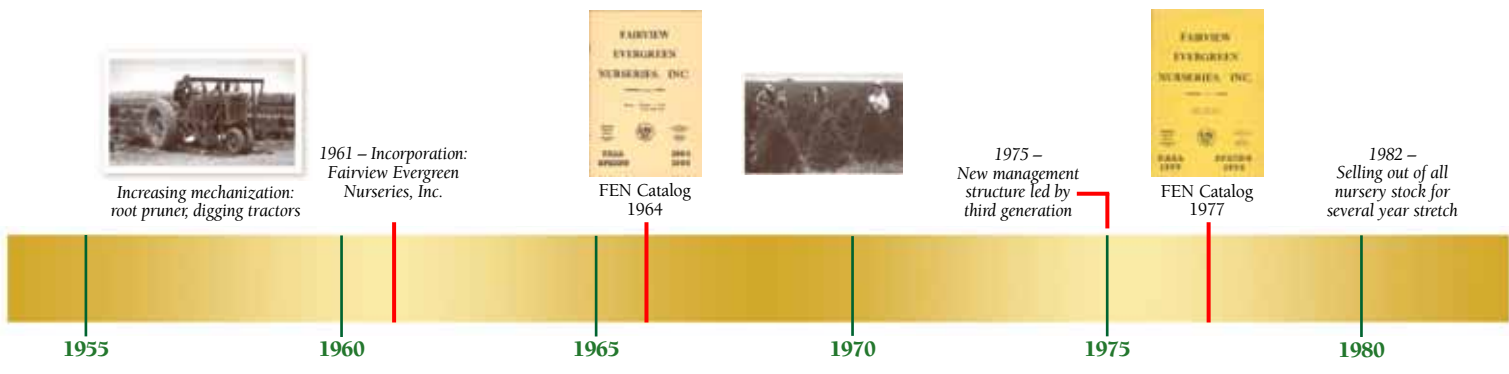
In 1974, to facilitate the transition from second generation to third generation management, we hired a consultant. For 1975 we adopted their recommendations and formed a new management structure

with Teddy Hetz as General Manager and Garth Hetz as President. While the Board of Directors ostensibly managed the company, the day to day



A successful transition: Neil and Leroy Hetz with our third generation family shareholders, 1984.

decision making mostly was in the capable hands of the Management Committee, consisting of five members, Garth, Ted, Steve and Richard Hetz, and Frank Bendure, one from each of the five original second generation 'families'. Hmmm... sound familiar?



Through the 70's and 80's we kept buying good land as it became available, gradually moving west from Fairview to Girard to Springfield. We also kept adding family members to the mix, as the fourth generation of the Hetz family began to work in the family business. Our plan to gradually increase production was successful, and the business prospered. It would not be accurate to say that things always ran smoothly, but what could one expect when at one point we had three generations working together? The 80's and 90's saw some great years, some not so great, mostly driven by what the housing market looked like. By the 1990's we owned



Taxus – A Fairview tradition

over 3000 acres of land, roughly divided into one third nursery production ground, one third farming ground, and one third ground that we had to buy to get the other two thirds! We continued to raise our beef cattle for the manure, which we plow into our gravelly sandy loam soil to keep the organic matter up. Over time, we began to sell more of our plants to large re-wholesalers, who in turn sold to landscapers and landscape contractors, as well as garden centers.

By the mid 90's we began to try to increase our product line by growing a few items in containers. We also started to dig shade trees B&B. Both of these operations proved successful, and resulted ultimately in more production for B&B shade trees and a large new container operation which only now is approaching full use. The shareholder-employees of the fourth generation were now feeling ready to take a more active role in management, so once again, in 1999 we started to work with a consulting firm to transition from third to fourth generation management. Third generation employees signed on to a retirement agreement, paving the way for the fourth generation to assume a greater role in the management of the company.

For all the trepidation about the advent of Y2K, the year 2000 came and went with no major disruption on the national scene, and in fact was a record year of sales for Fairview Evergreen. This success allowed us to purchase a 60 acre land parcel in Girard township, close to most of our field grown stock, which we envisioned as an excellent site to build a new headquarters complex, complete with a new office, loading dock, storage barns and equipment pens to replace our aging

Fairview facilities. As the first step in this transition, we built a state-of-the-art container production facility at the site. The container facility now includes 50 brand new 36' x 200' polyhouses, in which we are growing an ever-expanding line of flowering shrubs, in addition to a selection of our biggest selling traditional evergreens. This investment allows us to serve our customers, especially retailers and garden centers, better than ever before, without compromising the field-grown production for which we are best known.

Like most nurseries, we have not been immune to the challenging economic conditions of the past several years. With sagging levels of new construction, ever more rapidly changing consumer preferences, and landscape design movements that sometimes seem to be based more on political correctness than delivering aesthetic value, it is not easy to remain a quality-focused grower of time tested, long living nursery stock. We strongly believe, however, that continuing to focus on that mission will serve us well as we embark upon our next 100 years. The dream Frank Hetz started with 100 years ago remains alive today, carried on with pride by his grandchildren, Christine Hetz Phillips and Richard Hetz, and great-grandchildren, Chris, Tim, Kurt, Hans, and Hagan Hetz; Tom and Fred Bendure; Tammy Bendure Harrington; and Michael Wassink, all active shareholder-managers, along with more than 100 employees so vital to producing our quality plants and trees.

Frank Hetz understood in 1911 that any success he could achieve would come through not just meeting his customers' expectations, but exceeding them. We strive toward the same goal today. No company

reaches 100 years in business without the loyal support of its customers, and we are certainly no exception. Our industry is unlike most others in the world. Our customers are hard-working, family-oriented people of genuine integrity and kind disposition. To all of you we offer our most sincere thanks. We eagerly look forward to serving you for the next 100 years!



Our current family management team, ready for our second century

