



# Harvesting History

A day at The Farm at Prophetstown, where visitors get a glimpse of agricultural life in the 1920s

By Erin Brereton

Images by Laura Frank Hale, courtesy of The Farm at Prophetstown

On The Farm at Prophetstown, four coops provide the poultry much-needed protection from a mix of predators—foxes, raccoons, coyotes, even skunks—after the sun sets.

On a Monday evening in the spring, staff members at the Battle Ground, Indiana, farm can't find Brenda, an exceptionally outgoing Narragansett turkey who'd failed to follow everyone else into the coop. An exhaustive search proves unsuccessful, and as it gets later, the crew makes the hard decision to close the coop door and brace themselves for the worst.

When a stray bird stays out all night, the outcome can be grim. That's how the farm lost Becky with the Good Hair, a favorite chicken among employees. Recently, the body of another hen was found on the steps of a coop, according to Executive Director Leslie Martin Conwell; it had likely been attacked while trying to get back in.



On the Tuesday morning after Brenda disappeared, however, when employees arrive for work, they're pleasantly surprised to find her in good shape and good spirits, strutting about the yard.

Relieved, the staff move on to their usual morning chores: letting the other turkeys, ducks, chickens, and roosters out; depositing wheat and cracked corn chicken scratch; feeding the hogs and cattle; cleaning stalls in the barn; and tackling various other tasks.



The Farm at Prophetstown is home to many types of poultry and livestock, including various chicken breeds and Hereford cattle.

### / COMMITTED TO MEMORY /

Located on 100 acres of land leased from Prophetstown State Park, The Farm at Prophetstown is dedicated to showcasing agricultural practices from the 1920s, an era when farms began transitioning from animal to tractor power.

The farm's two horses are standardbred, a type frequently used back then for plowing. The Berkshire hogs the farm raises were another popular farm breed in the '20s, according to Leslie.

"We also have two miniature horses," Leslie says. "In the 1920s, many farms had miniature horses and ponies for children to ride or drive to school."

The animals have free rein to roam various parts of the farm, which, in addition to the barn, includes several large pastures and other historical structures that were built on or brought to the property. A small building outfitted with several generations' worth of donated blacksmith tools sits just off the entrance road. Guests can also visit a meticulously restored tenant house that the original owner ordered from a Sears, Roebuck and Company catalog, which would have been inhabited by hired help.



The Red Barn is among several historic buildings at The Farm at Prophetstown.

Lettuce, sweet corn, rhubarb, and other produce is grown in a garden behind the large 1920s-era home on the property, the Gibson Farmhouse. That's where Susan Wilson, one of the farm's employees, can often be found. Today, she's yanking up ragweed and hoping to work on some planting, although with the steady stream of visitors, that hasn't happened yet.

The farm offers formal tours, but it's not uncommon for couples, families, and other small groups to stop by without notice.

Offering guidance is one of employees' central responsibilities, so when guests emerge from the parking lot, unless staff are working on a time-sensitive task, they stop to ask if anyone would like to visit the barn or see the vintage player piano, or if any children in the group would like to help collect eggs. On summer weekends, Leslie says the farm gets 300 to 400 visitors a day.

## / LOCALLY SOURCED AND SOLD /

Lauren Reed, the farm's education and events manager, used to spend much of the morning doing chores. That's changed since Lauren, who previously worked as a chef in event catering for Purdue University, suggested the farm host farm-to-table dinners.

"They turned out to be insanely popular," Lauren says.

Lauren now spends much of her day responding to messages about events or prepping meals before the dinners.

Whenever possible, the dishes served incorporate farm-produced meats and ingredients from its garden. "It's cool to be able to serve people things that were picked that day," Lauren says. "Most people have never had asparagus right out of a garden, grilled; that really tastes different."



Guests enjoy a farm-to-table dinner at the farm

On weekends, the farm hosts **events** like pie-eating contests and educational programs on topics like beekeeping basics and food preservation methods.

Weekdays like today, though, are often dedicated to standard farm chores. Ribeyes, briskets, and other cuts are due from the processor the farm works with, This Old Farm in Colfax, Indiana, and everything halts when Leslie returns from the two-and-a-half-hour drive from the facility so the items can be recorded and promptly stored in the freezer. They'll later be sold to visitors, along with chicken and duck eggs.

"We work really hard to ensure clean processes and humane treatment of the animals at our processor," Leslie says. "This Old Farm has been very transparent about their operations and policies. Our cattle and pigs are there for 10 minutes; that's it."



Farm-to-table dinners incorporate meats from animals raised on the farm and vegetables grown in the garden.

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—Lauren Reed, education and events manager at The Farm at Prophetstown

## / EVENING RITUALS /



As the temperature rises in the afternoon, chickens take refuge in bushes.

The pigs, who usually sink into the mud when heat hits, are up and active when employee Trey Gorden slides into rubber boots and wanders into the hog pen. It's 4 p.m., which means dinnertime for the animals and the start of evening chores for the farm staff. Trey's next stop is the cow pasture, where he deposits food and water for the night.



Trey leaves the barn partially open so cows and horses can enter their pastures, and he places the rabbits in hutches inside their runs for protection. He also fills a food dish for Glitter, the barn cat who keeps mice away.

By 4:30 p.m., all poultry animals on this side of the farm have been safely enclosed in the coop outside of the barn. This coop—nicknamed the Island of Misfit Chickens after the Island of Misfit Toys in the 1960s stop-motion Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer special—houses chickens who have been picked on by other chickens or just don't like attention—and, as a result, don't mix well with the general group.



On the other side of the farm, Lauren emerges from the Gibson house with a bag of frozen tomatoes she'll use to coax the chickens in the house's yard toward their evening lodging. She's quickly greeted by a gaggle of birds.

"They love tomatoes," she says. "I try to save some for them to pick on in the evening."

As these ducks, chickens, and other poultry enter their coop, the staff realize there's a straggler: Brenda. The turkey who went missing in action last night has disappeared again, probably into the sheep pasture, Lauren thinks, after ducking under the fence.



Technically, it's time to go home; but no one wants to risk Brenda being outside of the coop's walls until morning again. So employees head into the tall grass, tapping at it with long sticks, until Susan, who's farthest from the yard, suddenly calls out, "Found her!" Brenda's lying down in the grass, hissing, seemingly furious she's been discovered.

After a moment, though, she stands up, unapologetically strides to the coop and ambles in, as if it were her idea all long.



Tonight, everyone will sleep safely and soundly where they belong.

For more information about The Farm at Prophetstown, visit [prophetstown.org](http://prophetstown.org).

### About the Writer

Erin Brereton has been writing about travel, business, and other topics for magazines, newspapers, and other publications for more than 20 years.