

'WE ARE THE HOLE IN THE DOUGHNUT'



Bill Manley / The Northwest Herald

Farmer Tom Halat waters poinsettias in his greenhouse at Tom's Farm Market & Greenhouses in Huntley. Halat says he expects that the development along Algonquin Road eventually will force him to move his farm to the west.

Growing pains

Huntley farmer looks to the west as sprawl closes in

By GENEVA WHITE
The Northwest Herald

Tom Halat never wanted to be anything except a farmer.

At 17, he began renting his first 30 acres and started a produce stand on Route 20 in Bartlett.

That was 40 years ago.

"I actually was not even raised on a farm," said Halat, who owns Tom's Farm Market & Greenhouses in Huntley.

His interest in farming started as a youngster in 4-H. After graduating from St. Edward High School in Elgin, he earned a bachelor's degree in plant and soil science from Southern Illinois University in Carbondale,

where he met his wife, Cheryl.

"All the members of the 4-H club were from farms, and I envied them," said Halat, 57.

The vegetable stand on Route 20 still exists. But Halat's dream of growing crops in his hometown of Bartlett faded with the arrival of bulldozers and rooftops.

Two years ago, Halat's second farm stand at Stearns Road and Route 59 in Bartlett closed to make way for a Home Depot.

As suburban sprawl moves farther west, it is not uncommon for farmers to find themselves being pushed off their land, said Steve Arnold, manager of the Kane County Farm Bureau.

"That brings a mixed bag," Ar-

nold said. "It increases property values, but it also increases the conflicts. It makes it much more difficult for farmers to operate."

In 1976, a real estate broker showed Halat and his wife land in unincorporated Huntley. The couple purchased about 240 acres with plans to grow vegetables in Huntley and truck them back to the two stands in Bartlett.

Four years later, the Halats opened the Huntley farmers market.

"The furthest thing from our minds was that we'd ever have a farm stand in Huntley," Halat said. "Now look at it."

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Farmer: Halat says he may move crop production to Genoa but plans to keep Huntley stand

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Tom's Farm Market & Greenhouses on Algonquin Road sells everything from flowering annuals and bedding plants in the spring to locally grown sweet corn and watermelons in the summer.

"Sweet corn is our best item, and we're most well-known for that," Halat said. "We pick it fresh every day."

In October, the Halats host a fall festival with a corn maze, a petting zoo and pony rides.

The market also has a gift shop and bakery and sells Christmas trees during the holidays. Halat closed his business for the season Sunday and will reopen in April.

The Halats' daughters, Mary and Liz, and their husbands also work at the market.

Although business is good, the Halats are starting to face some of the same problems from development that plagued them 26 years ago in Bartlett. The farm lies between Lake in the Hills and Huntley, two of the fastest-growing

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Tom Halat

Huntley farmer

communities in northern Illinois.

"It is getting increasingly difficult culturally to grow vegetables around here because we are surrounded by houses," Halat said. "We are like the hole in the doughnut."

Halat has sold two pieces of land: one to members of Springbrook Community Church, who meet at Jacobs High School, and another to the congregation of Shepherd of the

Prairie Church.

With all the homes being built around Halat's farm, spraying pesticides is an issue, as is running noisy irrigation pumps at night. Because there are so few farms in the area, Halat's prized sweet corn often is eaten by blackbirds.

"Every new house that's built around me increases the pressure of blackbirds on my farm because there's no place else for them to feed," Halat said.

To help scare the blackbirds off his land, Halat sometimes uses propane fire cannons that mimic the sound of a shotgun. Some neighbors are not fond of that method.

Halat said his cabinet is filled with complaints about the farm from surrounding residents.

"We get constant phone calls when we're trying to protect our fields," Halat said. "People just don't understand agriculture, and they never will."

However, he said most of his neighbors appreciate his work.

"I believe that's what keeps us here,

is our good customers and neighbors," Halat said. "I would say the good neighbors overwhelm the bad ones."

Huntley resident Pete Velos said he hopes that development does not drive Halat off his farm.

"It would be nice to see some farmland in the area, other than houses," Velos said. "It's changed a lot since I moved here. I can remember when Randall Road was a two-lane highway."

Halat also has experienced drainage problems on his property from surrounding homes and has battled developers in court over the matter.

"I have nothing against development," he said. "But I don't want them to hurt my soil in the process."

Halat's daughter, Mary Manning, 33, said she watched her parents struggle in recent years to try to farm in the midst of the development. Elmer Kurz, who owned the last farm next to Halat's property, sold his land to a developer last year.

"When he went, you knew it was getting difficult to farm," Manning said. Harry Allen Jr., president of the Mc-

Henry County Farm Bureau, said a plan is needed to preserve the area's valuable farmland.

"People are making more people, and they have to have a place to live," Allen said. "What's happening is they're gobbling up a lot of good farmland. Once you've destroyed that topsoil, it will never come back."

Arnold said Kane County has strict policies on residential development coming in conflict with agriculture.

"I think Kane County is generally viewed as more favorable toward farmers continuing their agricultural operation," Arnold said. "That is an environment the Kane County government wants to foster."

Although he is not sure when, Halat said he knows he eventually will have to move his farm farther west. He is considering relocating his crop production to Genoa, where his son, Jeff, is a corn and soybean farmer. The market will continue to operate in Huntley.

"We're not stopping farming," Halat said. "It's in my blood, and I doubt I will ever retire."