

# **The Life and Times of The Green Dragon**

*By Kathryn Donaldson*

**T**he farmer's market has been a part of Lancaster County life since the 1700s. When the city of Lancaster was first planned, space was set aside for just that purpose. It is truly amazing how little has been documented for posterity. Historical knowledge of our markets has been mostly oral.

The weekly markets have functions far removed from mere selling and buying. Farm people gather for the opportunity to learn from each other, compare notes, and socialize. It is a bright spot in a workweek and a chance to meet friends and neighbors. New ideas and products are available, like a small scale farm show. Other people go for the goodies . . . no serious shopping, just subs, donuts, funnel cakes and soft pretzels.

The following anecdotes will acquaint people with Northern Lancaster County's Green Dragon, and some of the culture that produced a climate for this type of market.

## **Market Day As a Social Event**

Walking into the Auction building on a Friday afternoon or evening, you will see some people, mostly men, bidding on items. Some are spectators, they gather in small serious groups, chew tobacco and enjoy the conversation. Being a woman I found this boring, but the auction seems to draw men like flies to honey. They really do not talk much. It is more like some ritual where they stand around and commune with each other. I asked a male friend why this was enjoyable to men. He told me that if you don't know when you

are born, you never will, and then he went over to join the group and I didn't ask any more questions.

The women visiting the Green Dragon have a different air about them. You can almost see their minds working while they study bushels of green peppers, huge bags of potatoes, and giant heads of snow white cauliflower. They question the standholder about uses and prices. They will spend some time chatting with acquaintances, but they also look for the best quality and the best prices. This is one method of putting food on the table. It can be very satisfying to serve and preserve good food to feed the family. The fresh produce and meats offer a rewarding opportunity to challenge one's culinary talents.

Children absolutely love the Green Dragon, I can attest to that. My brothers and I would "eat ourselves full," every time we talked our grandfather into taking us along. He kept us satisfied with food while he participated in the "men's social building" (alias auction). From toddler to teen, there is always plenty to see, do, and eat. There are well over a hundred stands to get lost among, animals to look at, music and food, merchants with oddities to display or demonstrate. These call the wandering kids like sirens. By the time the little ones are carried to the car, truck, or buggy, they are already dreaming happily. I do not remember, even once, the ride home. This is amazing, considering that one time we had two goat kids in the car with us on the way home.



*The Green Dragon midway, in front of the original market building.*

## How The Green Dragon Was Born

Most businesses have some interesting history, but the Green Dragon came into being in a sort of trial and error metamorphosis. Some time during the 1920s a Mennonite farmer named Noah Burkholder decided to start a car repair business. His farm was about one mile north of Ephrata, east of what is now Route 272, then the main highway between Lancaster and Reading. The sect he belonged to allowed automobiles and he was handy with them. The traffic passing his place seemed to offer an opportunity, but after struggling unsuccessfully for three years, Mr. Burkholder gave up on it. He rented a portion of the building to Lottie Hess, who tried to run a restaurant, but she gave up after a year and Mr. Burkholder sold the building to John Schreck.

Mr. Schreck found a new way to use the building. He turned it into an exotic roadhouse, decorated with a far-eastern decor called the Green Dragon. This business was successful at first, but this too would be short lived. Schreck had not bargained on prohibition and he soon was raided.

While all this drinking and dancing was going on, the god-fearing Mr. Burkholder and his family lived only a field's distance from the Green Dragon Roadhouse. He was not pleased by these activities, and surely must have regretted selling the building to Schreck. A short time after the raid, Burkholder bought back the property.

Mr. Burkholder was more determined than ever to have a decent business on his land. He was eager too to have the name of the roadhouse forgotten. In that respect he never succeeded. But this is where the story of the Green Dragon of today really begins.

## Recollections of William Schwartz

I recently discovered Mr. William Schwartz, who was one of the two merchants present on the first day of the Auction's existence, and has memories that are as clear as a bell.

The first Friday of Green Dragon, officially named the "Farmer's Market and Auction," was in the Spring of 1932. The office was a bit rustic. Actually, Mr. Burkholder removed the seats from the three holed outhouse, put in a floor, and added a twenty-five-watt light bulb. The grounds were comprised of two tables on either side of a pole that held a one-hundred-watt light bulb.

On that first week there were only two merchants, Mr. Schwartz selling shrubs, and a Mr. Ulrich offering produce for sale. During the day, the men sold what they could, and at nine o'clock in the evening Jacob (Jakey) Beamsderfer auctioned off what remained. A percentage of the day's profit went to the owner. Mr. Schwartz remembers this amount being about four dollars. He cleared sixteen dollars for a truckload of shrubs.

"Jakey" Beamsderfer was a colorful character with an affinity for off-color jokes. This did not sit well with Mr. Burkholder, but he overlooked them until one day Jakey went too far. His final joke at the Green Dragon was made during the auctioning of an outsize chamber pot to a rather rotund woman.

On the second week, Mr. Roy Stauffer set up shop with produce. This became a family business and his sons now operate a few large markets in the area.

Twelve merchants brought their wares to the market the third week and the ball was really rolling. Mr. Burkholder was finally able to watch his business blossom.

## Paul Stoner Buys The Market

In 1946 Noah Burkholder became a minister in his church. The sale of his business was necessary in order to devote his time to working for the Lord. There would be changes at the Green Dragon.

Paul Stoner stands in Bill Schwartz's mind as a very easygoing man. He was rarely seen to be wearing shoes and loved the Auction.

The showmen took their places at the market and drew large crowds. The "Mighty Atom" bent nails in his bare hands, and drove spikes into his nose, while young and old gaped in astonishment. Meanwhile, the man selling Veg-a-matics sliced, diced, anti-rusted and busted his way into the hearts of the housewives. Both men rattled on at a mile-a-minute, while children would stay to hear the spiel over and over. This sort of thing became an integral part of the market.

Mr. Stoner began building up the Dragon by leaps and bounds. The new office of knotty pine was quite a step upward. Other buildings seem to radiate out from the office. He put up a sign along route 272.

The atmosphere of the market is based on tradition. It has to do with the open air of trust that can be felt as soon as the Dragon on 272 comes into sight. It comes from the smiles on the faces of merchants and customers. It is pile after pile of perfect fruits and vegetables, shelves of freshly baked goods, tantalizing delicatessen foods, barns full of healthy animals, and long, long rows of sweet-smelling hay and straw on wagons, waiting to be auctioned.

We take it for granted that the market grew with little or no planning. Perhaps that is just what happened. But it seems more likely that Mr. Stoner planned the crucial period of development for his adolescent market. Growing so fast, the Dragon could just as easily have become a monster. It could have taken on the tawdry personality of a carnival, or maybe a giant merchandise mart, with "everything under one roof" and look-alike clerks in every aisle.

Luckily for all involved, the Dragon kept its individuality, and that is due to the planning and foresight of the various owners.



*An early '60s aerial view of the Green Dragon Market and Auction.*

## 1961 Brings New Owners

In 1961 Larry Loose and William Rohrbach took over the Dragon. Their lives seemed to lead them there. The Loose family had moved from Berks County to the Cocalico Valley as early as 1800. Larry's parents moved to Ephrata about 1948. Four doors down from their house was the Rohrbach house. The two boys quickly became friends. In high school they remained friends with Loose eventually marrying Rohrbach's cousin. But first, the boys went off to college. Bill graduated from Goldey Beacom Business College, and the following year Larry was preparing to graduate with an advertising degree from Franklin and Marshall College. During that year Larry's father-in-law had an idea for the two men. He was Paul Stoner's attorney. Mr. Stoner had a serious heart condition and needed to sell the Green Dragon. But he didn't want to sell to just anybody. He worried about how a new owner would treat the standholders.

Although Larry was still in college, the two decided to tackle the business. David Burkholder, who had been with Stoner, stayed for a year to help them. The transition could not have been easy, but with Mr. Burkholder's help, the new owners learned all about their business and avoided any severe changes.

## The Dragon Gains Respectability

In 1961 there was still a roadhouse. It was across the street by then, but Schreck still operated it. When it eventually went up for sale, Loose and Rohrbach bought it and put an end to the problems it caused, but until then other measures were necessary.

Mr. Schreck's operating practices gave rise to a great deal of rowdiness. In the early days, there is a good possibility that prostitution had its place in the roadhouse. When cold weather came Schreck went to Atlantic City and hired black couples to entertain. They were housed in buildings on the market grounds.

By 1961, the roadhouse was still popular with the rowdy crowd, but legal. The problem was with people drinking and then going to the market. Fights in the parking lot and generally unsavory behavior was far too common. The new owners wanted to project a wholesome, family image. Security guards were hired to patrol the market, and drunks were discouraged from entering before they even had a chance to start trouble. Now there is no need for guards; the image is a reality.

Toward the end of Mr. Stoner's ownership, he lost interest in the upkeep of the market. He was ill and he left behind lots of things for the new owners to work on, and they were soon fixing things up. Within the first ten years after Loose and Rohrbach took possession, every building needed a new roof. The plumbing was inadequate for the number of people being served, and needed updating. Lighting was scarce, so there was wiring to be done. Everything got a coat or two of paint. A shallow stream separated the grounds from the upper parking lot, and there was no bridge. The parking area was not big enough for the crowds that descended each Friday, so that had to be enlarged. The main entrance went right past the livestock loading area. Loose and Rohrbach saw the potential danger there and moved the entrance to the end of the parking lot.

In 1975, demand for indoor space had made it necessary for the construction of the "new" building. Loose was nearby clerking the Hay and Straw sale. Rohrbach was in the office. Work was going so well on the new building that the workmen neglected to crossbrace the trusses. When they were about three-quarters of the way done, the trusses fell like dominoes and crushed part of the new walls. Loose dropped what he was doing and ran to make sure nobody was inside. A man known for practical jokes went to inform Rohrbach. It took the man a while to convince him. On a busy Friday afternoon, it was a miracle that nobody was injured.

Good luck was on their side. Nothing bad happens without a good side to it. The broken trusses were put in the livestock barns. New ones were ready one week later. Another example of resourcefulness involves the Dragon Sign. Someone shot two arrows into its side. Instead of calling the police and charging vandalism, Mr. Loose considered painting blood dripping down from the wounds, and sending a picture to the newspaper.

## **The Green Dragon Makes Its Debut**

Larry Loose and William Rohrbach put a lot of energy and enthusiasm into their new venture. The Annual Ephrata Farm Show and parade are really



*Save for use at fairs and in parades, this Green Dragon has stood faithfully since 1964 along Rt. 272, marking the turn-off for the market.*

big events that attract many thousands of persons. Loose and Rohrbach decided to build a parade float to call attention to the Green Dragon. Although the floats were prize-winners, the prize money didn't cover the expense of the floats! This is where the Green Dragon made its debut in 1962. It was decided that since everyone called the market the "Green Dragon," that should be its official name. The parade dragon was made of chicken wire and boards.

The sign that guards the entrance along 272 was made by Rod Shutt of Strasburg. The dragon originally boasted eyes that flashed red, but a zoning regulation put an end to that. The dragon found his way into the Associated Press wire service, and has been seen in newspapers around the country.

## **Floods and Community Response**

Every business has a problem which is beyond control. The Green Dragon is no exception—it gets flooded. Many people in Lancaster County believe that the Akron-Ephrata area gets more rain than any other area. It also gets more flooding. A few years prior to Hurricane Agnes, a flood hit the area, damaging the bridge over the Cocalico Creek near the market. It also ripped up the macadam at the market. Plans to prevent future destruction

were presented to the commissioners by Loose and Rohrbach, but rejected.

When Agnes hit, it was inevitable that the dragon would be swimming. The flood reached its crest on Wednesday. Water was everywhere. Merchants, neighbors, and other volunteers pitched in to help in the cleaning up. On Friday, the market was open as usual.

## **How To Enjoy A Day At The Green Dragon**

The first rule is to dress comfortably, as if for a hike. Keep in mind that you will be indoors and outdoors. So a heavy bulky coat would be a poor choice. A flannel shirt and thick sweater jacket work best for me in cool weather. Wear comfortable shoes, because it is easy to put many miles on those shoes at the dragon. Second and most important, don't ever buy anything heavy until it is almost time to head home. Last time I was there, I bought a five-pound chicken shortly after arriving. By the time we finally left, the chicken seemed more like an albatross!

Next, the ideal appetite to take along would result from a three-day fast, but realistically, it is more fun to arrive a little hungry. Not ravenous perhaps, but hungry. After parking, walk for a while on the fringe of the activity. Circle the grounds, and take it in. Without some bearings, one could easily become slightly disoriented. This also allows you to see what there is to see. I watched a picturesque autumn auction, and located the buggy shed and the original Burkholder Homestead, while just strolling around near the parking area.

Once you head into the center of the market, do not rush. Keep eyes and ears open, while following your nose to the soft pretzels, or funnel cakes—depending on which end of the market you start. From there, it is up to the individual. Prop yourself against a wall and watch the parade pass. Stop at the different stands and talk about the weather, or the price of beans. Ask which apples are best for baking, or sauce, or making cider.

Don't hurry! Don't hurry through as if it were a supermarket. Breathe it in and enjoy it. It is only available one day a week.

## **The Dragon Ladies**

As soon as my sister Maryanne and I discovered the low cost of a stand, we knew we could not pass it up. She had started the previous year, making stuffed Cocalico ornaments, and I knew I could do it too. It seemed a unique way to defray tuition costs while conducting research. Maryanne could see consumer reaction before going into a larger scale venture.

**Week One**—That week was terrible! We covered the ten dollar cost of the stand and had three dollars and fifty cents left over. Our customers were our grandmother, a friend, another standholder and two legitimate shoppers.



However, we did get a feel for the place. We had lots of fun, and were determined to try again. Standholders told us that the next week would be one of the busiest.

Our neighbors were terrific. We did not get their names; to our right and rear was the "Hat Man." To our left was the "Jewelry Girl," who never put on her coat. We were freezing and then she told us that her long johns were lined with bunny fur. Behind her was the "Stained Glass Lady." She was well prepared. She had a rug so her feet wouldn't get tired, blankets, a chair, thermos bottles full of hot foods and beverages, tape, paper towels and a kerosene heater. We were upset by some of the reactions we got from the people walking by. It was very close to open hostility. At that point, we were unaware of our poor timing in selling Christmas ornaments, and very sensitive to negative comments. We refrained from replying rudely, and tried to concentrate on the compliments we got.

Our neighbors were very friendly. Business was bad for everyone, so we stood around the kerosene heater, talking, most of the day. For all the cold weather and tactless comments we had that day, we had a lot of fun. We both had stitches in our sides from laughing by the time we got home. We wearily fell into bed, got up the next morning and started sewing with abandon for the next week. Nobody can say we gave up easily!

The second week started very differently. The day after Thanksgiving, I groggily turned off the alarm at 6:00 A.M. We were ready. We had twice as much inventory as the week before, and our neighbor kindly showed us some of the finer points of merchandising.

By 10:30 that morning we had enough money to rent six stands. We got so excited that we even got the confidence to talk to the customers. Up until then, we just stood there, smiling and taking money. We were still smarting from the week before. By noon there was no stopping us. People would stop and look at our stand, leave, and return bringing other people with them. We were a success!

This week we had new neighbors. One was a man with a solar collector on a trailer. Another neighbor sold writing tablets. These people were very interesting. Under any other circumstances, I would be a little frightened of them. But everyone depends on each other. Out of necessity, standholders greet each other as old friends, and extend courtesies to each other, even if they have just met that week.

We watched large groups of Mennonite teenagers gather and disperse, flirting coyly, seeming almost to pretend that the girls and the boys were unaware of each other, but not quite pulling it off.

We also saw a child wearing a green dragon suit. He was sitting in a stroller. It was adorable. "There's no such thing as a dragon" was printed across his chest.

The Green Dragon is a great place to spend a Friday, whether one

is on the buying or selling side of the counter. Even though I was raised in Lancaster County, I am still surprised by the open, trusting atmosphere at the market. It is a never-ending parade of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. The outside merchants are always changing, so it is never the same.

## Some Green Dragon Information

The Green Dragon covers about eighty acres. The market proper takes nearly five acres, the parking area for seventeen hundred cars covers twenty-five acres and the remaining fifty are leased for farming.

Hours are officially 10 A.M. until 10 P.M. on Fridays. The only time it would not open on Friday would be if Christmas should fall on a Friday. Good Friday and the Friday following Thanksgiving are the busiest days of the year. Merchants start arriving at 5 A.M., and customers start coming as early as 8. The evenings are the most crowded unless it's a holiday.



*A calf sale in the Auction Barn, January 1965.*

Costs of stands depend on location (indoor, outdoor), season, and depth, but the average, for ten feet of frontage, would be \$10–12. Tables and lighting are provided. Reservations are taken no more than one week in advance. Many merchants do not bother with reservations.

### Auction Times

Outdoor Miscellaneous sales	11:00 A.M.
Livestock-Beef Slaughter	11:00 A.M.
Hay & Straw	12:00 Noon
Dairy Cattle	12:30 P.M.
Indoor Dry Goods	1:00 & 7:00 P.M.
Small Animals	7:00 P.M.
L. & L. Auction	7:00 P.M.
(formerly Smitty's Action Auction)	

## Sources and Acknowledgements

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2. Messner, Arlene H. *Green Dragon*. An essay supplying the historical background. Unpublished.
3. Schwartz, Wm. Interview of Oct. 1981.
4. Green Dragon Map, by Larry Loose.
5. Larry Loose and William Rohrbach interviews.

## About The Author

*Kathryn Donaldson researched and wrote this essay in 1981 as an "Untraditional student" at Millersville University. Unchallenged by jobs she had held such as bookkeeping, sales clerking, and being a police dispatcher, she decided on a career as a writer.*