FOR MORE THAN 200 YEARS...

One Family's Farm

By Linda Wirtanen Fitzgerald

Established in 1776, just days after the Declaration of Independence was signed, the farm of William and Alexander Macomb once occupied all of Grosse Ile.

Today, a portion of the acreage is still being used—as a commercial nursery—by descendants of the same family.

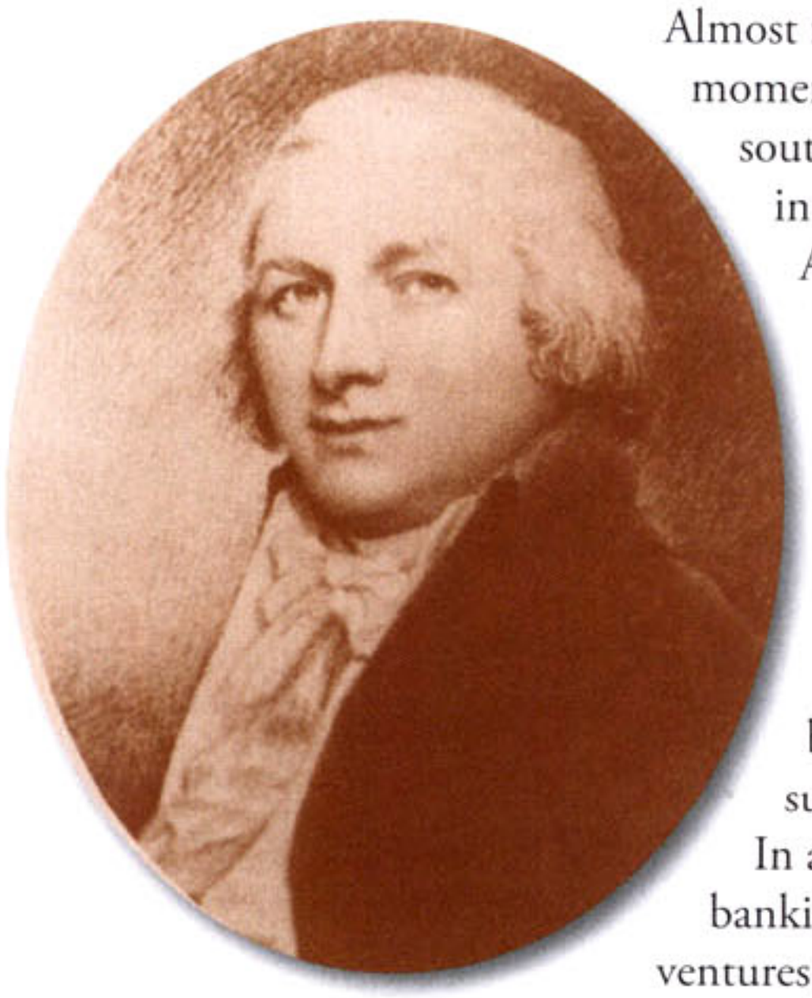
It is Michigan's oldest family-owned farm—an enduring example of the state's centuries-old agricultural heritage.

It's a perfect spring day on Grosse Ile. The sky is a flawless blue, and the air is tinged with a faint haze. A breeze ruffles the surface of the Detroit River. Along West River Road, blooming plum, dogwood, magnolias, and forsythia punctuate the budding green foliage of maple and oak.

On a day like this, it's easy to understand why the Potawatomi chose this lush island as their home. And why, in 1703, famed explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac praised its "vast meadows…fringed with long broad avenues of fruit trees" and its "fine, open plains."

It's also easy to understand why brothers William and Alexander Macomb were so eager to purchase the whole of Grosse Ile—covering 9.6 square miles—and transform it into a farming community. And why several of their descendants have remained on the island, operating what is today the oldest family-owned farm in Michigan.

The Macomb Legacy Begins



Almost from the moment they arrived in southeastern Michigan in the 1760s, Alexander and William Macomb began acquiring prime real estate along the Detroit River. Like their father before them, the two brothers were successful traders. In addition to their banking and importing ventures, they were "sutlers"—merchants licensed to sell provisions to the British army.

Grosse Ile, the largest island on the Detroit River, was of particular interest to the Macombs because of its rich soil and abundant wildlife. And so it was that on July 6, 1776, under the spreading branches of what would become known to Grosse Ile residents as "the treaty tree," Alexander and William met with 18 Potawatami chiefs and their eldest sons. There, they signed a deed that made them owners of Kitche-minishen (Grand Island).

Being shrewd businessmen, the brothers developed a strategy for securing their commercial interests on the American continent. William held the Michigan property, which remained under British rule, and cemented his claim to Grosse Ile by leasing land to tenant farmers and building a grist mill, cider press, wharf, and even a "mansion," although he and his family maintained a home in Detroit.

To further the family's interests in the fledgling United States, Alexander moved to New York. There he purchased a fleet of merchant vessels and within six years acquired nearly 6,000 square miles of property—becoming one of the largest landowners in U.S. history. However, the Panic of 1792 led to major business reversals, forcing Alexander to sell his share in Grosse Ile to William for £200. Soon after, he declared bankruptcy and was consigned to a debtors' prison.

Fortunately, Alexander's sad fate did not end his family's relationship with Grosse Ile—nor did it taint the success of his heirs. During the War of 1812, his son and namesake, General Alexander Macomb, became the hero of the Battle of Plattsburg and from 1828 until 1841 served as commanding general of the U.S. Army. He also solidified ties between the two branches of the family by marrying his first cousin, William's daughter Catherine.

Ownership by William's Heirs

After William's death in 1796, his sons David, John, and William II filed claim to Grosse Ile and parceled out the land among themselves. In 1811, there was additional cause for celebration when President James Madison ratified the original treaty between the Macombs and the Potawatomi, officially recognizing William's three sons as the owners of Grosse Ile. But the satisfaction of that victory was short-lived, for the War of 1812 brought tragedy to the Michigan branch of the family.

In the winter of 1813, Native Americans allied with the British burned the Macomb homestead on the island. William II's wife, Monique (née Navarre), managed to flee by canoe with their infant son Pierre, but died from exposure soon after reaching the relative safety of Detroit. Present-day members of the Macomb family believe that the attack was a personal vendetta on the part of a local Potawatomi chief, offended by his daughter's "dalliance" with Macomb.

After the war, increasing debt led the three brothers to sell portions of the island to their cousin, General Alexander Macomb. The sale of land continued at an

Previous spread: Today's botanical garden and commercial nursery are part of a 234-year-old farm that once covered the island. Courtesy of Westcroft Gardens. Above: Alexander Macomb was one of the original owners of the farm, though he established his residence in New York. Facing page: The 1776 deed to Grosse Ile was witnessed by 18 Potawatomi chiefs who drew pictographs to distinguish themselves and then left their thumbprints in sealing wax; only the wax's red stains now remain. Images courtesy of the Detroit Public Library/Burton Historical Collection.

Know all men by these presents that We the Chiefs and Sachems of the Ottawa, Chippewa and Potawatomi Nations of the River St. Joseph, and Lake Michigan, for and in consideration of the sum of Two Thousand Dollars to us in hand paid by Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell of Detroit, Merchants, and the receipt whereof we do hereby acknowledge, have given, granted, aliened, bargained and sold, and by these presents do give, grant, alien, bargain, sell and confirm unto the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, all that Messuage or Tract of Land known by the name of Pagé-wâ-nâ, and called in our language Nitchi-ing, also Grand Island, situate lying and being in the mouth of Detroit River, which said Messuage or Tract of Land is bounded by the waters of said River, viz.

[illegible] and the said Island, with all and singular the appurtenances thereunto belonging, and the reversion and reversions, remainder and remainders, rents, issues and profits thereof, and also all the estate, right, title, interest, property, claim and demand whatsoever of us the said Chiefs and Sachems of, in, and to the same and every part and parcel thereof, to have and to hold the said Messuage or Tract of Land, Island and premises, with all and singular the appurtenances, unto the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, to the only proper use, benefit and behoof of them the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns forever, to be holden of the Chief Lords of the Fee, by the rents, services and customs therefor of right due and of ancient time accustomed, freely, clearly and absolutely acquitted, exonerated and discharged of and from all manner of former and other gifts, grants, bargains, sales, leases, mortgages, wills, entails, dowers, rents, services, duties, taxes, charges and incumbrances whatsoever, made, done, committed or suffered by us the said Chiefs and Sachems, or any of our ancestors, or any other person or persons whomsoever, lawfully claiming or to claim by, from or under us, them or any of them. And we the said Chiefs and Sachems, for ourselves, our heirs, executors and administrators, do covenant, promise and grant to and with the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, by these presents, that we the said Chiefs and Sachems, our heirs, executors and administrators, shall and will warrant and forever defend the said Messuage or Tract of Land, Island and premises, with the appurtenances, unto the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, against the lawful claims and demands of all and every person and persons whomsoever. And lastly, we the said Chiefs and Sachems, for ourselves, our heirs, executors and administrators, do covenant, promise and grant to and with the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, by these presents, that we the said Chiefs and Sachems, our heirs, executors and administrators, shall and will, at any time hereafter, upon the reasonable request and at the proper costs and charges in the law of the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, make, do, execute and acknowledge, or cause and procure to be made, done, executed and acknowledged, all such further and other lawful and reasonable acts, conveyances and assurances in the law for the better and more effectually granting and assuring the said Messuage or Tract of Land, Island and premises, with the appurtenances, unto the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, as by the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, or their counsel learned in the law, shall be reasonably advised, devised or required. In witness whereof, we the said Chiefs and Sachems have hereunto set our hands and affixed our seals, and delivered these presents to the said Alexander Maxwell and William Maxwell, their heirs and assigns, the day and year first above written. Sealed and delivered in the presence of us, being first duly interpreted and explained to the said Chiefs and Sachems, by Jacques Duchesne, Interpreter to the Garrison of Detroit, and by the said Chiefs and Sachems fully understood, and by them acknowledged to be their act and deed, in the presence of us, the subscribers, at Detroit, this [illegible] day of [illegible] in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and [illegible] and in the [illegible] year of the Reign of His Majesty George the Third, by the Grace of God, King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c.

In the presence of
J. Duchesne
Dpt. Comsy.

Registered in Book Page of Deeds, Wayne County, Michigan Territory, 1818 by [illegible]

1819 auction, where their brother-in-law John Rucker purchased 11 of the Macomb lots on Grosse Ile. That same year, Rucker moved his family into an abandoned British stockade on the island, where they lived until 1835.

According to historians, John Rucker completed his house on West River Road—the same house now occupied by Macomb descendants Constance de Beausset and her daughter Denise—in 1848. However, family members dispute that date. They point to a sizable increase in Rucker's property taxes in 1835—along with the fact that he and his family moved out of the stockade that same year—as evidence of earlier home construction.

Above: A barn, nursery office, and greenhouses built in the 1920s are still in use today. Courtesy of Westcroft Gardens. Below: A sign marks the property as a bicentennial farm—Michigan's first. Facing page: The Rucker-Stanton House, where the Macombs' descendants live, may be as much as 175 years old. Courtesy of Thomas Fitzgerald.

Enter the Stantons

In 1873, Robert Stanton—cousin to John Rucker—purchased the Rucker farm and house. That same year, he brought his widowed mother, Alexandrine Macomb Stanton, daughter of General Macomb, and her sister to live on Grosse Ile as part of his household.

A diligent farmer, it was Robert who gave the property the name "Westcroft" ("croft" being the Welsh word for farm). By the late 1800s, the farm was prospering, with most of its acreage devoted to growing hay for the horses that pulled Detroit's trolleys.

As horse-and-buggy transport was gradually replaced by automobiles powered by internal-combustion engines, it became clear that Westcroft needed to change in order to survive. As it happened, the agent of that change was Robert's son, Ernest Stanton.

In 1918, Ernest returned home from World War I. Ill from repeated mustard-gas attacks, he was ordered by his doctors to pursue work in the open air as a prescription for strengthening his damaged lungs. Managing the family farm seemed to be the most logical option, provided Westcroft could find a new, viable market for its crops. But what crops to grow?

Within a short time, Ernest came up with the answer. Westcroft Farm would become Westcroft Gardens, a landscaping firm and nursery specializing in acid-loving plants such as rhododendrons, azaleas, and dogwoods.

Ernest quickly transformed five-and-a-half acres of hay fields into landscaped botanical gardens. In the early 1920s, he and his farmhands also built a series of greenhouses along with an adjoining business office. At about the same time, they constructed a large white barn which, like the office and greenhouses, is still in use today.

Here, Ernest began what would be a lifelong labor of love: creating and patiently testing hybrids suited to thrive in Michigan's notoriously alkaline soil. Over the years, he became known as one of the world's foremost experts on and hybridizers of acid-loving plants as well as a landscaping pioneer.

The 1930s and 1940s

The stock market crash of 1929 ushered in an era of deprivation for all Americans—including farmers. As Ernest's daughter Constance recalls: "Overnight, everything changed. We lost our maid, stopped our newspaper subscription, and began eating endless meals of rabbit and cornmeal mush. We were lucky in that my father had a special permit from the state of Michigan to kill rabbits that were damaging our crops."

Life on the farm changed in other ways, too. The work crew was cut in half, from 100 men to 50, which meant that big projects often required considerable ingenuity. For Constance, one incident in particular stands out: "Once, in order to clear some fields, my father took out an ad and invited anyone with a car to dig up and haul away all the plants and trees they could carry for just two dollars."

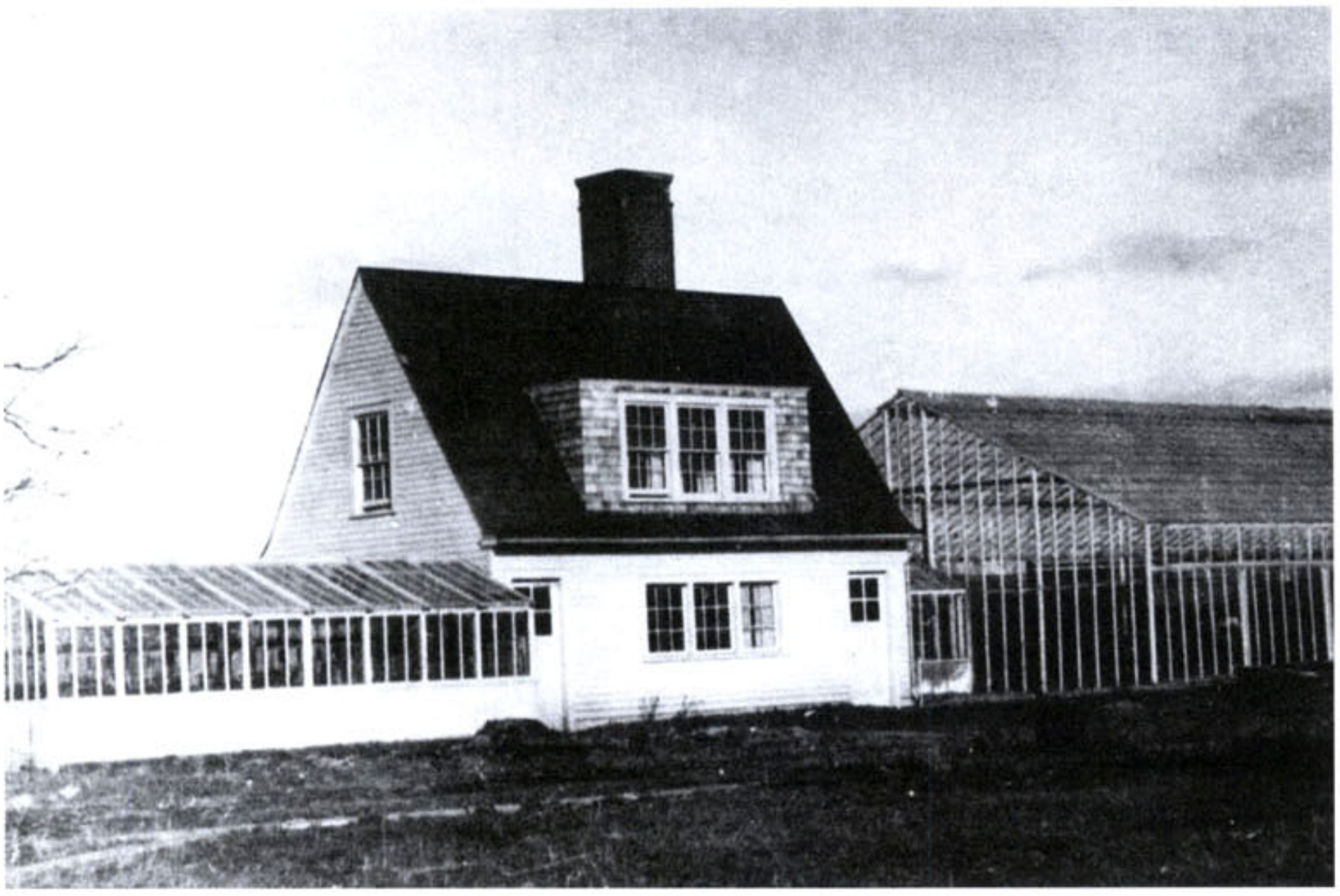
More change was on the way. In 1940, the U.S. government put out a call to farmers, asking them to produce food for America's troops abroad. In response, the Stantons began breeding turkeys. It was hard, messy work and, on V-J Day, Ernest announced to family and friends that he "never wanted to see or hear a live turkey on the farm again."

MICHIGAN'S OTHER **BICENTENNIAL FARMS**

The Macombs' property on Grosse Ile is joined by two Monroe County farms on the short list of family-owned farms that are 200 years or older. "It's a pretty elite group we belong to," noted Elaine (Durocher) Boudrie, owner of a farmstead at 1606 Durocher Road. Purchased in 1796 by Martin Nadault, it was originally described as containing "six arpens in front, and extending to River Aux Raisins, bounded east by lands now claimed by Baptiste Fontaine [and] west by lands claimed by Antoine Riopel."

The other Monroe-area bicentennial farm is the (Jean) Baptiste Fontaine property mentioned above. Located at 1823 Sandy Creek Road, it was established in 1809 and is now owned by Evelyn Durocher, a cousin-in-law of Boudrie.

Though greatly reduced in size—the Nadault property to 28 acres and the Fontaine farm to 11 acres—both are still actively cultivated with soybeans and corn.



It was in the greenhouses on the property where Ernest Stanton experimented with hybridizing acid-loving plants such as dogwoods, azaleas, and rhododendrons. Courtesy of Westcroft Gardens. Facing page above: Denise de Beausset is a seventh-generation farmer and descendant of William and Alexander Macomb. Below: The Westcroft Gardens sign proudly proclaims the property's year of origin. Courtesy of Thomas Fitzgerald.

Passing the Torch

In 1944, Constance married Valery de Beausset. Her husband's work as a chemical engineer took her and their growing family to the farthest corners of the world—including India and China. "But, by 1959, we were ready to give our five children a taste of the U.S. and some time in American schools," Constance notes. "Also, we wanted to be close to my aging parents." So that year, the de Beaussets purchased the Stanton house from Madeleine, Robert's oldest child.

But their time in Michigan was brief. After two difficult years of commuting between his job in New York and his home on Grosse Ile, Valery accepted a position in Mexico. From there, the family relocated to Costa Rica and then Honduras, where they lived for more than 20 years.

The death of Ernest Stanton in 1984 brought Constance and Valery back to Grosse Ile, this time for good. As the sole inheritor of Westcroft, Constance made an immediate decision to continue operating the farm—with the help of a manager—and to keep her father's extensive display gardens open to the public.

The de Beaussets were soon joined by their daughter Denise who, in 1985, gave birth to her own daughter, Nicole. Gradually, Denise found herself being drawn into the family business. "For the first year or so, I worked part-time under Lee Lichtenwalner, the manager at that time," she says. "Then in 1986, Lee insisted I take over. He felt it was important that Westcroft be managed by a member of the family."

Nine Generations and Going Strong

In 1985, Westcroft Farm was added to Michigan's register of historic sites. Two years later, it was officially recognized as the state's oldest centennial farm (or, more accurately, its first bicentennial farm). Those honors brought with them a happy burden for the de Beaussets.

As the great-great-great-great-granddaughter of both Alexander and William Macomb, Denise admits to feeling equal amounts of pride and responsibility. "I was born

THE MACOMBS' FARM IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Macomb farmstead that once occupied every inch of Grosse Ile's 9.6 square miles is now concentrated into 27.5 acres. Today, Westcroft Gardens is known for its hybrid azaleas, rhododendrons, and dogwood trees—the legacy of Ernest Stanton—as well as annuals, perennials, and wildflowers and a wide selection of trees, shrubs, and herbs. With the help of one full-time employee and her niece Erica Mesedahl, Denise de Beausset manages the business and also manufactures Greenleaf Compound, an acid-soil conditioner developed by her grandfather.

In addition to the nursery, 13 acres of woods—overgrown inventory from the days of the Great Depression—are used primarily for fall hayrides. But Westcroft's most popular attraction is the 4.5-acre display garden created by Denise's grandfather and open to the public. Accessible every day of the year, the garden draws as many as 3,000 walkers during the peak bloom months of April and May.

in China and grew up in Honduras," Denise explains. "So as a seventh-generation Macomb, it was a wonderful experience for me to rediscover my heritage and realize what the Macomb name means in Michigan."

In the process, Denise also discovered that she enjoyed the work of horticulture. As she observes, "I love being outdoors. I love the way our tasks change with the seasons. I love that fact that, on a farm, nothing stays the same for very long." She pauses, then gives a wry smile. "Of course, the older I become, the harder the work becomes."

What does the future hold for Westcroft Gardens? Denise herself has no intention of retiring soon. And, although daughter Nicole has other interests, Denise points out that her niece Erica Mesedahl is "doing a great job" as assistant manager. Looking even further into the future, there is Denise's granddaughter, Cammy, who lives with her and Constance in the Rucker-Stanton House.

Denise. Erica. Cammy. The Macomb dynasty continues. And it would appear that Alexander and William can rest easy, confident that their Grosse Ile legacy is in good hands—Macomb hands—for the foreseeable future.

Linda Wirtanen Fitzgerald *is a freelance copywriter and communications consultant based in Ann Arbor. The granddaughter of Upper Peninsula farmers, she has an abiding affection and concern for Michigan's farms.*