

THE TWO RIVER TIMES™

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THE WEEK OF AUGUST 22 - 29, 2014

BOB SICKLES:
DEEPLY ROOTED

BOB SICKLES HAS a great appreciation for roots.

He not only knows the importance of the roots of the plants and shrubs he sells at Sickles Market in Little Silver but also those established by the many generations of his family of farmers that run deeply throughout the community.

His ties to the land and area extend back to 1665. He is a descendent of the Parker family that is believed to have continuously owned the property where his 1 Harrison Ave. establishment is located as well as the surrounding land since acquiring it through the Monmouth Patent during the 17th century.

"If it really has been in one family's hands since 1665, the Parkers, then that's a very unique situation. It could be totally unique in the United States," he said. "We are still researching the title around the time of the Revolution. It's difficult to get records from that time period, particularly these types of records."

Sickles, whose great-grandmother was a Parker, is the great-nephew of Julia Parker, who gifted the Parker Homestead property in 1995 to Little Silver. He is now president of the Parker Homestead-1665 organization, a nonprofit group working to restore the home and the three barns on the property.

"I grew up here," he said of the homestead property and the ranch house that is just across the parking lot from his store.

He feels a strong connection to his heritage and has a deep sense of pride in the fact that his family members have always been farmers. "We farmed all over Monmouth County," including about 80 areas in the homestead area. Sickles father, Robert Sr., who is about to turn 87, still farms a plot of blackberries each year even though he has been "retired" for a while.

Sickles has many memories of Julia Parker, visiting with her during family holiday dinners and hanging out in the old greenhouses and barns on the property.

"I used to see Julia on a regular basis and talk to her," he said. "Julia was a very interesting person, a very 'glass is always half full' person. She was one to write thank you notes and never really watched the news on TV ... She always wanted to watch 'nice' shows.

"She used to work for Lovett's Nursery, which was a huge nursery in this area ... She was bookkeeper for them and also worked on the farm," he recalled.

Preserving the legacy of his family and his descendants' unique place in the history of the area has become a special project for the 58-year-old.

"In the grander scheme of everything, you know, everything gets developed and things get preserved as parks or open space ... I love all of that but historical pieces are rare, especially ones that have fairly important meaning. The important thing here is that it was owned and farmed by farmers. It wasn't farmed by George Washington or Thomas Jefferson of someone famous ... For me, it's the preservation of that concept of farming" and his connection to the land.

"My business is still here and now this historical piece is kind of like the final gem in the crown," Sickles said. "When I drive up that road, it's like looking at a Norman Rockwell painting to me ... It's about roots and a certain time period that was almost lost but instead did not get lost. This has been open space forever."

That space could have been lost if his grandfather had taken one of many offers the family received for the land, including one Sickles believes was somewhere in the area of \$500 an acre during the Depression. "My grandfather used to say they told him he'd never get any more than that for the land," he said.

"There was a lot of farmland around here at the time ... My dad remembers pigs being driven up Rumson Road. After World War II, things began to develop rapidly. There were a lot of housing developments built ... By the '60s my dad was still farming. We were the last farm standing. I was the only kid in town with a farmer for a dad."

While Sickles grew up on a farm and worked with his family planting, picking and "putting down straw for the strawberries and that kind of stuff," he also was the beneficiary of his mom's "expertise in retail in running the farm market. So, I fell into retail."

The farm market had three garage doors and was a strictly seasonal operation. Sickles smiles when he recalls his mother Adelaide managing the operation. "I spent a lot of time with my mom in the market. When I was 12, I was working as a cashier," he said. "We literally had hanging scales and had to calculate what five-eighths of a pound at 69 cents a pound was. We had adding machines, there was no scanning.

"When I was 15, my dad would take me to the Terminal Market in Newark where we would buy lettuce from California and things that were out of season for us."

The family had greenhouses and at one time they were growing "about 50,000 geranium plants, 10,000 flats of annuals and thousands of hanging baskets. It was a big business" but also

a seasonal one. Slowly, it became more acutely obvious that farming and that type of business were becoming unsustainable.

Sickles said it was a "very, very big decision" by the family during the late 1990s to move away from farming and the farm stand to develop "the retail model" that is the Sickles Market shoppers know today. His family still refers to the enterprise as "the farm," not the market.

"I love retail. I love food and I love the food business. That came out growing up in a farm market. We had the best of the best. We ate the best of the best in produce. I then had some really good friends in the food business and I learned so much more about finer food and wines. That's why I wanted to take this to where it is today," he said as he sat at his cramped office. "This was a more sustainable business."

The family developed the concept for Sickles Market during the mid-1990s and finalized it in 1998 when the transformation from a seasonal farm market to a year-round operation was made. "I always liked what happened, the change ... I'd rather be good at one thing than have 50 billion places," he said. "I always wanted to be sustainable.

"It was interesting growth. It was kind of like growing out of clothes and into something new ... I always imagined my business to be something that carries forward for my family and others who work here."

The market, which serves its customers with a wide array of offerings, including prepared foods, a gift and flower area, groceries, produce, bakery counter, a greenhouse and seasonal shrubs, bushes, plants and outdoor décor, employs 180 during its peak time. There is a core of about 90 workers and then others are hired temporarily or seasonally when needed, including high school students who are cashiers and those working in the nursery.

"It's very satisfying," he said.

One of the elements of his business that gives him a lot of pleasure is being able to help those in the community. Sickles Market is often represented at charity events with cheese platters and other foods, gift cards or baskets of merchandise that can be raffled to event-goers. He said he gets that spirit of generosity from his mother. "She was famous for giving \$5, \$10 or \$20 to so many things," he said. "So I always had that in me to try to help – and you always *want* to help – and you're also fortunate to be able to help.

"I'm very much a community person. I believe in schools and I believe in the police and I honestly believe in the government," he said. "Where you can help, you should help – if you can."

His favorite charities are Holiday Express, the Monmouth Medical Foundation, Lunch Break, Count Basie Theatre and the Two River Theater.

"We consider every single request ... as long as it is in our area," he said.

He also works with the young students at the Little Silver Point Road School and loves to pass on his appreciation of horticulture to the youngsters. Each year, he talks to students and gives them little lettuce plants to grow. Later on, he always accepts their invitation to have salad at lunch with the kids.

He seems pleased with where he has been and where he is going.

"We have been here a long time," said

Sickles, who is a graduate of Red Bank Regional and the University of Vermont where he studied horticulture. "I think, as people get older, they have a much better perspective on history than when you're younger."

He sees that perspective in his fellow Parker Homestead-1665 board members and is pleased that restoration of the site is moving forward after a number of years when necessary work was stalled because of financial constraints.

Sickles is excited about the organization's next fundraiser, a farm-to-table dining experience, created by celebrity chef David Burke, called "As It Grows ..." The event will be held at 6:30 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 13, and will include music, dancing and a live auction conducted by "Antiques Roadshow" star Nicholas Dawes. The evening will benefit not only the Parker Homestead-1665 but the Monmouth County Historical Association as well.

"It's a serious food and wine event with a fun, casual approach," said Sickles, who is co-chair of the event with Claire Knopf, president of Monmouth Historical Association.

Tickets to the farm-to-table dinner, which will be held under a sailcloth tent at the 235 Rumson Road homestead in Little Silver, are \$250 each. Additional information and tickets are available by visiting the website AsItGrows.org, or by calling 732-462-1466.

As for Sickles, he clearly loves what he's doing and living in the Two River area.

"I'm dug in. I'm not going anywhere," he said. "You always hear rumors, businesses change but I really like this business."



DANNY SANCHEZ