

# Gleaners help themselves to 'fruits' of bountiful harvest

By Teresa A. Parsons

Their names were Janet and Lynn, Mabel, Ginny, John and Al. And the field belonged to the George Mueller family.

Both the people and the scene were thoroughly modern. Nevertheless, the nearly 20 Ontario County gleaners who gathered last Thursday, July 24, at a Manchester farm recalled an ancient tradition most often associated with the Old Testament account of Ruth, who gleaned the fields of Boaz for grain left by the harvesters.

Like the Biblical heroine who sought to feed herself and her mother-in-law, Naomi, seniors from the nutrition program at Canandaigua's Salvation Army headquarters came hoping to augment their diets with a little fresh produce. Volunteers from area churches came to help feed the hungry. Bea Plympton brought along 10 men from the Veteran's Administration Hospital's Day Treatment program who were looking for something to do.

"It's just nice to be out of there for awhile," said John Gallagher, one of the veterans.

After assembling at the Salvation Army in Canandaigua, the group embarked in a caravan for the Mueller farm, a 900-acre spread southeast of the village.

When they arrived, the Mueller family and 84 young employees were just finishing their harvest for the day, having begun at dawn. Mary Lue Mueller directed the gleaners to an 80-acre field partially planted with sweet corn.

As Janet Dickinson, 76, trudged through the corn stalks under a blazing sun, she recalled the pleasant days when her father took the family to pick cherries and apples. "I hate waste," she said.

But there wasn't much time or energy for chatting in the sweltering heat as the gleaners gathered between 10 and 15 bushels of corn in less than an hour. Two bushels were credited to Mabel Blake, 77. "It's the first time I've sweated this summer," she exclaimed with pride.

The group then moved on to another farm, where they collected almost as many bushels of green beans. Afterward, each gleaner took what corn and beans he or she needed. The remainder was distributed among senior citizen highrises, nursing homes, neighborhood centers and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality.

Organized by Alison Clarke and Marvin Rapp, this was only the second gleaning expedition in Ontario County. But Clarke, who heads the Politics of Food task force in Rochester, has been bringing farmers and gleaners together for nearly three years in Monroe County.

"It's a chance to let people do for themselves," she explained. "You take what you need first and take some back for other people you know who need it."

Gleaning also provides a rare opportunity for urban and rural people, those who are poor and those who are charitably inclined, to work side by side, Clarke said.

Nearly two years ago, Rapp, a Canandaigua resident, read about Clarke's efforts in a newspaper article and asked for her help in organizing a similar operation south of the city. Last summer they only went out once to glean strawberries in Naples.

"It takes time to build trust with the farmers, to assure them that we're not going to run rough-shod over their fields," Clarke said. "Now the Ontario County gleaning program has clearly taken off, and there is a structure in place of seniors who are gleaning contacts and distributors, the VA Day Treatment program, church (people) who are drivers and farmer contact people."

This was the first time Mary Lue and her husband, George Mueller, have agreed to al-



Gleaners wait patiently as Mary Lue Mueller directs organizers to one of her family's fields.

Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal



Mabel Blake, 77, waves for someone to lend her a hand with a crate of corn she picked.

low gleaners in their fields. The Muellers bought the combination dairy and produce farm back in 1964. They've since built a reputation for selling fresh vegetables. What corn they can't sell within a day or two of picking is no longer considered saleable.

So, in addition to what the gleaners gathered Thursday, the Muellers offered the gleaners 20 bushels of "old" corn, already picked and crated. The day before, the Muellers had given 30 bushels to the Finger Lakes Office of Social Ministry, which distributed it among Geneva's soup kitchens and food banks.

"We just hate to waste anything," Mary Lue Mueller explained. "It's part of our nature. . . . If we were wasteful, we wouldn't be in business."



Agnes Bangs lugs the corn she has gathered to a waiting crate. Gleaners gathered nearly 15 bushels in just over an hour.



Alison Clarke satisfies a hunger pang by relishing an ear of corn as she prepares to head for the fields.