

FEATURE

'Hands of Christ' winner has faith in farm life

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

PRATTSBURGH — A water-storage tank overlooks a large portion of the 370 acres that make up J & G Squires Onion Farm off Route 53. Mark Squires, an 18-year-old senior at Prattsburgh Central High School, likes to call the top of the tank his "thinking spot" and often climbs up there on clear evenings to watch the sunset.

"I just love the country," said the son of Sandy and Greg Squires. "You can't beat the peace."

In an age when most teens favor using computers, playing video games and channel-surfing cable TV, Mark seems part of an earlier, simpler time. As he drives around his Steuben County farm, he points out that he must work constantly from spring to late fall to help his family and their 14 employees plant, tend and harvest onions.

"I tell my friends, 'Unless it's a rainy day, don't count on me going anywhere,'" he said.

But Mark isn't complaining. In fact, he appears to relish the hard work he does after school every day to help on the farm, co-owned by his father and his uncle, Jeff Squires. He hopes one day to run the farm himself.

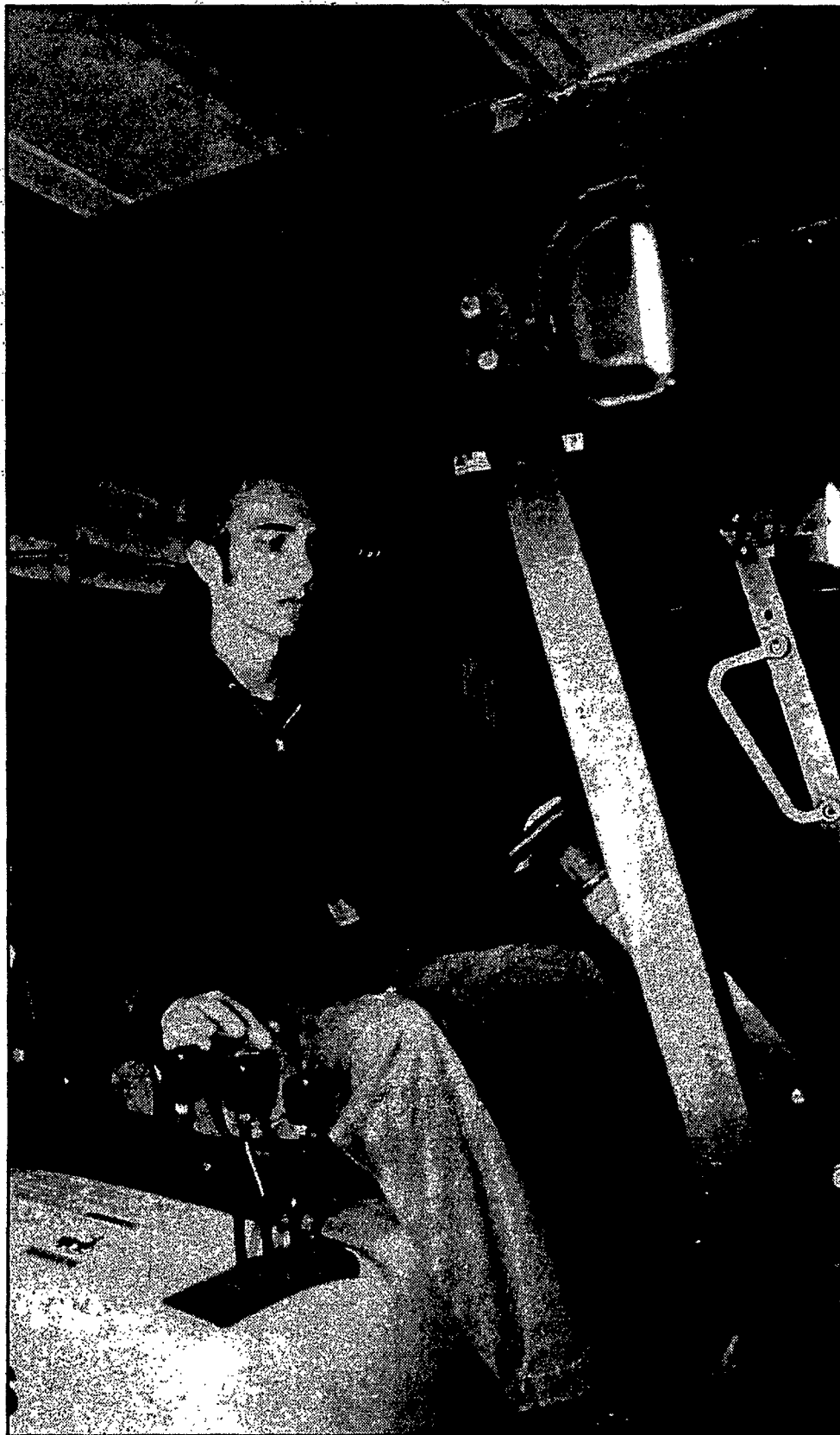
The Squires moved to Prattsburgh from Elba, in Genesee County, back when Mark was starting high school, and the family still farms 70 acres of land in Elba.

The Squires also have a daughter, Cassie, 20, who is a sophomore at Nazareth College in Rochester.

The family attends St. Patrick's Parish, which is part of the six-parish Our Lady of the Lakes Catholic Community. Last October, Mark received one of the 580 Hands of Christ awards given annually by the Diocese of Rochester to high school seniors who exemplify their faith in the parish, school and community. Mark was nominated for the award by his pastor, Father Philip J. Billotte.

"If there's anything that needed to be done, he was there," Father Billotte said of Mark's commitment to the parish and the community. "He's a gentleman, too."

The pastor noted the young man has helped plow the church parking lot with his father during the winter for no charge, and was a faithful attendee in the parish's religious-education programs. He added that Mark also is known for helping other area



Andrea Dixon/Staff photographer

Mark Squires unloads crates from a truck at his family's onion farm, J & G Squires, on May 10 in Prattsburgh.

farm families when they need assistance.

Mark took his award in stride, claiming that he hadn't done "diddly-squat" to deserve it. He said the award did make him feel appreciated, however.

"I felt good that people think that highly of me," he said.

His mother, who serves on the parish council and social-ministry committee at St. Patrick's, said her son has a "quiet faith" that expresses itself mainly in service to his friends and family.

"He's just a good all-around kid," she said. "He does things for me all of the time. His life focuses on the farm and his car."

For the record, Mark drives a 1984 Chevrolet Camaro. He rebuilt the sports car's engine with his dad.

"It's my baby," Mark said. "I just like that if you go someplace, people look at you."

As for more spiritual matters, Mark pointed out that he is one of a handful of Catholics in his mainly Protestant high school class, and said many of his friends have asked him about his faith, particularly regarding the sacraments. Although some of his peers respect his beliefs, he said he has taken some flak for trying to live out his religious convictions.

"They sort of look at me like 'church boy,' 'goody-two-shoes,' 'doesn't do anything outside church and school and work,'" he said. "I'm not asking them to get on their knees and say 'Mark, you're the greatest,' but just showing some respect is not a lot to ask."

In particular, Mark said he tries to revere God by praying and thanking him for blessing his family's farm.

"The way I look at it, if you don't respect God, you're going to hell or your visit to heaven won't be a pleasant thing," he said.

Mark said that, unlike many of his friends, he has no plans to go to college because he figures he can learn more about what he really wants to do — farming — by continuing to work.

"I've had countless lectures on 'Mark, you should go to college, you're a fool,'" he said. But he said he has made up his mind to pursue life the way he's already living it.

"I don't like sitting inside at a desk all day answering phones," he said, preferring to accomplish his objectives by working in the fields.

"Even in the pouring rain, I love it," he said. "You can look at it at the end of the day and say, 'I did that.'"

Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580) Vol. 111 No. 32, May 18, 2000
Published weekly except the last Thursday in December.
Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.

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