

Hevener sisters prepare to sell Dividing Waters Farm

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HIGHTOWN — Some transitions are tougher than others. This is one of them.

After years on the market, Dividing Waters Farm is under contract.

The homeplace for seven generations of the Hevener family, the farm will come under new ownership.

For 230 years, this place, so full of life, evolved under the stewardship of one Highland County family, and a multitude of folks who helped them operate one of this region's most iconic and productive farms.

Last week, two sisters spent their last night in the house where they grew up. A home filled over the years with matriarchs and patriarchs and sons and daughters and cousins and countless farmhands and visitors from across the world.

Dividing Waters was always a well-kept farm, situated in the heart of Hightown, dividing not just watersheds for the Potomac and James rivers, but also the Blue Grass Valley.

And the farm itself is divided by U.S. 250 running west toward the state line.

And now, two daughters also feel divided — nostalgic about being the last of the clan to own the farm, yet ready to close this chapter of family history.

What stays? What goes?

Tuesday was gloomy, overcast. Anne Marie Vieira and Nancy Baillie, daughters of the late Jacob “Jake” and Carol Hevener, were busy sorting through the last of the household items.

Kent Botkin of Green Valley Auction and Moving was there with his crew, helping them choose the remaining things that will go up for sale Jan. 10 at Green Valley's auction house in Mt. Crawford.

There were dozens of boxes, paintings, lamps, and other items scattered about the 17-room home.

The house was quiet, standing stately as the sentinel of so much history.

Anne Marie pointed to the upstairs hall sitting room — a place graced with grand furniture her whole life. “I've never seen this area empty before,” she said wistfully, as she moved about the upper rooms. “It's an odd space, sort of a sitting area, but it's never been empty as long as I can remember.”

Botkin deftly moved to each item or box, asking gently, respectfully, whether it was to be sold. Some larger pieces of furniture will stay with the house, but the vast majority of what remained was hauled away this day.

This was the last of several weekends Botkin had spent here, sorting and organizing. He's the best guy for the job, too. After all, he's got deep roots in Highland himself, and he is steeped in county history, as regular readers of this newspaper appreciate.

In addition to knowing pretty much everything about old things and old ways, Botkin can rattle off Hevener history, and Highland history, in encyclopedic fashion.

Botkin carefully looked over the heirlooms, and things that had been important to this home's operation. He knew what each item was, and what it did, even if the sisters weren't sure.

He pointed to a large roll of brown paper, perched on a wooden plank, with an upper metal rod. “This was used to wrap,” he explained to them, pointing out the piece that held a roll of string.

The sisters said it was always in the house. “It’s been here as long as I can remember,” Anne Marie said.

“Then they were using it to wrap meat for household use,” Botkin said, not for wrapping items at the store.

More than general merchandise

The store. Now there’s a place that had a life of its own. If the house was a-bustle with people, Hevener’s Store was even more so.

Jacob Hevener ran the store and post office most of his children’s lives, although the post office operation changed locations back and forth across the main road a few times.

Longtime Highland residents know all the legends of this place — about how the woodstove was fired up and, especially during hunting seasons, men would gather. Stories would be told — stories that got bigger and better the more often they were shared.

Folks would gather ‘round, and listen to Jake, primary storyteller.

“Sometimes there’s more killing done around the fire than there is in the woods,” Jacob used to say.

This store was the center of Hightown’s universe back then. In fact, Hightown’s original name was just “Hevener’s Store.”

Jacob stocked every single thing a family might need, from fence wire to food supplies. Gas and oil, for vehicles or chain saws. Hardware. Wood. Machine parts. If he didn’t have it, he would order it for you. And you could put it on account, too. If you didn’t have the cash on hand, Jacob would simply write down what you owed, and you’d pay later.

One of those registers, full of Highland names, will be sold at the auction next month. That store housed the Hightown post office until the U.S. postal system started shutting down small offices such as that one. Operations were suspended in 1992 — after continual service since 1841.

Jacob always said losing the post office operation would sound the death knell for his store. He was right.

A year later, Jacob closed the store. In the 1790s, a Jacob Hevener had opened a store in Hightown, and in 1993, this Jacob Hevener closed the same store opened by his great-great-great-grandfather. Why close a family business that survived nearly 200 years?

“Unless you are retired on a pension, a country store has no way to survive by itself,” Jake said at the time.

But, for a few years, he would open the store during special occasions like the Maple Festival or Mountain Mama Road Bike Challenge. He welcomed visitors to drop by, sit a spell, and he’d tell his stories.

Botkin discovered a cellar underneath the store building. “We had no idea what could be in there,” Anne Marie said.

“We had to cut the lock off,” Botkin explained.

There wasn't much there beyond some old storage containers, but he found an unusual wooden box — it had been used to ship a typewriter, perhaps two of them, Botkin guessed, because of its size. It, too, will be for sale next month.

Back inside the store, there it was: that old woodstove. It will remain there. Other things like old Coca-Cola bottles will be sold, though.

Botkin climbed the narrow stairs to the office, a small room from which Jacob could see the whole store through a window.

In the back storeroom, Botkin went up to an open attic where much of the store's offerings were kept. He reached for things left among the rafters. He located a box of ax handles. "Your blade would be fine, but you often broke the handle, and Jacob would have one for you," Botkin mused.

A lost brother

Back at the house, the sisters reminisced about how the eight rooms upstairs were easily filled, usually with farmhands. They recall some kind of curtain hung in the hallway, separating the workers' rooms from family rooms. There were only two bathrooms in the house, and often, they said, one of them wasn't working.

"But we managed," Anne Marie chuckled. "It was a busy house. We had all kinds of people here — maids, hired hands, even teachers who stayed here."

Botkin made his way to a room where one could access the attic. He removed a board that held it closed, and pulled the wooden drop-down ladder. He and his crew carefully pulled down items like special windowpanes that had been stored for years.

"Places like this, they never threw anything away," he said. "You never knew what you were going to need."

Nancy pointed out a lamp the sisters think was made by their brother, Richie, as a 4-H project.

Richard "Richie" Hevener was Jacob and Carol's only son. He died in June 2000, the result of a tragic auto accident, at the age of 45.

Anne Marie turned to her sister. "You know, Rich would be 64 now."

They shared a soft glance, thinking about the brother they lost too soon.

Richie and his father operated Dividing Waters Farm. He was a deacon and pianist at Pisgah Presbyterian Church, right up the road from the farm, and held several positions in civic life, like his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before him.

But he loved the farm. If he hadn't died, his sisters said, he'd still be running it. Their dad, they said, just couldn't continue without him, and didn't want to.

The daily bread

Down in the kitchen, the sisters laughed about their mother's sugar.

"She cooked so much she had this huge sack of sugar that sat here all the time," Anne Marie said.

The enormous cupboard on one wall held not just a pound of flour, but one hundred pounds.

"You can't imagine how much cooking went on here. All day long they cooked, every meal, for all the men, all day long."

In the dining room they pointed to the pass-through window, used to get food quickly from the kitchen to the dining room.

“We’d called it a butler’s window, like we ever had a butler,” Nancy laughed. “We used it all the time. And we used this room a lot. The women served all the workmen in this dining room every day. Granddaddy still worked here on the farm even when he was county treasurer. They cooked all day. That’s how it was, with all these generations living together.”

One could imagine the endless pace of food preparations managed by several women, probably with a little power struggle among them. Whose kitchen was it, anyway? Who was in charge? Talk about too many cooks in the kitchen.

The dining room, like the rest of the house, has superb woodwork, giving formality and stateliness to the home. “All the wood came right off the property,” Anne Marie said. “All local wood.”

This was not the original home, though. There had been a previous log structure, which was taken down after Jacob’s grandfather built the big house in 1915.

Botkin pointed to a corner cupboard in the dining room. It had come out of that original house. “You can tell it wasn’t built for this house because it’s too large for this corner. But it’s a good old 16-pane walnut Highland County corner cupboard. A great piece of furniture,” he added, pointing to its square nails, and mortise and tenon joints.

Letting go

The sisters talked about how their father had no intention of staying in Highland, or running his father’s farm. “Daddy didn’t want to come home,” Nancy said. “Uncle Dick was already gone, and he was going to take a job in accounting and go out west. But then, everybody died.”

Jacob had returned to the family farm in 1950, after serving in the Army during World War II, and completing a degree in commerce at the University of Virginia. His father died that year, shortly after his grandfather in 1949.

He had met Carol in Berlin. She was in the Army, a secretary to the commandant, and they had married in 1947.

When the patriarchs died, Richard “Dick” Hevener, Jacob’s brother, was working for General Electric in Ohio. Jacob’s sister, Charlotte Anne Hevener Nobbs, was traveling in the west at the time. So, someone had to run the farm, and Jacob returned home. “I guess my grandfather would have come down the hill out of the cemetery if I hadn’t,” Jacob said once. “And he wanted it done right.”

Jacob always gave his wife credit for learning how to manage the home, as a farmer’s wife. “If it hadn’t been for Carol I couldn’t have done any of this,” he said years ago. Despite her city-girl upbringing in Duluth, Minn., Carol was tough, stoic, and she became a master at gardening, canning, and cooking, helping out at the store among all her other duties at home and in the community.

But things changed.

Daughters Nancy and Anne Marie had left home years ago, and without Richie, there was simply no one left in the family to take over the farm as their parents aged. In 2011, Jacob died at age 87 in this house, the same house in which he was born. Carol passed in 2016 at age 93.

The sisters reflected on how important their home has been to them, though.

“We’ve both been gone since we were 21,” Nancy said. “But we never missed a Christmas here until they died.”

Anne Marie added, “You know, it’s hard. We’ve had seven generations here, this place so steeped in history. You feel guilty, like you’re ending a dynasty here, where your family first settled in the 1780s.”

“It’s nostalgic,” her sister added, but noted they’ve been working on letting go for a number of years now. “It’s a process,” Nancy said.

Each has items that are important to them, and there have been other auctions from time to time, including one in 2012 to sell the farm equipment. “You can only take so much,” Nancy noted. “I have a big sideboard I love, with the names of all the canned goods on it where they were stored.”

“Rich died in 2000 and Dad started to get rid of everything,” Anne Marie said.

“And the store stuff, all that merchandise, we had a sale in the 1990s, but there was still stuff left, a lot of hardware,” Nancy added.

They recalled fondly their father’s collections. “After the store closed, he kept them over there, all kinds of collections,” Anne Marie said. “He’d take his easy chair over there, start a fire in the stove. I guess it was like his man cave.”

Maintaining the house, store, and all the outbuildings has been tough, even with help.

Anne Marie spent months here in the summer trying to keep it up.

But, they have their own lives – Nancy in Washington, D.C., and Anne Marie in Hilton Head, S.C. The farm has been on the market many years, and they are ready to let it go. Nostalgia gripped Botkin, too. He talked about how the auction business isn’t the same anymore, either. Like the farming industry, things have changed. There is much happening online now with social media, and websites like eBay and auctionzip.com. He said Green Valley Auction is moving into that arena soon, with an online app one could use to bid on items by phone.

But, he noted, “People aren’t buying the old pieces like they used to.”

One of his helpers came forward with a flag, carefully folded into a triangle and framed under glass, asking whether it was to be sold.

The girls paused and looked at one another.

It was the flag given to the family at their father’s funeral; he was buried with military rites, in honor of his Army service.

“Yes, we’ll have to let that go, too,” Nancy told him, with a kind nod to her sister.

Botkin propped open the front door as the men hauled the last of things to the truck parked outside. Anne Marie wandered out, looked around the yard, noting the deer had been coming closer to the house than they ever had. “The groundhogs have moved in, too,” she said. She saw seven of them in the yard one day, a sure sign of an empty home.

Moving forward

If there’s one thing the Hevener clan was known for, it’s progress. The family was central to moving Highland County into the future in everything from banking, to a county phone system, getting U.S. 250 built to the West Virginia line, and government and civic service.

“The old ones don’t like change,” Jacob Hevener once said, in a discussion about the future. “But I’ve accepted the whole thing. You’ve got to blend the old with the new. I’m like my grandfather — progressive.”

Jacob understood the need for change, and never wanted his children to keep farming if they didn't want to. He himself predicted the fate of Dividing Waters and his family's legacy back in 1999. "It's going to end. It's going to end sometime," he said.

And once again, he was right.

But the memories of Dividing Waters will stay alive, as long as those who were touched by the place do what Jake did — keep telling the stories.