

Peddler's Village turns 60

Inspired by a trip to Carmel-by-the-Sea, twenty-somethings Earl and Sheila Jamison opened Peddler's Village out of renovated chicken coops in "Hentown." Would its visionary founder be surprised it attracts 2 million visitors a year? Probably not.

BY JOE FERRY



COURTESY OF PEDDLER'S VILLAGE

Earl Jamison in front of the newly constructed Grist Mill in 1973.

Donna Jamison Cave pauses for a moment, then smiles before answering the question at hand: would her father, the late Earl Jamison, be happy with the current state of Peddler's Village, the hugely popular Bucks County shopping, dining, and family-fun destination he founded 60 years ago?

"You didn't know my dad," she says with a laugh. "Yes, he would be happy but I also think he was such a perfectionist he would just be tweaking it all the time. He always said when he looked at a garden bed, he never saw the flowers, he only saw the weeds."

A sprawling, 42-acre property with 60-shops, six restaurants, a 66-room hotel, a family fun center, 350 employees during the peak season, and two million visitors a year was definitely not what Jamison and his wife, Sheila, had in mind when local businessman Arch Theile approached them to buy his old chicken barn, hatchery, and coops at Routes 202, 263 and Street Road in 1962. Theile knew that a few years earlier, Earl, a farmer, and Sheila, a horticulturist, had opened Bountiful Acres on Route 202 in Holicong and ran a successful farmer's market there. He figured as creative entrepreneurs they could work similar magic on his property.

Jamison had gotten the idea for Peddler's Village-type operation during a trip to Carmel-by-the-Sea in California, so he borrowed \$6,000 from his uncle and bought the 6-acre plot. Peddler's Village opened with 14 quaint shops operating out of renovated chicken coops and the Cock 'n Bull Restaurant on land known to the locals as "Hentown."

But the Jamisons were just beginning. Their initial goal was simple: they wanted to prove "that a shopping area could blend harmoniously with the countryside and enhance its beauty," according to an article in the Villager Broadside publication four years after it opened. They did it by using architectural styles, landscaping, and authentic antique decor typical of another century, and scattering the shops in "a comfortable and interesting pattern" around the Village Green.

Earl Jamison, a tireless worker who could often be found toiling on the grounds alongside employees, had an uncanny knack for working well ahead of what the public saw.

The concept caught on and people flocked to Peddler's Village, drawn not only by the shops and restaurants but by special events like Apple and Strawberry Festivals, scarecrow and gingerbread contests, and even dinner theater productions. Visitors arrived by the busload to stroll among the lush greenery.

"I don't think they had a grand master plan in mind when they bought the chicken farm," says Cave. "It just kind of evolved over the years. It just continued to grow."

And, as Cave likes to remind everyone, her parents were 19 years old when they started Bountiful Acres, 27 when they opened Peddler's Village, and still managed to raise five children during that time.

"I love saying that because today most people say they can't brush their teeth without their mother's help during those years," adds Cave. "It really was amazing."



COURTESY OF PEDDLER'S VILLAGE

Earl and Sheila Jamison tending to the grounds at Peddler's Village.



Square dance on the Village Green in 1972.

COURTESY OF PEDDLER'S VILLAGE

Peddler's Village continued to grow, says Bob McGowan, the village's chief operating officer for the past four years, because Jamison was a visionary who could see potential where others only saw obstacles. As strategic opportunities to add on property and to expand offerings presented themselves, Jamison was able to figure out a way to meld them into the village seamlessly.

"At some point, he had to see the way it was going," says McGowan. "He kept adding on. He had to be thinking it was going to be really cool when he got some stores over there, and something over here."

Jamison, a tireless worker who could often be found toiling on the grounds alongside employees, had an uncanny knack for working well ahead of what the public saw, says Cave. When he bought the property across the street, for example, he was probably thinking about it four years before it happened, she says.

A great example of Jamison's ability to look beneath the surface and find potential was his determination in restoring a vintage carousel built in 1922 by the Philadelphia Toboggan Company. Jamison had long dreamed of having a carousel in Peddler's Village that was fun, exciting, and visually stimulating to children, but also elegant and beautiful for the adult enthusiast.

Stored for 13 years, the carousel had been stripped of its original figures, so Jamison commissioned a master carver from Long Beach, Calif. to custom hand-carve 46 figures in basswood using the traditional techniques of master carvers from a century ago. Today, the carousel, featuring nearly 1,000 clear light bulbs, 36 scenery panels restored in oil-painted landscapes, children and animals, and horses with real horse-hair tails, is the crown jewel of Giggleberrry Fair, the indoor family fun center that draws tens of thousands of visitors each year.

Like any other tourist destination, Peddler's Village has been subject to the whims of weather, the economy, and other attractions over the years. One of Earl Jamison's business philosophies was an insistence on changing with the times. Before she retired, Cave served as Chief Operating Officer of Peddler's Village and often

questioned her father about why he felt the need to keep adding stores and other attractions.

"He would say, 'You've got to keep changing in order for people to keep coming back,'" she recalls. "And he was right." □

Joe Ferry is the editor of Bucks County Senior Living.



May Day in 1967 was one of the earlier events that helped put Peddler's Village on the map.



The Strawberry Festival at Peddler's Village draws thousands every May.

PHOTO BY MEREDITH EDLOW

Spring Events at Peddler's Village

May Weekends:

Strawberry Month – Enjoy strawberry treats, strawberry-inspired specials, live entertainment and family fun.

Late May through August 31: Bucks County Beach Days

View larger-than-life sand sculptures featuring popular Bucks County attractions and play in sandboxes designed for family fun.

Weekends in June: Summer Block Party

Stroll all five of the Village neighborhoods to experience a variety of live entertainment, food and beverages, and activities for guests of all ages.