

# 11. The Day 8,000 Visitors Came to Blawenburg

May 6, 1950 was a beautiful spring day. The sun rose at 5:53 am; the sky was clear; and the temperature was 65 degrees. It was a perfect day to welcome 8,000 visitors to a small village with a population of less than 200 people.



*A somewhat time-worn program from the event*

It was Soil Conservation and Machinery Field Day in Blawenburg, a big event sponsored for the regional farming community by the J. Percy Van Zandt Co. and the Mid-Jersey Soil Conservation District. Its purpose was to provide new information about farm equipment and farming techniques to farmers and others interested in agriculture. This was a time when many of today's suburban communities in our region were predominately made up of farms.

World War II was still a fresh memory, and the country was busy getting back to work. It was a time of growth and industry. It was also a time of population growth, and farmers were beginning to feel the pressure to develop land for housing for the "baby-boomers" that were emerging.

In this year, it was the time for Van Zandt's to host a special event at their farm along Route 518 in the western section of the village. Called Broad View Farm, it had developed a reputation for innovative farming beginning in the 1800s when James Van Zandt expanded the farm and built a mansion just north of the village where the SAVE animal shelter now sits.

### **A Farm Known for Innovation**

Since the early 1900s when brothers Percy and Albert Van Zandt took over the farm and added a farm equipment and home appliance business to it, people looked to the Van Zandts for many of their home and farming needs. Whether it was putting lights in the chicken coops to help their 8,000 chickens produce more eggs or using a nearby rail line to ship milk and eggs to the urban markets in Philadelphia and New York, people knew that the folks at Broad View knew how to run a farm business. The farm also had an International Harvester dealership as well as products from New Holland and New Idea brands. They sold many types of equipment such as tractors, plows, balers, rakes, combines, mowers, spreaders, and tilling equipment along with refrigerators and freezers. It was the largest dealership for miles around during a time when farming was a

big business in the Garden State. People came from 100 or more miles away to see the latest equipment and farming techniques.

The event was heavily marketed by the county agricultural departments throughout the state. Newspapers carried ads and feature stories, and WOR radio also promoted it at a time when radio and newspapers were the primary source of news. "It turned out much bigger than we expected," John Van Zandt, Percy's son, said in a recent interview. "All that promotion was good for our business." Fortunately, there was still a lot of open farmland at the time, so parking could be accommodated. We aren't so sure how they handled restroom facilities for that many people.



*Taken almost nine years after the event, this aerial photo shows how much of the area was still farmland.*



*While this picture is half a world away from Blawenburg, it shows what a terraced farm looks like.*

### **Community Involvement**

The Van Zandts involved the community in the Soil Conservation and Machinery Field Day. Local organizations like the Blawenburg Fire Department, which at the time was stationed along Route 601 (Blawenburg - Belle Mead Road) where New World Pizza is today, and Blawenburg Church had food booths. It was a great fundraiser for the community.

WOR radio did a live broadcast of the event so that their broad audience would be able to enjoy the festivities, if only vicariously. For the Van Zandts and International Harvester, this was tremendous publicity. Of course, each of the brands being promoted had company representatives present to show off their best equipment.

Blawenburg Boy Scout Troop 46 demonstrated soil conservation by planting a grove of white pine trees. Local groups had home economics demonstrations and displays, and, of course, International Harvester brought in special equipment not usually sold at the farm store.

One of the demonstrations that intrigued farmers was the farm terracing project that took place on the south side of Route 518 where Cherry Valley Country Club is today. According to Don Terhune, who lived in Blawenburg at the time, terracing was done to prevent the sloped land from eroding so that it would have a greater crop yield. To terrace the field, farmers would plow the field in rows that resembled steps. The crop would be planted on the tread, or top, of the step, and grass would be planted on the riser, the vertical area between the steps.

International Harvester brought in some special equipment to demonstrate how a pond with an earthen dam could be built quickly. The equipment was used to scoop out about an acre of earth on the down slope north of Route 518. The land was scooped out and then compactors closed the lower end of the stream. The whole pond was created in one day during the soil conservation event. Imagine trying a one-day event like that these days! The pond, which has gone by several names like Van Zandt Pond and Blawenburg Beach, is now part of the development just west of the Elks Lodge. It is privately owned and has a canoe docked nearby, suggesting that it is still used for recreation. Our next blog will be all about Blawenburg Beach.

The Soil Conservation and Machine Day was a big success. According to Bill Van Zandt, Albert's son, it took a great deal of preparation and it was a long day for the staff of employees and volunteers. The fact that the event is still remembered almost 70 years after it happened, suggests that it was a significant day in Blawenburg's history. There was only one other time when a great many people came to Blawenburg, and we will write about the 1964 visit by the Wally Byam Caravan in a future blog.

Do you have any recollections or pictures of the Field Day or Blawenburg Beach? If so, feel free to comment below this blog or send an email to [Tales of Blawenburg](#).

### **Don Quixote Project Update The Van Zandt windmill is still missing!**



Background: The windmill was used on the Broad View Farm from 1905 until the early 1990s. It was then donated to the NJ Agricultural Museum at Rutgers, but the museum was closed in 2011. The windmill, which was donated in memory of J. Percy Van Zandt, was taken down and ultimately donated to an organization in central New Jersey.

Despite contacts with several members of the Millstone Valley Preservation Coalition, who Rutgers says they gave the windmill, no one seems to know anything about it. Several people have contacted other people who might know something about it, but it remains a mystery. Do you have a clue where it is? Is it still in a crate somewhere or has it been re-erected on a farm? Email any leads to [Tales of Blawenburg](#).

**Blawenburg Fact:**

The VanZandt Co. and International Harvester held a community Pancake Day at Broad View Farm in the 1950s and 60s. It was always on a Saturday in January or February, a time when farmers were less busy. John Van Zandt noted that dairy farmers would tell you they never got a day off! The breakfast became an annual event, and it gave farmers and community members a chance to socialize and catch up on local news. It was a well-received giveback to the community from the business.

**Looking Ahead:** Blog 12 - Swimming at Blawenburg Beach

**Sources:**

Blawenburg Nomination for the National Historic Register

Recollections: John Van Zandt, Don Terhune, and Bill Van Zandt

Weather information

<https://www.wunderground.com/history/daily/us/nj/trenton/KTTN/date/1950-5-6>

<https://www.almanac.com/weather/history/NJ/Princeton/1950-05-06>