

# Mead Orchards: Getting to the Core

By Christopher and Claudine Klose, March 21, 2024



*Panorama view of Mead farmstead with auto in the driveway soon after G. Gordon Mead purchased the farm in 1916.*

*In preparation for our upcoming Then & Now festival, the Collections Committee has been hard at work processing the Mead family farm collection. This article originally appeared in our March 2024 Member Newsletter. Interested in receiving these stories in your inbox? Become a member today!*

Historic Red Hook's mission is to engage the community in conversations about our town's unfolding stories. We gather, preserve, and promote the shared values and common experience of the generations as expressed through family letters, photo albums, genealogies and memorabilia, business correspondence, tax records, bills of sale, exchanges of land and deeds, legal cases, local government proceedings, marriage, birth and death records, and oral and video histories. The list goes on and on. One caveat: rarely do we accept furniture or other three-dimensional items. We don't have the space.

As the name implies, the StoryStudio, at 5 Cherry Street, is the heart of our historical research. A team of volunteers is there to bring order to the well-meaning but typically long-neglected boxes of valuable family farm, business, church, and organization archives we regularly receive.

Given our place at the center of Hudson Valley agriculture, family farms are a key waypoint on our journey. Last June, Chuck Mead called to ask: would we be interested in going through the many boxes of correspondence, business files, photographs, and more ahead of the transition of Mead Orchards from three generations of family operation to new, remote ownership? Weave the dusty threads of memory into a portrait of a very prominent Red Hook family farm? We jumped at the chance!

At Chuck's invitation, we explored the basement of the nineteenth-century farmhouse with town historian Emily Majer to determine the farm's overall age. Finding a "jambless" fireplace, she dated the foundation to the eighteenth-century and identified the site as the first Pitcher homestead. Then came many hours of winnowing sheaves of papers from the attic into eight boxes ripe for archival review and



*G. Gordon, with Margaret "Fay" Mead at the wheel, in their circa 1920s auto.*

selection by StoryStudio researchers.

Although some collections arrive at Historic Red Hook out of the blue, most come to us through such voluntary donations as the Mead family. Except for the Fraleigh's Rose Hill Farm collection, few are as voluminous. Eight months in, we have inspected most of what we chose to retain, sorting, filing, scanning, cataloging, and digitizing the decades of correspondence, business and financial records, photographs and more that we believe best tell the story of the Meads' contributions to Red Hook's life and times over more than a century.

Chuck's grandfather, Connecticut native G. Gordon Mead, graduated from Yale in 1912, followed by a two-year postgrad course in agriculture at Cornell. On a summer 1914 internship with William S. Teator, Upper Red Hook's premier orchardist, he fell in love with apples. In December of that year, Teator wrote to Gordon about a local farm for sale:

"Our visit to the Boice farm was very timely. There was a tremendous snowstorm, so deep that our teams could not break a track through to the young trees—even where not drifted. We had to go out the best way we could—four of us—and dig many of the young Jonathans free—to prevent them from breaking down when the snow settled. There are many cases reported of roofs falling in with the enormous weight...I have not heard anything more from Mr. Boice. I think it is a good farm on which to build up a fine orchard."

On his mentor's assurance, Gordon bought Elmer Boice's 100-acre farm on West Kerley Corners Road in 1916, christening it White Clay Creek Orchards, later renamed Mead Orchards. The family's Red Hook saga had begun. Through membership in the Red Hook Grange, Gordon met Margaret Fay Kennedy ("Fay"), marrying her in 1920. Together they raised five children and managed their diversified farm of dairy cows, chickens, hogs, and various grains and fruits.



*G. Gordon Mead looks at the camera as the family enjoys a July 4 picnic seated on apple crates, 1924.*





*Horses and tractor working in the Mead apple orchard, circa 1925.*

Having bought the farm from his parents in 1959, second son, Sidney (“Sid”), and his wife Elizabeth (“Beth”) sold the livestock and expanded apple production for the wholesale market. Chuck, the middle of their three children, then partnered with his parents and began the shift from whole-sale to retail in the 1990s, adding pumpkins, sweet corn, squash, berries, and more to their “pick-your-own” operation. They also participated in farmer’s markets in New York City and Westchester County.

Also as our research trove shows, the Meads have always been active in the life of the greater Red Hook community. For instance, Gordon was

a founding member of the Red Hook Golf Club, which opened in 1931. Lo-and-behold, he saved Club membership lists, financial reports, and expense receipts (some on the elaborate letterheads of the many businesses active in Red Hook at the time).

Another priceless nugget for future story-telling is the letter on White House stationery dated August 27, 1934, from Louis Howe, secretary to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to Club member William S. Massonneau, thanking, but declining on behalf of President and Mrs. Roosevelt the Club’s invitation to honorary membership. Diplomatically, Howe explains that the president “...should not accept the many tenders of membership constantly coming to him...”

Historic Red Hook craves such intimate glimpses. However ephemeral, they expand our understanding of the people, places, and events, large and small, that enrich our lives. Oblivious to or uncaring about their historic value, such potential gold mines of new stories often get tossed as “that old junk.”

Historic Red Hook depends on the goodwill of those who care about Red Hook to share what they might think has no value but which may be priceless as far as Red Hook’s story is concerned. Lest we forget, “One person’s junk is another’s treasure.” Keep Historic Red Hook in mind when you come across such documents that could add to our town’s story and archives. Reach out to us at [collections@historicredhook.org](mailto:collections@historicredhook.org).

To listen to Chuck Mead talk about his farm, visit our website to access excerpts from a [2018 oral history here](#) and watch a [video here of a 2015 talk](#), “A Historical Perspective on Changing Land Use Patterns in Red Hook Farming.”



*Working with the new Cleveland Tractor on the Mead farm, 1925.*





*Extended family seated on porch of Mead farmhouse (Top row: Fay, third from left, bottom row: G. Gordon, second from left, with three Mead children on laps), circa 1925.*



*G. Gordon Mead at the top of a 30 foot ladder and a Ford Model B, circa 1947.*





*Chuck Mead and his mother Beth with large truckload of apples, 1984.*