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# 'Pickers Checks' Unlock Rich Farm History of Local Area, America

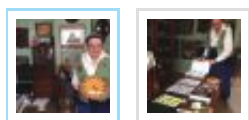
Tokens once used to pay farm workers now worth real cash, and so much more.

Posted by [Jennifer Donatelli](#) (Editor) , January 24, 2014 at 09:29 PM



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Emma Schramm holds a clock with checks for the farm in Pasadena. |Credit: By Jennifer Donatelli



Walking into Emma Schramm's apartment in the Charlestown retirement community in Catonsville is akin to stepping back in time.

The 85-year-old is surrounded by her collections of life on her family farm in Pasadena in Anne Arundel County nearly a century ago. Photos of relatives who ran the farm - measuring 237 acres at one point - fill a wall. Her coffee table is filled with small, round tokens called pickers checks that her farm and others used to pay workers.

Farms like the Schramm farm on Mountain Road recruited the workers to pick crops. The Schramms grew a little of everything, including peaches, pumpkins, strawberries, apples, flowers, and later, Christmas trees. At one point, they also raised turkeys.

"The idea was, after the Civil War, they needed people to pick crops. They," Schramm said, referring to the workers, "didn't speak much English. The checks were a way of communicating. It acted as currency, but it was also a way of communicating."

Schramm got into collecting the checks after talking with Ora Pumphrey Smith, who was

collecting and selling them to raise money for the Ann Arrundel County Historical Society Inc.

"She would go around and bug every farmer until she got her pickers checks," Schramm recalled. She said Smith raised about \$60,000 for the society through selling the tokens.

At one point, Schramm said she had 750 tokens. The tokens have the farm's initials and a denomination stamped on them, and some have rounded or scalloped edges to distinguish them.

The checks were important because the country didn't have one set of currency right away after the Civil War, Schramm said.

"When you collect money, you have only about 10 faces to collect," she said, referring to the amounts on each coin or bill. "When you collect checks, you have hundreds (of kinds)."

Smith made some tokens into necklaces or pins, and Schramm has been known to wear one such pin with another pin of a bushel of corn that says, "Farmers are the cream of the crop." She also has a vest with replicas of checks sewn into it.

The remaining checks she has are a fraction of her former collection. When she, her brother Louis, 88, and cousin Evelyn, 68, moved to Charlestown in 2012, she donated part of her collection to the historical society.

Giving up farming was bittersweet for the Schramms, but Emma Schramm said family members couldn't keep it up anymore. The farm is slated to become a housing development.

Emma Schramm's brother and cousin both live in Charlestown with her. They said they wanted to stay together, just as they had farmed together.

"We're the last three left, the end of the line," Emma Schramm said. "We don't like the idea (of selling,) but that's where the most money is. We only have 20 acres left."

She plans to leave her pickers checks collection to the society in her will so others can appreciate it, she said.

"She's been a good friend to the historical society. She and her family donated a lot of stuff to the Benson-Hammond House over the years," society Vice President Skip Booth said, referring to its headquarters on the grounds of Baltimore-Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport in Linthicum. "She's been really kind to the society."

When the state moved to take over land for expanding Friendship Airport into BWI in the 1950s, farmers were upset about being displaced and tossed aside their belongings, including the pickers checks, Schramm said. Many found near the airport have corroded after being left in the elements.

"They were money. If people found them, they could come and demand money," she said.

The Schramm family also used pickers checks, Schramm said. Her family's workers found some pickers checks Schramm's grandfather used in a box. They are round and have the letters "L SCHR" imprinted on them.

The checks provide valuable insight into farming life for residents used to buying food in a

supermarket, said Jack Wisthoff, a member of the society's board of trustees.

"It was before my time, but I can imagine how it went for these people," he said. "A lot of the checks are on display at the society. We tried to keep a record of those farms and the people who lived on them."

The checks aren't unique to Anne Arundel County, although many were found on county farms, Schramm said.

"It's the history of farming in Anne Arundel County. Anne Arundel had the most farms," she said. "The saying was the soil in Anne Arundel made the vegetables taste better."

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Catonsville Patch Editor

Jennifer Donatelli

jennifer.donatelli@patch.com

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