

# BITZ PLANTS FARMING HISTORY IN BOOKS

It needs to be recorded," Bob Bitz was saying.

We were talking about the book he finished in 2008, "A History of Agriculture in Onondaga County." This was Bob's modest (313 pages!) magnum opus with about 200 pictures and tables about a subject that cried out for coverage.

The author will be 80 years old this year and believe it or not, he's got a new one out. This time it's a much broader sweep of the same subject, "Four Hundred Years of Agricultural Change in the Empire State."

Who better to write such a book?

Bob is retired as president of Plainville Turkey Farms, which has been called the largest turkey grower in the Northeast. The Bitzes sold Plainville in 2007, but the family held onto Plainville Nature's Fare restaurant in Cicero. It has since closed.

This gave Bob a chance to clear his plate — in a matter of speaking — to write and publish these two massive studies, which make for neat companions on the history bookshelf. Just the pictures alone are worth the price of admission: \$17.95 on one Web site.

Bob was the fifth generation of his family involved in farming in Onondaga County. The farm was bought by an ancestor — William

Ward, who came from Owasco Lake



Courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association

in 1835. William bought 72 acres of land. At the time of the 2007 sale, Plainville Turkey Farm covered 1,500 acres in Lysander, employed roughly 300 people and produced more than 600,000 turkeys a year. Bob and his son, Mark, were two of the most successful farmers we've had in the history of Onondaga County.

The Bitz place had been a general farm until about 1923, when the experiment with raising turkeys began. They gradually gave up on cabbage, kidney beans, wheat, oats and tobacco over about 15 years. We know what happened after that.

Why? "Because I liked the turkeys," Bob explained when we talked back in 2008.

The man knows how farming has changed in New York, and elsewhere. In 1794, he wrote, "agricultural production was the main occupation of almost every person" in Onondaga. Today, it's the occupation of less than 1 percent of the population.

Bob started out with five horses powering the farm. Over time, they were replaced by tractors. The farms got bigger and more complicated.

"To be successful," he writes, "a

farmer has to be astute in business, be extremely productive and very efficient." Farming, as a way of life, still continues on a few farms but has been rapidly disappearing in New York.

"It is difficult for me to see these changes," he writes.

Bob says the new book is available on [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) and [barnesandnoble.com](http://barnesandnoble.com), as well as in the shop at the Onondaga Historical Association.

## A little rail history

This is another local history book out there: "The Ups and Downs of a Rural Line: Elmira, Cortland & Northern RR: from 1867 to 1967 and On," by David Marcham. It's \$19.95. He is a former Cortland employee of the Lehigh Valley Railroad.

The Post-Standard received a paperback copy of the second printing. The publisher — the History Center of Ithaca — said they weren't satisfied with the first edition's reproduction of illustrations and ran a new one. If you bought the first edition, the publisher (607-273-8284) will replace it.

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A POSTMAN delivers mail in the town of Manlius in 1904. The photo is included in Bob Bitz' "Four Hundred Years of Agricultural Change in the Empire State."

