

Sussex County developer's career continues to soar

Turns demand for land into success

By CAROLYN LEWIS
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SOMEDAY, WHEN a history of 20th-century Sussex County is written, men like Joseph R. Hudson are likely to figure prominently in the tale. Hudson, 54, of Lewes, is an almost classic example of a local entrepreneur who grabbed the opportunity offered by development and rode it to financial success. And, in the process, he changed the face of the county.

Hudson owns a number of companies that deal in land, mobile home parks and, on a limited scale, construction. He and his two sons, Jody and Craig, with an occasional assist from his granddaughter, Susan, are involved in residential projects that stretch from Seatowne in Fenwick Island to Cripple Creek north of Lewes. Hudson also owns and operates an aerial spraying company in Hous-ton and Red Mill Pond north of Lewes.

In spite of his holdings and the involvement of family members, Hudson said, "I'm not intending to establish a dynasty."

Hudson has come a long way

since he was one of 12 children living on a small farm near Lewes. His father came to Sussex County from New Jersey in 1900 and went bankrupt during the Depression. His mother's relatives were timber workers who lived near Harbeson.

When Hudson was a child, the idea of flying captured his imagination, and at 15 he learned to pilot a plane. Working at the Rehoboth Airport after school and on weekends, he obtained a commercial pilot's license when he was 17. "My whole life centered on aviation," Hudson said.

What appealed to him was "being able to hear the air whoosh by, to fly up in the clouds, to act like a bird, to be free." He liked best to fly in an open cockpit where there was nothing to separate him from air and clouds.

Hudson parlayed that love into a job as a pilot on charter aircraft. It was work that introduced him to the world of some Sussex County high rollers.

"A lot of people were making a lot of money in the chicken business," he said. "They lived in places like Ocean View, Millsboro and Dagsboro, and they were making it big." Hudson would fly

groups of chicken farmers to racetracks in New York and New Jersey and then back again.

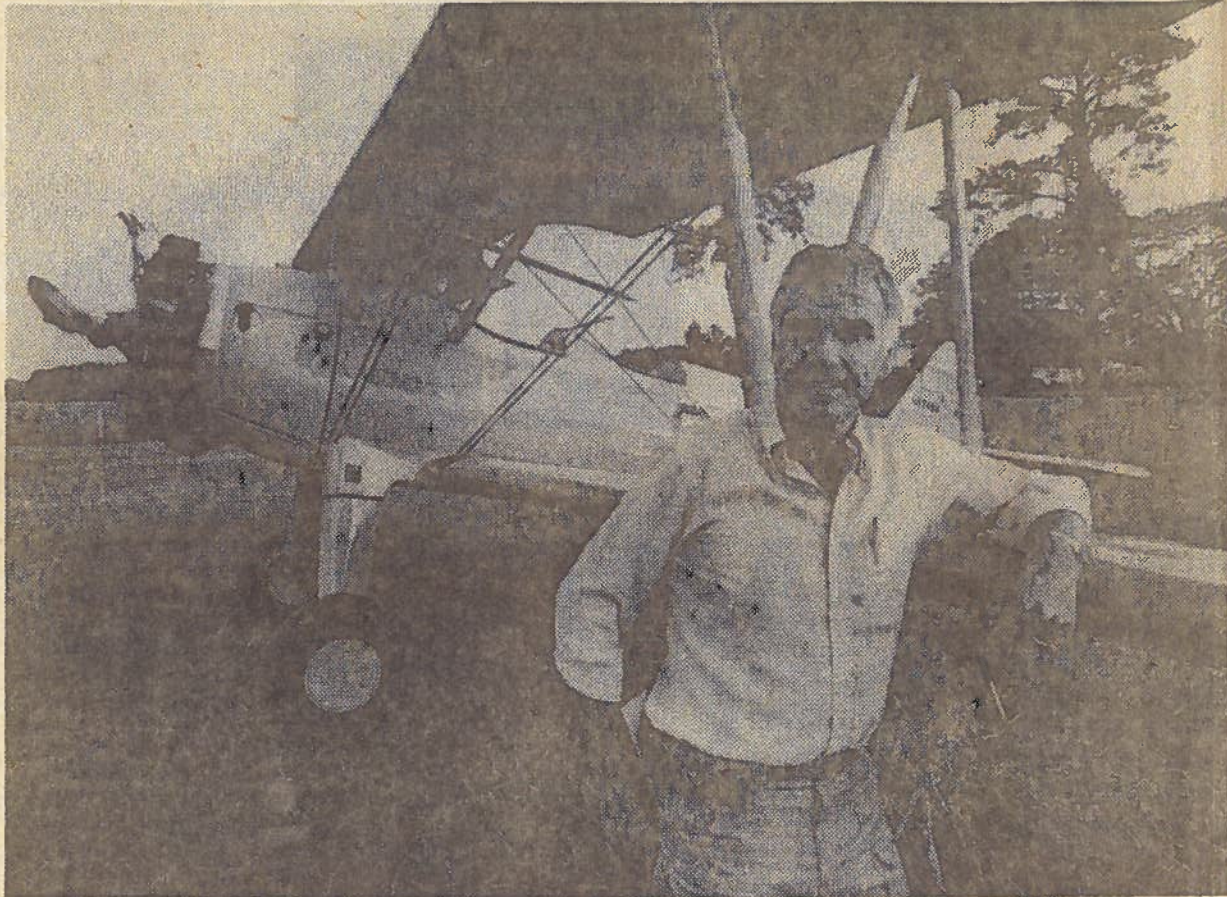
"A lot of them owned their own horses," Hudson recalled. "They would lose 10 or 20,000 bucks at the races, and it wouldn't bother them." Hudson didn't have any money to bet, but occasionally one of his passengers would give him something to put on a horse.

"They'd give me as much as 500 bucks, but I never won anything. For some reason, that never really interested me," he said.

Hudson remembers the farm as "lively, full of fun and hard drinkers." Sometimes they would play games of chance, such as craps, in the airplane and get into arguments in midair. "Once they got so riled up they were threatening to throw one of them out of the plane. I was flying without a copilot, so I couldn't go back there and calm them down."

One regular passenger on the charter flights took a fancy to young Hudson and told him that he ever wanted to go into business the older man would co-sign a note for him. As a result, Hudson was

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Staff photo by Susan L. Gregg

Joseph R. Hudson, 54, of Lewes, is a crop duster and a developer of real estate in Sussex County.

Development soars

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able to buy his first plane. He went into the aerial application business, flying as far as Wilmington to the north and Chincoteague, Va., to the south. He even managed to garner an aerial spraying contract with the state of Delaware.

One day Hudson was flying over the parade grounds at Delaware State College when he ran into a flagpole and crashed. "I was using an old war surplus plane, and it didn't have very good visibility," he explained. Hudson was badly injured and hospitalized for several weeks. "But I was young, pliable and flexible," he said, "and I soon mended."

Hudson began to buy land in 1952. He started with a 35-acre farm in Overbrook and then added a 147-acre parcel nearby. On that he built the Eagle Crest Airport, from which his aerial spraying business operates.

BY THE mid-'50s, Hudson was doing two of the three things he enjoyed most: flying and farming. He was growing string beans and soybeans on his farms at a time when those were paying crops. His farming operation expanded to 4,500 acres over 20 years.

In the mid-'60s, he made plans to pursue his third love, real estate. In tandem with Stanley Thompson, owner of Edgemoor Pharmacy, he established a mobile home park in Coolspring, and with members of his family he developed Cave Colony near Milton. In the early '70s, the beach area

began to boom. Hudson and his partners bought up parcels and developed settlements including Lazy Lake, Covey Creek and Overbrook Shores. They were cashing in on the growing demand for places to live in Sussex County. In recent years, his elder son, Jody, embarked on something different, an exclusive, high-priced community at Cripple Creek.

"Over 15 years, we have seen stable sales everywhere," Hudson said. It is his practice to maintain enough equity in a property to allow him to finance sales of the lots.

Hudson has seen land prices at the shore increase at astonishing rates. "In 1980, we started selling lots in Seatowne in Fenwick Island for \$18,000 to \$20,000. This summer, those same lots were selling for \$98,000." He anticipates that sales will show cyclical increases and declines, but "each time they go up I figure they'll go higher, because land near the water is running out."

Hudson is a tall, tanned, easy-smiling man, who looks much younger than his 54 years. His manner is disarming and laid-back, failing to fit the stereotype of a hard-driving business tycoon. "I want to do what's fun," he said. "I like to make enough money to pay the bills, and then I plow the rest back into the business. I'm not intent on being real wealthy." It bothers him when some people attribute his success to luck. "You have to make your own luck — grab at opportunities, take some risk and be willing to sacrifice," he said.

Hudson works out of a small,

cramped office in a converted house at Five Points. A map of Sussex County, with various Hudson family projects marked on it, hangs on one wall. Several photographs of small planes decorate another. A Beech Aircraft Genealogy Chart, illustrating the development of modern small planes from their early antecedents, hangs in a prominent place.

A BATTERED chrome lamp is laid across a work table, waiting for Hudson to repair its frayed cord. Nothing in the room smacks of power, money or even ambition.

While much of his empire is built on land development, Hudson said he is in favor of some kind of government planning for the coastal area. "We're behind on the planning, but it's not too late to begin," he said. "What has to be worked out is how much people who are moving in will have to pay for development. We can't expect the people who are already here to be burdened with the cost of expanded sewers, water service and highways."

He believes that development is unstoppable, simply because increasing numbers of people want to live and vacation in Sussex County. He predicts growing interest in inland areas because, "If you can't actually walk to the beach, it doesn't matter how far back you are. You still have to use your car."

To the county where he grew up and made his fortune, Hudson offers this piece of advice: "We've got to learn how to handle growth and then just relax and enjoy it."