

# The Dairy Farming Paradox: The Coexistence of the Image and Reality



by  
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## Author's Note

I will tell you a story. A complicated narrative of farmers and onlookers, and all who become mesmerized by the power of the rural Northeast landscape and the farming culture that inhabits it. It is a story that emerges like the making of an impressionist painting: one I can now see, stepping back, because of the deliberate and varied brushstrokes that compose it. The strokes are the details I first observed from the scene and then re-told on the canvas; details whose meaning cannot be understood until integrated into the whole painting. This story is about both the substance of dairy farming in the area and the myth that surrounds it, unraveling inconsistencies, ironies, and contradictions at the junction of the two.

My desire to learn about agriculture is fueled by my own passions for dramatic landscapes and awe for those who seem not only to know these vistas intimately, but are an inseparable part of them. Two years ago, I set out from Massachusetts to Montana to explore the life of those who work the land by studying ranching culture in the West. I fell in love with what I saw, and came to understand it as a complicated and harsh love story between the people and their landscape.

My studies of Montana and the themes I investigated there are far from over, but I am not one for sitting still. Finding myself once again in rural Massachusetts at Williams College, I turned my studies to what I find on the land here: dairy farming. Again I have focused on the stories and tales of people “on the ground.” I spent the fall with farmers: touring farms by foot and pick up truck, talking in farmhouse kitchens, and helping on farms when I could. My methods were simple, but my questions direct. I chose my informants, both farmers and non-farmers, through recommendations and then farmers’ subsequent interest in my study. Out in the field, I looked and I listened, recording interviews and observations in written notes, audio tapes, and photographs. I supplemented my own experiences with the work of Professor Hank Art, farm visits and interviews by my roommate Zinnia Wilson, and “the talk of the towns” I gathered as I became more familiar with the farming communities.

Here at Williams, I have concentrated my studies on Studio Art and Environmental Studies. Consequently, my investigation of the dairy farming culture is largely influenced by these two fields. I focused my research on observing not only what I heard in the interviews and read, but also what I saw in the field and through collected images. I came to the farms with the eyes of someone who did not grow up in this region, a wannabe farmer from the suburbs with a craving for a rural lifestyle.

I want to thank the farmers for their generosity and openness with their personal stories and their time. The best part about this project was the time I spent with the farmers, people and a lifestyle that I not only admire, but often wish I were a part of. I would happily still be visiting with the farmers and learning more from their life stories, but as is the nature of any research project, the time comes to put the information together. It is important for the reader to understand that all impressions

and analyses of these farmers are my own, and based upon my interpretations of what I saw and heard in a limited amount of time.

Some of the names and places in the narrative have been changed to preserve confidentiality. The cast of characters includes:

*The Olefield family*—an extended family that shares custody of their third generation Farm. Mrs. Olefield and her husband Neil, and Neil's brother George.

*The Chenail family*—a fifth generation Williamstown, Massachusetts dairy family who sold their milking herd and later bought a new one. Retired patriarch Win, his sons who run the farm, Chris and Wally.

*The Eldridge family*—the quintessential dairy family. (Again) retired patriarch Henry Eldridge, Steve and Tommy his sons, his other children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, including, David, all in Gatesville, New York.

*John Malcolm*—a farmer committed to keeping farms and the agricultural landscapes. Spent summers working on a family farm in New York, but otherwise a first generation farmer and a member of the Vermont state legislature.

*Bob Foster*—a farmer in Middlebury, Vermont whose family's product has diversified from dairy in an attempt to become a more sustainable farm.

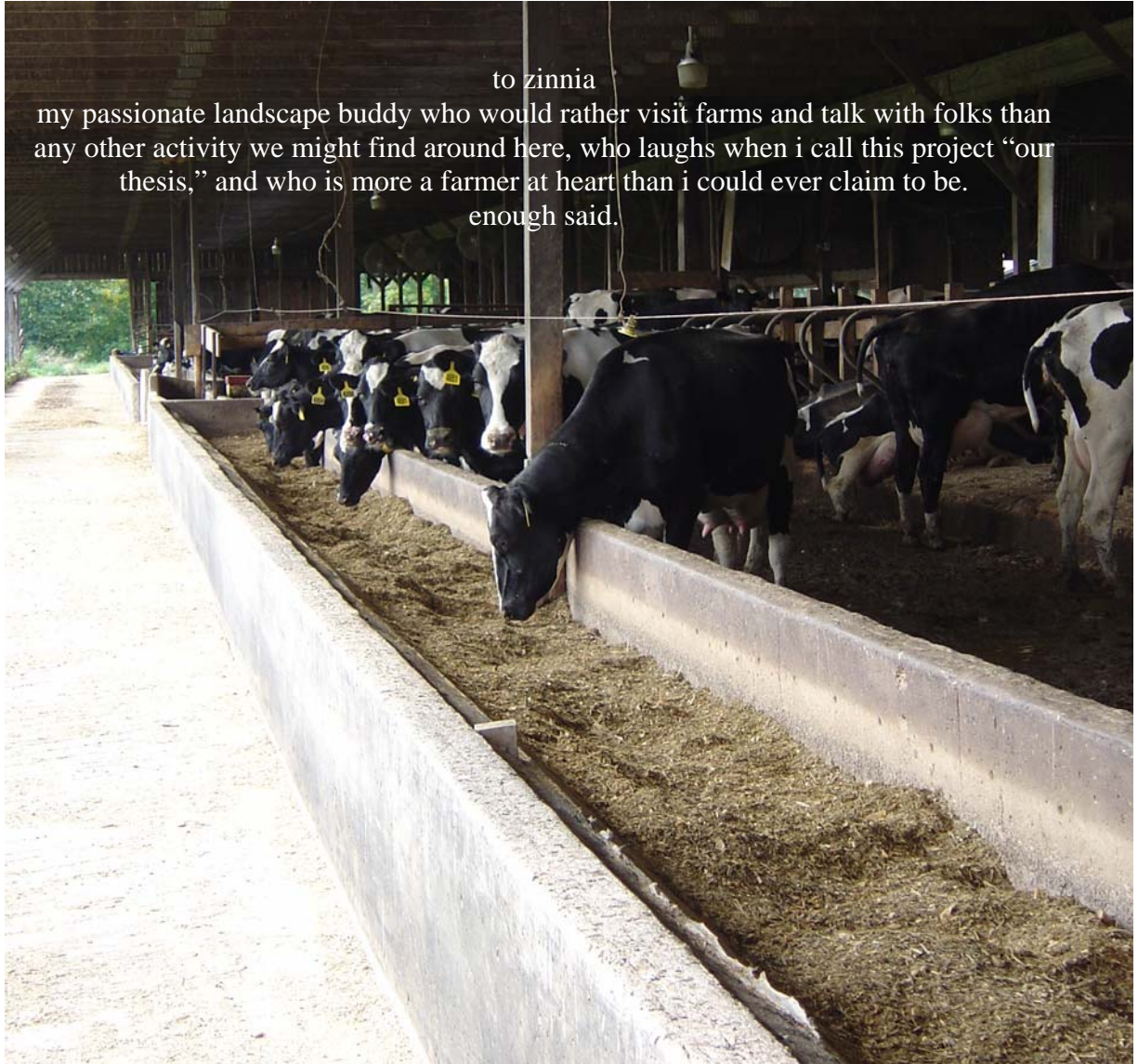
*The DeMayo family*—the owners of a popular Williamstown horse farm. Mr. DeMayo and Mrs. DeMayo.

*John Herring*—a wealthy landowner in Gatesville.

*Michael Bonsey*—a new farmer who is preparing a dairy to make artisanal cheeses in Gatesville.

*Paul Stotle*—the son of an old dairy family who sold off their cows in the 1980's.

The details of these individual farmers together paint a striking picture of the dairy farm scene in the Northern Berkshires today. The story I am about to tell reveals many paradoxes that surface from the coexistence of the beautiful image and the harsh reality of dairy farming. This is what I see.



to zinnia  
my passionate landscape buddy who would rather visit farms and talk with folks than  
any other activity we might find around here, who laughs when i call this project “our  
thesis,” and who is more a farmer at heart than i could ever claim to be.  
enough said.



## The Story





I am a sucker for family farms, red barns and tall silos silhouetted against the sky, local farm stands, rocking chairs on porches, and pick-your-own anything. I seek mountainous landscapes dotted with cleared horizons of pastures and the family farmhouse. I want to drive along the winding dirt roads in the fall foliage, winter snow, new spring growth or green summer fields.

I came to study in this region, a rural area of the Northern Berkshires that includes the northwest corner of Massachusetts, southwest Vermont, and east central New York, because I have always wanted to live the image I held of the rural lifestyle. One where I could spend all day outside—mornings with the cows, with time in the afternoon for a hike. One where I knew my neighbors and I never got caught in a traffic jam. Most of me knew I would not find much of this country living at a high paced, intellectually rigorous, liberal arts college. I came from the Boston area anyway to at least see the farms I dream about during my limited free time, to catch the scent of autumn leaves, fresh mown hay, apple orchards, and green grass, and to feel the changing of the seasons.



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I have come to worship this farming image I describe because of what it stands for. The chase after these American agricultural ideals is not limited to me of course. The search for our roots, for the old way of life, for the values that these traditional agricultural symbols represent, is widespread. The cultures that appear to embody these images are sought out by many, both tourists and those who come to stay. There is something about these rural areas that reeks of this heritage: a tradition of agriculture, an assumption of a simpler way of life and a quality of life that is not only attractive, but often deemed superior to those elsewhere. The image of a farm, whether experienced driving by on the highway, in our backyards, or from a vacation advertisement, is a reminder of the fundamental values of family and hard work. The farmers' work ethic is a necessity in their trade, and their connection to the landscape is born out of the nature of their labor.



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The farm is part of the scenery and helps give a human face to the sense of place we feel when we enter farming territory. Farmers are visible on tractors or carrying maple syrup buckets. We see children feeding the animals before school or haying with their parents and understand that the farmers of this region are family people. Their story is not any story, but one that tells the history of the landscape, from farms that go back generations. Thus, many farmers are living history not just of their own family, but also of our nation founded on an agricultural way of life.

Farmers are local people, people of community. Even when their mainstay product like raw milk is not sold locally, most farmers sell other goods through farm stands and farmers markets. They own or use land that may not have public access, but becomes an unrestricted landscape view. They provide a connection to the landscape that is literally down-to-earth, and their work with nature is seemingly so simple that it becomes desirable. Since farmers are tied to their farms, grounded to their place in a way their new neighbors might not be, they often provide the basis of a strong sense of place for a community.

This idea of farms, of farm people and their barns and homes nestled in the landscape is a common image, so widespread that many will understand and feel these connotations. Most importantly, perhaps, it is an image that is attractive to the farmers themselves as they seek to embody it and an integral part of the farming culture. But, this image and the challenges associated with the reality of a farming life today do not fit together easily. Together they create a complicated and delicate paradox, so that to understand the state of farming and its future, the tension between the two, the ideal and the actual, must be examined.

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Hand crafted magnets



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The image of farming is everywhere: souvenir magnets, calendar photos, milk cartons, advertisements for golf courses, ski resorts, shopping guides, and campaigns to move your business to the rural areas. Most readily accessible in the form of photographs, these images and advertisements are usually accompanied by a small printed name of the person who takes credit for the work, the photographer. A photographer is an artist and the photograph becomes his art. When he looks through his camera, he makes decisions about what to include in his frame, how far away from the subject he wishes to be, and at what angle to take the photograph. He snaps the picture so that others can see what he sees. Like a stage set for a play, such choices by the photographer give the viewer clues about how to look at the image.



Often a barn, silo, and farmhouse nestled in the mountains, the photographer time and again takes the photograph from far away, filling the space with the landscape so that the recognizable farm only takes up a small portion of the picture. In a landscape where even the cultivated farmland appears “natural,” the farm buildings stand out and are given immediate importance. Because farmstead differs from its natural background, and in most seasons its colors, it becomes the focal point of the piece. At the same time, the lack of detail of the faraway farm gives the viewer permission to insert his own memories and associations with farm and to use his imagination to invoke meaning behind what he sees. After the viewer sees many of these similar photographs, he or she comes to implicitly understand that the farms are central to the landscape of this area. Indeed, for many, their understanding of farming life is dictated by these cropped views.



The farms serve other purposes in these images as well. The recognizable farm establishes an immediate connection between the viewer and the landscape. Sometimes a dirt road or rolling pasture helps move the viewer’s eye towards the farm. Even the farm itself invites the viewer into it by adding a human face to the landscape and consequently making it more personal. These landscapes are not some remote beauty found on a Sierra Club calendar that few can experience. Rather, they are

accessible through a local farm family that knows and feels the pulse of the land, people we know or would know if we went there, as has been my experience this fall. The presence of the farm deems the location as a place already sculpted by human presence.

As a work of art, the images themselves become more than a visual representation. They are simultaneously a projection of what the photographer sees and an acceptance of that image by the viewer. Like all art, these images create a dialog between the artist and viewer, but what is significant about this dialog is that it is not specific to one particular image. There seems to be a message that is universally accepted and understood from many images of this genre. When put together, they become a statement about idyllic farm life. I am not suggesting that the photographers and artists are solely responsible for the image of farming in this region, for, especially in the advertising business, photographers produce an image that people want to see. Instead, the image is a combination of the work of the photographer, the acceptance of the viewer, and the nature of the farmers' work that it portrays.

What these conventional photographs do not show, however, tells us even more about the farming image. They do not portray what we might see if we drove the distance from the photographer's camera to the typical farm. Almost any farm will look ideal if you are careful to take the picture from far away, or to crop out the manure pit, the worn machinery, and the mud stamped with hoof prints outside of the barn. But these images do not show people, and they do not show dirt. In John Elder's book, *Reading the Mountains of Home*, about the Vermont landscape, he explains how history is a "time made simple by the loss of detail" (Elder, 16). Taken from afar, many of these images function in the same way. Without details of the land and the lives of the people who inhabit it, it is easy to hold idealistic and inaccurate views of farming life. It is only up close that we see rusted barrels and farm equipment, and paint peeling off the sides of barns, or that we notice a fence in need of repairing and the dirt road that is difficult to drive on because of the many potholes.



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With the preceding images, farming becomes less attractive. The hard work, the wear and tear of the landscape, the people, and the materials becomes apparent. The image is no longer an easy icon of affection; it is harder to worship such an idol.

Even when the photographer does choose to zoom in, the resulting photo often shows a man working maple syrup or a farm stand by the side of the road, but we still do not see sweat of the labor or the work that went into the pumpkins for sale. I have yet to see an image of the act of milking cows, mucking out the barn (or the muck for that matter), dust kicked up from the working trucks that travel the farm roads, or an alarm clock set for five in the morning.



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manure pile



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The image below accompanied by the caption: “View farm life upclose,” shows only the landscape of labor already completed, and one of the least dirty farm tasks at that.



View farm life upclose. Many of the rolling fields are cut for hay by our local farmers.

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There are other limitations to the photographs as well. It is the nature of a two-dimensional image to flatten a three dimensional reality. Through this process, the concreteness of that reality already starts to be lost. In real time, images are continuous, but the snap of a camera captures only one moment in time. A photograph immediately becomes an image of the past, making the quintessential image more prone to evoking a sense of nostalgia. In addition, photographs cannot be multi-sensory like the experience on a farm is. On a working farm one feels mud, smells manure, and hears incessant moos. While a photograph could potentially invoke these feelings, the distance at which the photographers have taken the photo prohibits these reactions. Capturing a farm, a multi-faceted, ever changing and complex mix of family and business, into a still image ensures simplification. Both despite and because of their simplification, these are the images through which the farmers become cultural icons of the area.

The farmers themselves accept, perpetuate and, idealize the image, for it is imbedded in who they are. Author Paul Rosenblatt, who conducted research similar to mine about farming families who lost their land in Minnesota, explains that

“It is easy to romanticize farming, to imagine a life of freedom, fresh air, and song birds in the morning; a life in which one can see the product of one’s skills in the ripe corn and healthy dairy herd. In reality, everyone who was interviewed for this book could speak to the many ways in which farming fell short of the romantic ideal. Yet despite frustrations and discouragements they had experienced and the unpleasant realities they knew all too well, they continued to speak about attachment to the home place, to an identity, and to a way of life (76, *Farming Is In Our Blood*).”

It is this sense of place, “identity,” and “way of life” that the farming image conjures, and these very “frustrations,” “discouragements,” and “unpleasant realities” that it excludes.

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The Olefield family is familiar with the relationship between land, identity, and frustrations that Rosenblatt describes. While the mountainous landscape surrounding their farm is as picturesque and scattered with fields as any in the area, their home landscape with the barns and living quarters is quite the opposite. Their complicated family dynamics are caught up in the landscape and the family business and create a disconnect between each family member’s image of the farm, what would like the farm to be like, and their current reality.



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Mrs. Olefield talks about a farm that looks like a picture, she says, with flowers in boxes outside, one that “looks nice when people drive by.” She talks emphatically, with a nod like I know what she’s talking about. And I do; I nod with her. We all know the image of the farms she describes. She repeats it to me. Rocking chairs on porches, Adirondack chairs, cows grazing on the green hillside. A clean red barn with a new coat of paint, and flower boxes in the windows. But the Olefield farm is not the kind of farm you drive by for such a scene. You drive through it and think you should stop because it feels like a dead end.

The roads around the barns are pure mud when it rains, as it did the day I visited. One barn was damp and dark, an age-old standstill<sup>1</sup> barn with an outdated manure collecting station that I am told “does not work as good as it should.” The other barn has no clear front entrance, and long weeds infest the ground around it, growing higher where manure once fell. In many ways, the impression one gets from the farm is like that of an old mining town, only it is still inhabited. Signs tell you where you are, but they are faded and cracked. There is no order to this place. Everywhere there are piles of discarded objects: rusty tractor seats and discarded farm implements, pieces of plastic and old tractors that appear to be situated where they were last used.



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Such a mess is a statement that reflects the disorderly family story of the Olefields. The farm started in the 1930's and had grown bigger since then following the national trend in dairy farms, until the brothers split the farm. After visiting the Olefield family on September 30<sup>th</sup>, I wrote in my field notes that “the main thing that stands out from this family is the problems.” Last spring they were one farm milking 1000 cows (a very large farm for the area); now they are two. Mrs. Olefield and her husband Neil, both in their late 50's or early 60's, own one part of the farm and milk around 50 cows. Neil's brother George owns the other half, milking 230 cows. The story that I was not really supposed to hear but have pieced together from listening in Mrs. Olefield's kitchen to the frustrations of her own life goes something like this:

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<sup>1</sup> Standstill barn: an old model of barn where the cows stand in one stall and cannot move freely throughout the barn.



Neil and George do not get along for personal and business reasons. Their father died in June, and it appears that the boys were waiting for his death to split the farm. Neil and Mrs. Olefield have 8 children, one and a half of whom work on the farm. George has some vague description of “a whole lot of help” from what sounds like many relatives.

Major reasons for the split from Mrs. Olefield’s point of view include each brother’s desire to take the farm in a different direction, and George’s Olefield lack of business sense. While George himself seemed to think he and his family had a good plan. As an outsider, it is hard to know how to judge family stories that pit one member against the other, but the landscape affirms the indication that something is amiss. The physical environment of the Olefield’s is as jumbled as their family life. In a profession where the people are so dependent on the landscape, the two come to reflect each other.



It is more than the family’s intrapersonal stories that plague these farmers, however. Mrs. Olefield doesn’t want to work on the farm anymore. It’s a hard life, she said. It’s time to live out her dream now, and not be tied to milking cows everyday. She is a woman like many other farmers, who is tired of the work day in and day out. “When you get to be our age, you think that we could retire,” she explained how she was ready to go and do the things that were important to her before it was too late. “But not when you’re a farmer;” farmers don’t retire. Her voice rises and she says these things more than once angrily. She did not even want to talk to me in the first place, and that message was openly stated. Her husband dumped the interview on her at the last minute. That happens to her a lot with farming chores, and is indicative of the fact that hired help is hard to find. She doesn’t mind working hard, but working hard and making no money, *ever*, is another matter, she makes clear. She balances the books, for both the old and the new split farm, and she says it is depressing. It is worse than doing dishes, she added glancing at the sink, because at least then you have a pile of clean dishes. There is often nothing to show for the work of farming but another season on the horizon.

The entire dairy industry can in fact be as depressing as Mrs. Olefield portrays it, for it is prone to many inherent risks. Aside from the sense of self, the confidence, and the identity that I find in the old farmers, there is nothing sure about farming. “Weather is the biggest factor,” another farmer, Win Chenail, told me. Too much or too little rain, early frosts or late defrosts. Much of the work, particularly the growing of feed, depends on the luck of the weather. In addition, the milk market is unpredictable and changing. George Olefield said that everything depends on the price of milk that will probably fall back and level off (right now it is pretty good).

And the predictions aren't good, he added. While the market for the milk is uncertain, the dairy farmers, particularly the small ones, must struggle to keep up with the new technologies, a significant financial burden often necessary for increased efficiency. As dairy farms become fewer and farther between, the social fabric surrounding a community that was once latent with farms is also disappearing—Ag stores with feed, veterinarians, and tractor repairmen are hard to come by in many areas where agriculture dominated the trade only half a century ago. As a result, the dairy farmer must be jack-of-all trades, with the varied skills of business manager, mechanic, animal husbandman, veterinarian, for example. The work of the dairy farmer is hard physical labor, demanding and often monotonous work. The hours are sunup until sundown seven days a week, all year, for as many years as the dairy stays in business. There is no time off. There are always cows to milk. The work of the farm is also dangerous with the risk of injury from physical labor or heavy machinery like tractors. The older one gets, the harder the work becomes. With such an unattractive job description complete with low wages, good farm labor is hard to find. Farmer John Malcolm from Pawlet, Vermont explains that few people grow up on farms anymore in this region, so even those who are willing to work are often unskilled. His frustrations are echoed by many other farmers. The difficult work also means that age is a factor.

What keeps Neil farming despite these difficulties is that “he’s not happy when he’s not busy. He’s a physical person,” according to his wife. When I asked if she could imagine him doing something else, she proclaimed in a very loud voice, “He doesn’t know what else to do!” Mrs. Olefield wishes her husband would retire. Yet in spite of her frustrations with her husband, parts of Mrs. Olefield remain connected to the farm in a way that might be more intimate than she admits. In the face of her supposed hatred for the farming life, Mrs. Olefield talked about yet another dream she has for her farm, one quite different from her yearning to be done with farming. She wants to go into grass-fed beef, or to stay in the dairy business. She discussed getting a mix of Holstein and Jersey milking cows rather than keep their current Holsteins that are known for having the best milking traits, because Jersey’s “are so beautiful you can almost hug them.” She spoke assertively, juxtaposing the two sentiments she spoke about passionately—to get off the farm and to make the farm better. The woman who hates farming is now dreaming of a cow she would want to hug in addition to her picturesque, drive-by farm? These conflicting responses to her situation illustrate the story of a difficult relationship not only with the people who double as family members and business partners, but also with the farm that provides a way of life.

The Olefields are people attached to their land and their lives. Despite the many hardships and the less than ideal landscape, they are proud of who they are. This became clear as I prepared to leave both Olefield households, each family asked me come back again, and to bring my friends anytime I wanted, to visit again the intricate story of each family. The story is a sad one about a place and people that reflect one other: a punished landscape and a strained family, whose addiction to farming is fueled largely by the image of what it might someday be.

The Olefields are the most extreme version of the divide between image and reality that I have come across. Fueled largely by the tension in how the farmers see

or want to see themselves and the intrinsic difficulties of dairy farming, this paradox is a phenomenon that all farmers are caught in. The specific details of each farmer's story highlights a different aspect of the contradiction, yet another way in which these farming lives are caught in the confusing paradox.

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From three farmers I have heard that “you have to love farming, or you'd sell out. Either that or you're crazy.” Following, I was told a joke several times, about the farmer who wins the lottery. When they ask him what he's going to do with all the money, he says he's going to farm until it's all gone.” While these lines were told in some jest, there is a certain truth behind them. With all of the inherent risks in farming, there is another more pressing reason why the farms are still in business—their need to be farmers.

The Chenail family in Williamstown is an illustration of such farmers. There is no denying that in the Chenail family, we see the great allure of the farming lifestyle. They have been farming the land for four generations. Farmer Win Chenail gives his own statistic, as he remembers it, there used to be five farms on Luce Road alone. Now in his late 60's, his family's farm was the last one left, one of only two in all of Williamstown.

My first view of the Chenail family was through a videotape. Indeed, photographs are not the only way to create an image of farming. Professor Hank Art at Williams College uses the video medium to document the many farm visits and interviews he has conducted in the Williamstown area. Different from a photograph, a video is a moving image that spans time so that it shows a series of moments rather than a single one. It adds sound and movement, allowing the viewer to experience, rather than infer more about the image. Like the photographer, a video artist makes choices about what to include. In Hank's raw footage, the viewer experiences a little bit of everything. The realities depicted in one of the videos of the Chenail family show a farm more complicated than the simplistic farm image. It creates an entirely new, non-idealistic moving image that tells its own story.

The farmers on the tapes showed little interest in the videotape or video taper whatsoever. They were farmers; they had a job to do—their apparent interest was in sprinkling the food to their cows in a standstill barn. After feeding came the milking. Wally Chenail, Win's son, chuckled into the camera, one of the few times he acknowledged it as if sending a message to the viewer. Their milking system's “not the most modern base unit to start with...” he laughed, “which is something we will not tell anybody.” His comment refers to the milk dumping stations he and his brother used to milk cows, collecting milk in buckets and then dumping the buckets into a larger nearby bucket, instead of the more high-tech and efficient process that takes the milk directly from the cows' udders into a bulk storage tank. From the video, the morning on the Chenail farm appears like any other morning, except for the reason the cameraman was there in the first place. Hank's purpose was to capture the last day the members of the Chenail family would feed and then milk these cows.

“That was a sad day,” Win told me later, as though those words conveyed all there was to say about the topic. As if in a movie, it was dark and rain pelted down hard, setting the mood for a somber scene. Wally, Chris, and the truck drivers marched the cows in rows through the barn doors and down a ramp like a gangplank. At the end of the ramp the cows boarded a long silver trailer that seemed to have endless room. Occasionally, Wally’s arms would fly up to prevent a cow from moving back into the barn. There was shuffling of feet, and a downward cast of faces that looked upon those same feet. Not a glance towards the camera this time. Inside the barn was an unprecedented silence for a home of livestock, broken by yells to the cows and their resistant moos, the kind cows always bellow when asked to move against their will. Outside, it was hard to make out the voices against the loud hum of the trailer trucks and more frequent moos. Then they were done. The trucks pulled away. No more loud hum of the motor. No more moos from the barn.

While not an idealized image, the scene Hank filmed is also not new to dairy farming. Another farmer, Dick DeMayo, whose family dairy farm went out of business years ago, explains it like this: “there will always be people who would rather work outside than inside for a living, but when you spend your whole life working outside with no time off, and you’re working for peanuts, that’s the point that people say they can’t do it anymore.” You’ve got to make money if you’re going to work.

The numbers of farms have declined since the days the old timers talk about when every family in this area owned at least a few cows. In Williamstown alone there were 132 dairy farms in 1850. By 1970 there were only 16, and after the Chenail’s sold their cows, 1 farm left (Art). What happened in Williamstown is mirrored on a larger scale in the entire state. In Massachusetts there were 1,211 farms in 1969, 609 farms in 1987 and only 381 in 1992 (Holmberg, 6). Like the photographs and videos, these numbers are a cropped view of the whole story. With each number, with each farm that disappeared, there is a family whose own set of circumstances led to the auction day.

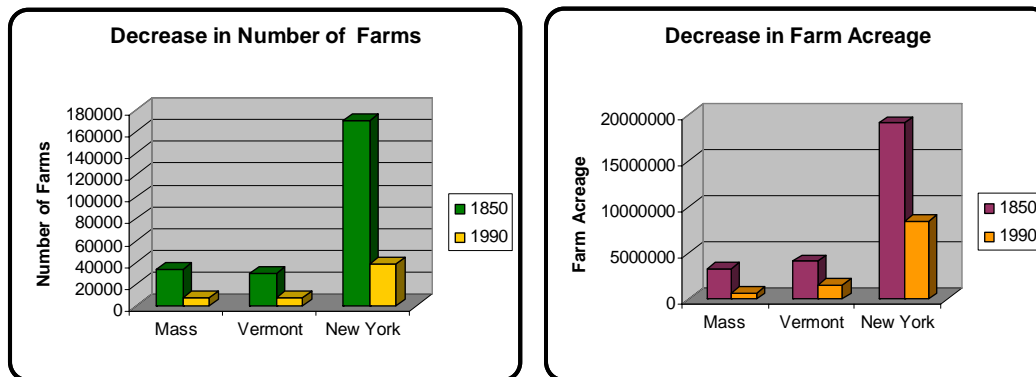
When I later asked Win if he missed the cows, he said “No,” he didn’t. He added that selling the herd was the best decision at the time, and it turned out well because the price of milk dropped right after. His answer is not surprising given the struggles his family faced at the time. While the cows were leaving, Win was in a hospital in Albany, New York getting his hip replaced. According to him, he was in need of this operation and it was clear he would no longer be able to continue farming with the physical labor, not an uncommon situation for a dairy farmer after a lifetime of tough work. When Win suggested that his sons continue farming by reducing the herd down to 50 milking cows, they disagreed. They were tired of it, Win recalls. Becoming tired of the business, the work without good pay, is common in the dairy industry. Win later described that his brother who processed milk also got out of the business seven or eight years ago after a lifetime in dairy because he too had had enough.

There are other notable strains on the family. As Wally confessed into the camera, the Chenail family operated under an outdated milking system. The necessary upgrades, however, were far too expensive, according to Win. As with many upgrades and increases in technology in the dairy industry, it is often difficult for small farmers to make the transition because the large upfront cost has a long payback time. This



difficulty illustrates a truth about farming: it is a struggle to run a family business where what is right for the family is not always right for the business. As with the Olefield family, these relationships no doubt influence the decisions made on the farm. These struggles together add to the instability of a farm, increasing the likelihood that it will be their turn to get out of the business. So for a family like the Chenails who were already in a more precarious position because they did not own most of the land they farmed, selling the cows was the next step.

When the Chenail family sold their cows, they added one more farm to the number disappearing across the country. In 1940 dairy farms made up 76.4% of total farms in the United States, 4,663,413 out of 6,102,417, according to the U.S. Census. By 1997, only 6.1% of the nation's farms had milk cows, 116,874 farms out of 1,911,859. The states in this region form part of a national trend. Massachusetts saw a 75.8% decrease in farms from 1850 to 1990, from 34,069 to 6,900 farms, and a 79.7% decrease in acres in farms from 3,356,012 to only 680,000. Vermont shows similar numbers, a 76.5% decrease in all farms from 29,763 to only 7,000 over that same 140 year period, and a 63.4% decrease in the farmland from 4,125,822 acres to 1,510,000. In New York there was a 77.4% decrease, starting with 170,621 farms and dropped to 38,500. It dropped from 19,119,084 acres in farms to 8,400,000, a 56.1% decrease in farmland, a smaller decrease than the other two that can be explained by the size of the state and the larger role it plays in the nations farm industries (*Historical Statistics of the United States*).



Data source: *Historical Statistics of the United States*. Graphs by Christopher Gregg.

While each individual state's pattern of land change varies over the past century and a half, the trend is clear: there are fewer farms and less farmland than there was in 1850. Thus, the dairy farms that "disappear" today are often farms that had outlasted generations of struggles on the landscape.

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Numbers do not tell the whole story, however. The Chenail family did something that is not in the statistics: they got back into business about a year and a half later. When I showed up to their farm, the scene could not have been more different from the cows marching out that I saw on video. This time the sun shone high in the sky for a late September day, and the small we-trust-you-to-pay farm stand was piled with the last of the season's corn. Pumpkins for sale lined the right side of

the driveway. In another week the fall foliage would be at its peak. I drove right into the image of the farm, a sort of dirt parking lot filled with tractors and trucks, in front of the white farmhouse and red barn.

Inside the barn at 10:00am I found Wally and Chris who had just finished milking the cows and cleaning the milking equipment. They looked like farmers in a dairy scene like any other around here—functional with up-to-date milking equipment, only the Chenail brothers had made all the necessary upgrades themselves during their “time off” from the dairy industry. The boys spoke to me in rushed voices and antsy gestures, swaying a bit as they spoke and shoving their feet around in the mud. They shared similar opinions about the dairy industry, looked completely different from each other, and were ready to get chopping their corn. You must really like farming to have gotten back into it, I commented. “It’s like any other job,” Chris said. “A job’s a job, I guess.” Then after a few more seconds, “Yeah, I guess I like it.”

Win arrived to the house on a 4-wheeler, seeming like a grandfather in his voice and mannerisms, chuckling to me even though we had never met, “I’m glad you did not leave yet, I was out working.” He smiled. “Come on in the house.” This past spring, Win explained, Chris wanted to start milking the heifer cows (non-milking cows at the time) that they had kept when they sold the herd. Wally was more uncertain about the decision on account of pressure from his wife who did not want to be tied down to an inflexible lifestyle. But it appears the cows won out. This fall they were milking 60-70 cows. Now their number is closer to 80. It sounds quite simple. In light of all the difficulties running a dairy operation, all the Chenail family said they had to do was buy some more cows after making the necessary upgrades. The dairy farming business is not known for its profitability, easy lifestyle, or prestige, so there must be other factors that led this family back to cows.

Win took me on a tour of the land in his pickup truck, showing me where they grew corn for feed and pumpkins for their vegetable stand. With each part I saw, Win talked about the land as if it were his own. Much of their land was bought by a private landowner who allows them to continue farming it. The Chenail’s do not know how long they will have the privilege of using it. The town of Williamstown owns another parcel. “This all used to be our land,” Win said proudly. “Our land” are the words he emphasized. “Used to be” are the ones I heard. Used to be. Not any more. The Chenail family is running an operation where they have already sold their greatest asset, especially in a town like Williamstown where scenic land prices run high. The family only owns about fifteen acres of the land they work—roughly that surrounding their house and barn.

While he explains the transition out of farming and back again, many of Win’s sentences use the word “we.” Although retired, Win still very much considers himself part of the operation. He speaks about what “we have to” then corrects himself, “they have to...I’m retired.” He laughs. “No, I help ‘em all the time. [Today] I’m going to go chop corn [for silage]. This morning I milked,” then self-correcting again, “I helped them milk.” Win cannot seem to let go of his connection to the farm both in his thoughts and his actions, “God I’ve been milking cows all my life.” To what extent Win actually helps is hard to know, but his mind is still in the game. He adamantly expressed that you “have to enjoy it,” and then again later, “you’ve got to love it. Without that you wouldn’t get through the day.” It is an existence then, based

on love and on the ability to carry out hard work, and no doubt a love of this ability. More than any other single factor, I believe it is this attachment to the land and way of life, which I perceive as love, that drew the family back into business. Win describes his typical day where he still wakes up at 5am, gathers sweet corn, grabs some coffee, and then helps with the milking. On a busy day he will help his sons mow, or pick more corn. He does it for the fun of it, and the hard work. Like Neil Olefield who doesn't know what else to do, Win keeps working to remain a farmer.

Win represents not just the hard work ethic of farmers; he is a person who cannot escape from the grind of the work, the feel of the animals, the purpose of waking each morning with a job to be done. It is a phenomenon that is difficult for these farmers to describe. It is simply something that they do. It is a part of them. They do not know what else to do. Another way one might characterize the work habits of these farmers like Win is that they are workaholics, or stuck in their ways and unable to change their routines. While there is certainly some truth to these pejorative characterizations, I think that the addiction to farming extends beyond them.

There is a power of the land and way of life that fuels a man who continues to work for little money, with a back that hurts at the end of the day, a hip replacement and a smile and a joy for what he does. I see a strong force in the connection to the land that they treat as their own even though it has long since been sold off. This is a breed where life itself seems tied to the cows and the landscape. In a situation similar to the Chenail's, another farmer, Paul Stotle, and his family sold their cows during a government buyout program in the 1980's. His parents were old and neither he nor his siblings wanted to continue farming. But it appears that his father could not continue without; he passed away shortly after the cows were sold. Mr. and Mrs. DeMayo, now horse farmers in Williamstown, discuss the disappearance of dairy farms, an industry they were once a part of. They spoke at least four or five times of people who sold their cows or stopped farming for one reason or another and, "it broke his heart," "he was broken hearted, never got over it" or "he wasn't the same after they sold the cows." They vehemently empathized with those who lost their farms, attempting to explain to me the devastating power of watching your whole life's work disappear before your eyes.

It is striking how the narrative of the Chenail family flows like that of the Olefields. In the words of my thesis adviser, the commonalities between these two stories are quite simple: "Farm is pretty." Or at least its image. "Look close and farm is in some ways ugly. But the farmer sees himself in the pretty picture, so plugs on" (Lee, Thesis comments).

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The number of dairy farms in Williamstown went back up to two when the Chenails started milking again. Outwardly, it would be hard to tell that this family had ever sold their cows, that Hank's video even existed. But it does. The process of going out and coming back tacks on another chapter to the Chenail's family story. As with the Olefields, we can take a hint from the landscape and facilities to better understand the farm story. I saw two different images on the Chenail farm. The first is a rural ideal on a sunny September day, a farm that essentially looks like a farm, one where a member of the community knocked on the door and walked into the house

while I interviewed Win, to exchange a few laughs and let Win know that he was headed out to the pumpkin patch to pick pumpkins with his son.

The other image is more hidden on the Chenail farm. Behind the barn, where the cows stand fenced in after they have been milked, was a mud pit. Some cows were lying down in it; others just stood. It did not look right. Milk cows with their udders smushed around in the mud. Then, inside their old barn, now a storage shed, I found what looked like a messy closet—an old bulk tank for storing milk, old tubing and barrels, accompanied by many other discarded objects.<sup>xxi</sup>



The things are evidence the family's farm had been around for generations, and a symbol, perhaps, of the chaos layered in the family's history.

On my way out, I stopped at their stand to buy some corn. Being corn from the end of the season, a sign accompanied it, warning that many of the ears contained worms. The corn was for sale despite these worms, for there was still some life left in it. The sign asked the customers to cut off the wormy parts and eat what was still good. This is exactly what the Chenail's have done with their farm, discarded the bad or challenging parts enough to keep going with the good.

The story of the Chenail family tells the story of farmers who cannot or do not wish to put aside what they know, to give up their identities as hardworking people of the land and people of the community. Here we find the paradox when pressures outside of the farmers' control make it reasonable for them to sacrifice this very identity. Nonetheless, the farmers hold tight to their own image of themselves as farmers, one that encompasses both romanticism and reality as we see in the character of Win Chenail.

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The Chenail and Olefield families are faced with many difficulties based on their familial and financial situations. There is more that explains these difficulties, however, than what is visible on the ground at any particular farm. The national trends in milk production, technological advances, economies of size, and regionalism of today all put farmers in the Northeast region at a disadvantage.

Increases in technology and growth hormones have enabled cows to produce more milk than ever before. The production of milk in the U.S. increased drastically over the past half century. Milk per cow increased 95% from 1950-1975 and another 76% from 1975 to 2000 (Blayney, 3). Milk production has risen over the 50 years from 115,398 million pounds to 167,658 million pounds. At the same time, the national average number of milk cows per farm decreased more than 49% from 1950-1975 and 18% from 1975 to 2000 (Blayney, 2000). Thus, the United States has been producing more milk with fewer cows. How is this happening?



Over the course of my visits, I was struck by the size of the milk cows' udders, huge milk-filled sac that hang in some cases halfway down the legs of the cow, swinging when she walks. Cows are producing more milk than they used to as a result of a combination of factors. In 1950 the average cow produced 5,314 pounds whereas in 2000 it produced an average of 18,204 pounds (Blayney, 2). In his report from the Economic Research Service, "The Changing Landscape of U.S. Milk Production," Blayney explains this increase by citing technological innovations including more sophisticated milking machines, refrigerated bulk tanks to store milk, more efficient parlors, new animal housing such as freestall barns, improved breeding techniques, and better overall biological understanding. Such thoughts are echoed in a report by the Springfield District Farm Credit Service, "Dairy Farming in the Northeast: Now and in the Future," and the *2003 Northeast Dairy Farm Summary*, which also adds "management practices" to the list.

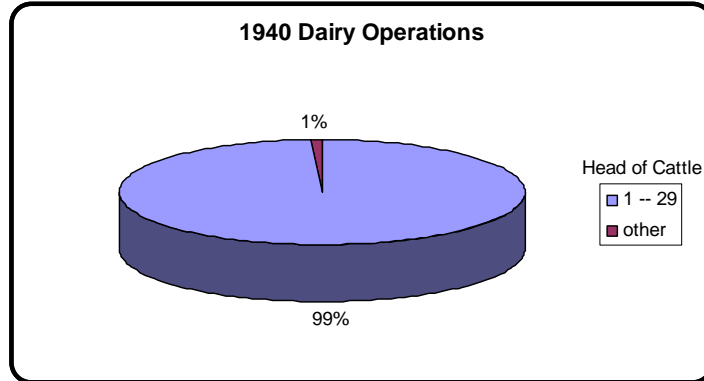
The need to keep up with technological changes is familiar to the farmers I have spoken with. The Olefield family is split on this issue, with George Olefield pushing for more and modern technology "to keep up with the times." The Chenail family has increased their herd by at least 10 cows in the past three and a half months and are now limited in growth by their barn. The part with the new milking equipment is already full. In both Vermont and New York, the milk production reflects the national trend. Vermont produced 2,787 million pounds in the year 2000 as compared with 2,009 in 1975. Although its poundage increased, Vermont's share of U.S. production remained constant at 1.7%. New York saw an even more dramatic increase from 9,964 to 11,920 million pounds. While New York did increase the amount of milk, its percentage of the total milk produced in the U.S. declined from 8.6% to 7.1% as other regions become more significant in milk production. For example, in 1975 Idaho produced 1,555 million pounds, 1.3% of total milk production, rising to 7,223 million pounds, 4.3% of the total milk production, and the 6<sup>th</sup> largest producer in the U.S. (Blayney, 5).

In Massachusetts, however, the total production of milk fell, suggesting that these farmers were unable to size up or keep up with the technologies. The Chenail family is a perfect example, going out of business in large part because of their old milking equipment. Milk production in Massachusetts was at 601 million pounds in 1975 and dropped to 392 million pounds in 2000. In part, Massachusetts' share in the national milk production decline from 0.5% to 0.2% over 25 years (Blayney, 5). Massachusetts decreased in production and herd size because the bottom line is that if you don't have the machinery, you cannot compete. In a business like farming where competing often means breaking even or earning a minimal profit, there is little room to be sub par—either you keep up or your business is under.

Like many farms, the Eldridge family has a wish list of new machinery and equipment, and an upgraded barn. Yet, from another farming family in Gatesville I heard that the Eldridge's chopper broke and they did not know how they were going to fix it, which is farmer talk for, they cannot fix it themselves and it costs too much to get someone else to do it. Each day that goes by without chopping corn is a potential revenue loss. There is always one more piece of machinery that will transform a job that was once an endless task into one that takes "one farmer an afternoon," or "the crew about two days instead of two weeks." In the tours of the farms, I heard

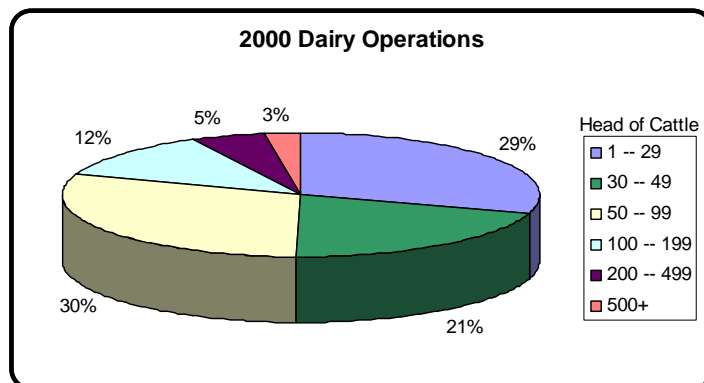
repeatedly about the efficiency miracles of new machinery, and how with the aid of the machine they could produce more milk or corn or hay in less time. Yet despite their enthusiasm, those I spoke with did not pioneer the field with their new machinery. Rather, the added efficiency was a defense measure, one that came when necessary, and if affordable, to keep them from falling too far behind those bigger farms who can take full advantage of the technological advances.

And, on the national and regional trajectory, farms, defined by their herd size, are getting larger. In 1940, dairy operations with 1-29 head of cattle made up 99.1% of the industry.



Graph by Christopher Gregg

In the year 2000, that group only consisted of 29.6% of all dairy operations. Instead of domination by farms with up to 29 cows in 2000, the numbers were more spread. Operations with 30-49 head made up 20.8% of the national industry, 50-99 head 29.8%, and 100-199 head 12.2%, indicating that the operations were getting larger. Finally, two new categories were created: 200-499 cows made up 5.1%, and 500+ head 2.5%. If trends persist this way, we will continue to see fewer but larger dairy farms.



Graph by Christopher Gregg

For example, in 1978 there were 131,946 farms with milk cows with a herd size between 10 and 49 cows; in 1997 that number was down to 40,833. Meanwhile, the number of farms in the 500+ region increased from 843 in 1978 to 2,257 in 1997 (Blayney, 11). These trends are mirrored on a regional level in Vermont, New York, and Massachusetts (Census of Agriculture, 1992 and 2000).

George Olefield (230 milking cows), the Chenails (80 milking cows), Eldridge's (230 milking cows), and John Malcolm (50 milking cows) have all expressed interest in getting more cows. Why? "Which regions and farmers will prosper" in the changing milk scene "will depend on who can produce milk at the lowest costs" (Holmberg, 1). In general, the larger farms can produce milk at the lowest costs, and the Northeast as a region does not have the growth potential that other regions have (Putnam, 2). Growth potential on a basic level is about places where the land is cheap and there is room to expand. The regional spectrum of milk production is changing as dairy farms outside of the traditional Northeast and Midwest areas, those in the nontraditional dairy areas of the West and Pacific regions, are becoming major milk producers. "Milk producers in the West had a significant cost advantage over producers in other regions in 2000 because their operations were much larger" (Short, 3). They have an average of 469 cows as compared with 100 cows in other regions (Short, 3). Those with 500 or more milk cows had significantly lower total operating and ownership costs, indicative of the economies of size experienced by larger operations...spread[ing] capital costs over more units of production" (Short 3). Those in the West can operate their facilities 8-15 more hours a day than in other regions of the country, and they use eight times fewer hours of labor per cwt (a unit used to measure milk) of milk sold. (Short, 5, 8).

The Northeast is disadvantaged by high farm real estate taxes, input costs, more expensive transportation costs to and from the farm (Foster), and in most cases a shorter growing season. Because most dairy farms now are only raw suppliers of milk, the farmer must wait to get his return on the product, unlike other cash crop commodities where the return is more immediate. This becomes problematic when a farmer must make investments in new barns, storage, or in the genetics of a bull—all advancements that have a lag time in returning money to the farmer (Holmberg, 19, 21). Holmberg explains that Massachusetts produces less milk than Vermont and New York because the latter can "provide larger percent of feed inputs" that they need because of less population density and more available, inexpensive land (Holmberg, 33). "The faster the advances made by the top operators in applying new technology and intensifying management, the greater will be the economic pressure on farms at the lower end of the profitability range to improve or discontinue" (Farm Credit, 105). These are sometimes the only two options small farmers, particularly in the Northeast, are faced with.

Here we have a situation where the farmers feel pressure to expand technology and/or herd numbers to "keep up" in a race in which they will always lag behind. Increased production per cow brings more milk to the market, driving the prices down. At the same time, the farmer has no choice but to keep up with these trends by investing greater capital to increase their own efficiency (Lee). As the statistics indicate, no matter how much they try, a farm in this region will always be at a disadvantage by the economies of scale and their regional limitations. This is yet another side of the paradox, where the farmers' deep relationship to being farmers makes reconciling with these trends a daunting task. The farmers understand the need to change their circumstances in order to compete, but getting larger is often not economically or socially unfeasible as larger herd size and more complicated machinery become more for the family members to manage. They want to keep their

operation going, the family on the farm, and the land that they know well, yet the national dairy industry poses a threat to this way of life. As farmers feel threatened, they are more likely to refer to the ideal image, to how they wish things were or how they think they used to be.

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Some version of the ideal runs strong in most farmers because believing in it provides a hope for the future. It is like an ideology that allows farmers to embody, in their own minds and in the public view, the legendary life of the farmer that is increasingly difficult to fulfill today. In agricultural circles, I have often been told that farmers and ranchers are the most optimistic people in the world. One season there is too much rain, the next too little. Another season hail ruins the crop, and the prices drop. Yet with the passing of each season, the farmer will look at the sky and say, “next year.” There is always hope that if the farmer plants a little earlier or changes the feed to get a little more milk from his cows, then things will work out better.

The Eldridge family in Gatesville is a fifth generation farm that embodies the image of the traditional farm family. Yet even they cannot escape the uncertainty the many sides of the paradox bring. Patriarch Henry Eldridge takes his family’s connection to the landscape a step further than the other farmers. People who make money are a different breed, Henry explains in reference to new Gatesville farmer Michael Bonsey who plans to start a milking business in the spring to produce specialty cheese. Bonsey, and those like him who did not grow up on farms but made money some other way and came to farming later in life, may have the money to get all of the right equipment, but they don’t know a damn thing about farming, in Henry’s opinion. Henry and his family, on the other hand, are expert farmers. According to Henry’s definition, all the Eldridges are prime for farming because they have indeed been bred into the business. Thus, it is not only a connection to the land and strong identity that make people farmers; it is a gift they have received as a birthright.

Indeed, the Eldridges are *The* farming family in Gatesville. Countless times I have been asked for a description of my thesis, and again and again the response to my dairy farming answer has been, “Have you talked to the Eldridges?” or “Oh, you *must* know the Eldridges” or “The Eldridges will tell you about farming.” So I’ve heard. The tradition of farming runs strong in the Eldridge household. Henry and Anne Eldridge have three sons. They all live within one mile of the farm. So do most of the grandchildren. And the great-grandchildren. The Eldridges are people of the land. Their trucks are muddy, their houses are modest, and all the roads on the property they laid down themselves. Driving and walking around their land, the place feels like a working farm. The barns are not picturesque up close, but are filled with working farm things: tractors, 4 wheelers, tools, and old parts to all of these. The family members have houses near each other. In the fall I smelled hay and packed corn silage. In the winter, mud and muck with the melting snow. The Eldridge farm is a place that is used.

The Eldridges encompass what people often think of when they picture a “farming family.” On a hayride the great-grandchildren of Henry bragged to us about

their horses, explaining how they took them out all over the land, and one of them was now old enough to ride on her own. The Eldridges are well established and respected in the community; they have kids in the school and occasionally write editorials in the town newspaper (Fall, 2005). In short, the Eldridges are community people, a town family that does construction, hays, and holds onto the tradition of dairy farming.

On a ride in Henry's truck, he stopped numerous times amongst the corn fields they were cutting that day to let me look at the view, to tell me about the view, to look at it himself and let it remind him of stories. "I always say this is the prettiest place in Gatesville. Show me a place that's prettier," he challenged. "You won't find one." I've seen far fewer views in the area than Henry, but I concur. The mountains ring the open space in a 360 degrees view that separates you from the landscape you came from below.



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On another ride in a Eldridge truck, this time in the back of the pickup on square bales of hay with three Eldridge great-grand kids, Steve Galusha, Henry's son, drove us to the same spot. "This is the prettiest view in Gatesville," he told us. We wouldn't find another more stunning. Two votes for the 360 view. These people love their land! On their unproductive farmland they created a pond, and then another to look at and to fish in. In between the ponds they built a cabin, a sort of retreat for family gatherings and a massive super bowl party that I heard plenty about. When I attended a cookout there after working an afternoon on the farm, I learned the sacredness of the cabin place. It is treated by the Eldridges with awe and respect. I felt privileged to be there. I would rate the view from it second best in town. In this way, the land for the Eldridge's does not serve one purpose, but is multifaceted—it is home place, a family place, and a business place. It grows crops and houses cows, and it is a place of sanctuary and recreation.



On this land, the Eldridges are together running a functional enterprise that has outlasted the rest. Why? “The reason I’m left is that I won’t sell. I would not sell anything valuable to our operation,” Henry Eldridge made clear to me in that same pickup truck looking at the 360 degrees view. “Would you sell that woodland?” I asked, pointing to part of the view he had just explained was not good farming land. “No, I wouldn’t.” I asked why; he waited a bit, staring at it, looked around and then started the old truck. “I don’t know; I just wouldn’t.” I was well aware that he did not feel comfortable with these prying questions. He talks about cows, not feelings. He then continued that we were sitting in the largest piece of open land left in Gatesville. “That’s why I keep it.” Pause. “Not good reasons to other people, but good reasons to me.” Here is a man whose love for the land runs deep. It is not in his nature to discuss it, so he won’t say more than he already did. Good reasons to me. The few words said enough.

It appears that the connection to the land permeates the entire family. Henry described that “money is what thins out small farms. Old age thins them out.” But the Eldridges have somehow kept an efficient and profitable enough farm. In his own words, Henry does not, “amount to a damn in terms of working on the farm” anymore because of his age and health. What he could have meant by “age” is that while he is growing old, the younger generation will continue the farming business. Otherwise, they most likely would have gone out. This answer, like his others, implies that the reason the Eldridge farm has outlasted the rest is vested in the Eldridge’s commitment to and feelings toward the land. The unusually high rate of family succession could be attributed to a system of family values in which working on the land and running the farm are an important part of who these people are. In a book aptly named, *Farming Is in Our Blood*, the author Paul Rosenblatt chronicles similar sentiments from Minnesota farming families who lost their land: “The working of the ground, the livestock, it is in you, and you will never get rid of that.” And, “I think farming will always be in our blood” (Rosenblatt, 1). In contrast, Mrs. Olefield was adamant from her introduction to me that she is not a farmer. She does not come from a farming family, she told me. Her husband is the one who is a farmer. He has done it all his life.

This other breed, as Henry labels them, those who do not have farming in their blood, are a threat to farm families like the Eldridges and Chenails because they offer something in their interaction with the landscape that these families cannot unless they sold their land: money. It is understandable that these families would feel some resentment towards Michael Bonsey who purchased old farmland, entering the Gatesville scene with a plan not just to milk, but also to create specialty cheeses—not exactly a workingman’s food. With such a product, he acknowledges a customer group who are also part of the “other breed.” For the traditional farmers, this group is risky because when they fall in love with the farm image, they have the purchasing power to buy land in rural areas. In addition, money allows this breed to afford the necessary technologies, taking away part of their North East regional disadvantage in a way farmers like the Eldridges cannot. For example, according the talk of the town, Bonsey has state-of-the-art equipment and facilities. Bonsey has not yet had his first season in the industry, but even the very idea of his enterprise simultaneously provides an example of what the traditional farmers could not afford, and a farm that might have found a niche market strong enough to make it profitable.

John Herring is another one of this species. He buys up farms or other open space as it becomes available in Gatesville. He has a passion for open space. I asked him what fuels it. "I like to look at it," he said. And there was a pause on the phone. "That's all." Who doesn't like to look at the image of farming? Of course, the "prettiest view in Gatesville" that can be seen from the Eldridge property is largely dependent on looking at the land John Herring owns. When he bought the land, developers were looking to put 3-400 houses on it, he says. Hundreds of houses that would have clouded the Eldridge's (and many others') view.

John Herring is an interesting case. He is head of a New York investment-banking firm, and his property in Gatesville is one of many homes he owns in beautiful places across the country. He arguably owns the most land of any single person in Gatesville. His house is in some ways a contrast to the Eldridge farm. It is groomed and cared for and, aside from Tommy Eldridge and his crew who are the caretakers of the property, the signs of human evidence are few and far between.

Herring is a symbol of those who migrate to places like Gatesville, one who might buy artisanal cheeses. He is willing to pay the high land prices, the demand side of the equation that allows for the prices to rise in the first place. In this sense, he is part of the problem that farmers face. He is a direct threat to the land that makes the Eldridges who they are. The family is under immense pressure to sell their picturesque land, to cash in and in doing so give up their lifestyle. Herring assumes dairy farms will "go under" in this area. "It's a loser," is how he described them. He explained that those who are organized, creative, and open to change will find a way to continue farming. Otherwise they're out because they are not economically viable in this area.

Conversely, the Eldridges are somewhat dependent on the land Herring leases to them for their operations. After buying land from several past and current farming families in town, Herring allows the farmers to continue farming on his land. The very breed that threatens the farmers also sanctifies the farms' existence. Although they approach it differently, both Herring and Bonsey like farms and open space. With their money, they provide ways to keep the land open, farmers in business, and the landscape picturesque. The result of their actions temporarily provides a solution to keeping the family farms alive. Thus, the paradox appears again. The relationship between these two caretakers of the land, the rich land owner and the traditional farmer, is one of interdependence. While the farmers intuitively and with reason feel uncomfortable with these newcomers who are different from themselves, the farmers cannot disregard their presence that, at least for the time being, helps them run their farms.

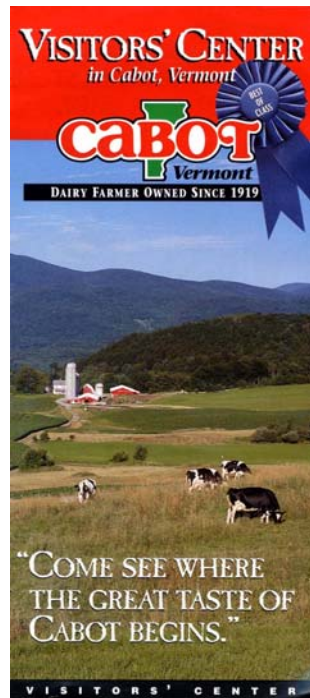
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Another way to observe the inconsistencies in the paradox through the identity of farmers and their unwavering connection to the land is to examine the topic of the future of farms. Intuitively, it seems as though the farmers would plan carefully to ensure the longevity of their land in agriculture. However, I have found quite the opposite.

Farmer John Malcolm is heavily invested in the image of farming. He is also devoted to the future of farms. He was recently elected to the Vermont state legislature and is now working on its agricultural committee. Living in Pawlet, Vermont, he has had to give up some of his own involvement in the dairy to serve the legislature in Montpelier, the state capitol. He also serves as a board member of the farmer owned co-op Cabot, a well-known brand of dairy products that are “Made in Vermont.” The co-op helps to create a farming community where the farms are working together rather than competing, and provides a place for the smaller farmers to sell their product, Malcolm explains. John Malcolm’s farm appears on the “Extra Sharp” Cabot Cheese package and the cover of the Cabot Cheese Visitor’s Center Brochure.



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Despite these deep commitments, Malcolm does not yet have a plan for his own land. He has no immediate successors. Younger than many of the farmers I visited, he is still waiting it out. “Planning for the future is not one of our strong points,” his lady confirmed for me. I wonder who will dictate the fate of the land if something happens to him.

Malcolm’s land and barns were the neatest and cleanest of all those I visited. His milking parlor was immaculate.



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Ideology is a big factor in the way Malcolm runs his farm. He allows the cows he milks to graze (something none of the other farmers I interviewed do) because he thinks that it is better for them. He is careful to treat the manure of his cows in the “proper way.” His farm is, in short, idyllic in many ways. The tractors are clean; the smells in the barn are minimal. The property is set on a beautiful hillside that any farmer would know was less than ideal agricultural land and anyone like me would think fits the farming image perfectly.

But still no plan. Malcolm is the one who introduced me to the word “paradox” as a way of relating the many contradictions I found on these farms. Yet he seems caught in one of his own: he who is without doubt dedicated to ensuring future sustainability of agriculture is not sure what to do with his own land.

I have an image in my mind that these farmers are running with a blindfold on. The future is uncertain; they do not know where they are headed, and many, especially those who are older, cannot see anything else. They go forward as farmers, plunging into a world at full speed, hoping that they will not hit anything too hard. The blindfold is a protection measure, as backward as it might seem, to keep farmers, particularly the older ones, from asking tough and painful questions about the future or facing the disheartening realities of dairy farming in this region. What will happen to the land they love?

The personal nature of this question keeps many farmers from planning the succession of their land, planning to keep it as open space, as they say they want it, as well as sharing their stories with me. Henry Eldridge was taken aback when I asked him what he planned to do with the land. He said his sons would take care of it, of course. When I asked if they felt the same way he did about keeping the land open, he did not know what to say, pausing for a long while and finally replying that he thought they did, but maybe not to the extent that he does. Win Chenail also says that it is really up to his boys. When asked, he did not know what their plans were. This was a topic he was eager to move on from. Neil Olefield and his wife hope to keep the open space as long as they can, she said. When I asked if they had thought of conservation easements or land trusts, she said no, they were planning to split it among their eight children. I wonder how long eight parcels of land will remain open space.

Planning for the future involves facing the reality that there are often not many options for a family with a farm whose financial success is far from guaranteed. Conventional options become selling the land or using conservation easements or land trusts to ensure development restrictions in the future. Both options are largely unattractive to the farmers I visited. The farmers want their land, not the money they would get from selling it. Furthermore, land with development restrictions takes away part of the farmers' autonomy to self-govern their land. With no real solutions about what to do with a farm that does not provide a predictable income, planning for a future that also appears to have no solutions is difficult and arouses painful realities. Consequently, it is not always done. While I received many personal stories in the farms I visited, the question of the future of the land was either not addressed or too personal to share, a sort of backhand indication of its importance.

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With an incomplete long-range plan for the future of the land and enterprise, the farmer often looks towards the more pressing circumstances of making the farm work, of bringing it closer to their image. Whether consciously or unconsciously affected by the landscape of U.S. milk production, farms take different tactics—becoming bigger, smaller, or diversifying—in coping with their regionally disadvantaged situation.

Most of the farmers I have observed want to get bigger. It is a solution that appears simple—fix up the old barn, buy a new piece of machinery, add a few more cows today, then some more tomorrow. While Henry Eldridge nostalgically thinks on the past with pride about how he milked the cows and then delivered milk by hand, he also idealistically plans for the future, about a farm with more cows that produce more milk—one with top of the line equipment. Aside from these noble thoughts, Henry reluctantly told me that they needed more money. Producing more was the way to do that. The Chenail brothers also represent many farmers when they talk about planning “to get a few more cows.” In an uncertain occupation, more cows and more land offer a promise of more money that provides an answer to the question of how to make the farm viable.

I am reminded of a country song with lyrics typical of that genre about a wife and her husband who dream of a better future, “He will, she knows/He’s gonna build a



dream, a little further down the road/Her faith, it shows.” With a music that often represents this agricultural culture, in the farmers we see a hope and a blind faith, like the woman in the song, that one day the dream will be built. There is something very American about the mindset depicted in this song and found in the farmers—the idea of a dream to chase with the promise that it will come true if one works hard enough. The paradox in this mindset is, of course, that the farmers will keep chasing this dream to get bigger without ever reaching it because the family farms in this area can never be as large as mega-farms. They face different constraints based in the region and the more intimate nature of the family farms.

Even more than the others, George Olefield is on a mission to expand his enterprise. He told me that the name of the game is to “get more efficient,” which means increasing production per cow. Growing in other words, while keeping the herd numbers the same in an attempt to mimic the profits of the larger farms. He described their farm as being up with the times but not up with the facilities. He would have to get rid of his standstill barn and upgrade the tractors. His outlook was positive. He told me they were “trying to push the pencil and figure.” And he was, at least in appearance, confident he and his family could get the job done.

There was a rush in George’s voice and the manner in which he spoke, which could be because he needed to get more corn cut before the rain set in. Yet, the way he spoke and what he spoke of went together. There is not much time for thinking in an industry of great challenge, but one must tuck his head and keep working hard. Running with a blindfold on, afraid of looking too closely for fear of what a prudent analysis of numbers might say, afraid to look at the future of their farms because the answers are unclear, and in many cases, heart-wrenching. These are lines of behavior that in some ways remind me of the emergency situations I have observed from working on an ambulance. There is only time for quick thinking, for response to the immediate situation, and this outlook can be harmful to the farmers in a long-term enterprise. It’s been my life, George says, and I will keep going as long as it produces.

On the other side of the Olefield compound, Neil and Mrs. Olefield are taking a different tactic. They think George is crazy. “I don’t know *what* he is thinking,” Mrs. Olefield said. As far as they could tell, his books don’t add up. She rolled her eyes. She spoke curtly. She was unwilling to say much more. The difference in this fundamental vision of the future explains a large part of the decision to split the farm. Mrs. Olefield explained that she and Neil’s vision for the farm is to keep the number of cows smaller to know how the animals are doing, AND enjoy it, she added. Their solution to the problem of profitability and the overwhelming demands of their work is to get smaller. Reduction is the answer to becoming more economically sound. Smaller, personalized attention, enjoyment—these words sound to me like an impetus to go organic.<sup>2</sup> Organic might be Mrs. Olefield’s ideal, yet she, a self-declared pessimist, doubts they could pull it off. She explains that her husband does not pay enough attention to detail and he could never follow through with the regulations that going organic would require. Like many farmers’ stories, when it comes to farming, it is his heart that is in it, that sometimes makes poor decisions because of his love for the animals and the farming way of life. While they do not plan to convert to organic

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<sup>2</sup> Definition of organic: of, pertaining to, or involving animals, produce, etc., raised or grown without synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, or drugs. (Webster’s).

at any point in the near future, it is an ideal, similar to the ideal of getting larger, because it represents an avenue where money can and is being made.

The organic dairy industry began as a small niche market and has increased with popular demand. Though the price of organic milk products remains much higher than conventional dairy products, the consumer demand for these goods is rising as Americans become progressively more concerned with where their food comes from and how it is produced. In July 2003, Time Magazine featured an article that why more and more farmers are choosing to go organic; “organic farming used to be about saving the earth. Now it’s about saving the family business—one farm at a time” (Time). The article describes “family farmers, whose herds average around 100 cows, suffer most when conventional-milk prices are low; they lack the economies of scale of the large factory-style producers, but organic farming levels the playing field, because certain land-use requirements can be more difficult-or even logistically impossible-for larger farms to meet.” Getting to the playing field, however, is a different story. While these numbers may sound promising, like everything in the dairy world, the payoffs are down the road. Conversion to organic often takes several years as the farmers must wait until their fields are certified chemical free. Forbidden use of antibiotics and other medicines means more sick cows, and the inability to use pesticides or other chemical fertilizers result in more labor and time intensive processes. In addition, cows produce less milk without growth hormones (Time). Despite these challenges, some are making the switch and, at least for the time being, it is curing financial hardships.

Win Chenail’s projection of the dairy industry echoes the organic success stories. He thinks that we will see small farmers with niches in vegetables and other organic foods. Of course it will be labor intensive, he added, but subsistence type farms are how farms originated. So, in that sense, it seems that Win foresees a movement that draws on traditions of the past in order to maintain the tradition at all in this region.

John Malcolm believes in a lot of what the organic industry stood for, in taking care of the land and the animals, and running an operation that is held to certain high standards. He is a recipient of the 1990 Vermont Dairy Farmer Award. But, he gets frustrated with the organic culture that seems like a “born again” cult, he explains. He doesn’t like people to tell him that he’s treating his cows poorly. Not giving cows medicine when they are sick is mal treatment of cows to him! He shares a concern with George Olefield that organic farms could also start to get big and then the price of the organic milk would soon fall. While Malcolm, at least on the surface, might stay away from organic farming for ethical reasons, others do for practical ones. Henry Eldridge explained that organic would be great because you make a lot of money, but who wants to deal with all of those rules? Henry laughed, “I don’t like people telling me what to do,” he said. These words indicate another roadblock to the organic industry: its image. Organic people are more “in touch with nature,” they spend their time weeding instead of on tractors, in short, they are “touchy feely” and “less manly” than the farmers. Farming characters like Henry Eldridge see organic as a something that is not for them. While for some, the organic niche market is just what they are looking for, for others such a story brings regulations inconceivable for financial, practical, social and familial reasons. In this area, neither Hank Art nor I

have come across a farmer who went organic and regretted it, although the organic farmers are often younger than most of the farmers I interviewed. The farmers seem to love their new organic lifestyle, or to fear the operational and lifestyle transition going organic would provoke.

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If getting larger or becoming organic are not practical or realistic options for the farmers, those farms that are alive today but do not fall into one of those two categories must be doing something else to keep afloat. Indeed they are. Without exception, those I have observed have diversified either their product or their job as a way of coping with the economic stress. The Eldridges have bed and breakfasts, one run by Henry and Anne and the other by their son Steve and his wife Dorothy. The Chenail family has a farmstand outside of their house where customers are trusted to leave money in a cash box. John Malcolm's lady works off the farm providing the steady income for the family. Mrs. Olefield owns apartments in another town that she fixes up and rents, an industry that is much more profitable than farming she says. From what I gathered, that income supports the farming business. Other farms such as Ioka Valley in Hancock, Massachusetts cater to tourism as a way of making money, setting up mom and pop farm stands with fresh vegetables and fruits, pick-your-own seasonal fruit or vegetable, hay rides—they have taken to selling their lifestyle.

Perhaps the most extreme version of coping I found was the Foster Brothers Farm in Middlebury, Vermont. They are the largest farm I visited, milking around 300 cows. Yet the Foster Brothers Farm is unusual for farms in their area: they have not increased their herd size over the past ten to twelve years. Instead, they expanded other areas of the farm. In 1982, the Foster Brothers were one of the few farms in the country to get an anaerobic digester that has allowed them to essentially recycle the waste from their cows by converting the methane in it into a source of power. Today they are essentially producing all of their own power. In addition, they have diversified, using the waste from their digester, their manure, for a product line they call "MOO DOO." They advertise themselves as, "producers and suppliers of superior quality bagged and bulk compost, growing media, and soil mixes throughout the Northeastern U.S." The name of their company is Vermont Natural Ag Products, Inc. and they use the description "made in Vermont" to market their products.

xxvii

Bob Foster expressed his desire to sell their increasingly further away if the correct transportation was available, as a way of increasing



revenue for their farm. I have heard from several farmers that the Vermont name sells because the products are connected with the farming image and construed as being more “authentic” and “down-to-earth” than those made elsewhere. The major limiting factor currently is how many trucks they can run a day, a subject of contention in their area of Middlebury. More trucks mean mounting noise, traffic, and exhaust, three things that do not foster the ideal farm that people come to Vermont to see.

Yet even these efforts to become increasingly sustainable through diversification do not always succeed in creating a financially viable alternative. The familiar sounds of economic hardship ring true on the Foster Brothers farm as well. In an effort to run their sustainable dairy, the family feels pressure to grow to continue to make ends meet. Several years ago, Bob Foster and his wife mortgaged their house to buy a new piece of equipment that bags their DOO. Shortly after, the prices of milk dropped. Keeping the farm in business was an accomplishment. The sustainable farm, one that has diversified on both philosophical and economical principles, might not actually be sustainable.

While my first impression of Bob was that he was an apt and well-conditioned tour guide with practiced answers to our common questions, by the end of the tour, his demeanor slowed down as he showed us the machinery that was worth his house. His eyes softened; he looked tired. He spoke of years in a row when the entire farm came out in debt. Looking at the four of us college students, he asked what we wanted to do with our lives, as if trying to protect us in some way from choosing a life of financial uncertainty. “I wouldn’t wish these kinds of problems on anybody,” he repeated several times through my two hours there.

The idea of sustainability is in many ways an ideal for agriculture—a cycle of resources renewing other resources. Yet, even if a farm like the Foster Brothers that combines the goals of running a dairy, producing electricity, and manufacturing manure and soil for sale, were financially solvent, they would not project the farming image that many seek. Because of the diversity of their product line and the size of their herd, the Foster Brothers Farm is in many ways more of a business than the other farms I visited. They have more large machinery and trucks traveling to and from their farm. Their farm is louder. As they advertise, “We DOO MOO,” the odors on their farm are strong, infecting your clothes long after you leave. In contrast to this image of an organic farm:



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Scenes from the Foster Brothers Farm look more like this:



xxix

It is not completely fair to compare these two images, for one is an organic vegetable farm, part of a network of farms called CSA, Community Sponsored Agriculture, where community members help farm. In many ways, their mission is to sell the image of a farm. In contrast, the other images are from a fifth generation working dairy farm, which ships their products and sell the image from afar. This is exactly the point. Which farm would the classic farm image lover rather drive by? They both promote values of hard work, community, and family, only one image is farm more pleasing than the other. In fact, for these same reasons of ease and image, while dairy farms in Massachusetts are declining, vegetable farms like Caretaker Farm are increasing (Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources).

The economics of the dairy industry reflect some of the beautiful fundamentals of work on the landscape. They are harsh, unpredictable and ever changing. In line

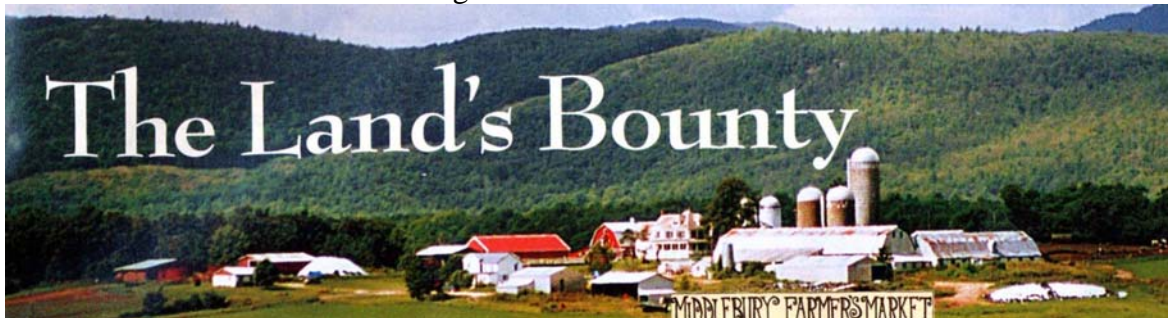


with the wrestle against and with the land, these farmers fight and work with the economics, trying to make some sense and make a living. At the same time, the larger and larger farms bring the industry away from the American agricultural ideal. Again the paradox surfaces. If farming is about a way of life that is tied to the land and about the people who work that land and the values associated with the interaction of the two, then do large farms where the cows do not go outside, where they are fed concentrated food from across the country propagate those values? The answer to that question, from what I have seen, is that they do not, at least not in the way that the traditional family farm does. These farms are about efficiency and maximum production, about producing a product for the distant customers. Unfortunately, those values often contradict the idea of the family farm, making it hard to run a business that competes with those who put the business first.

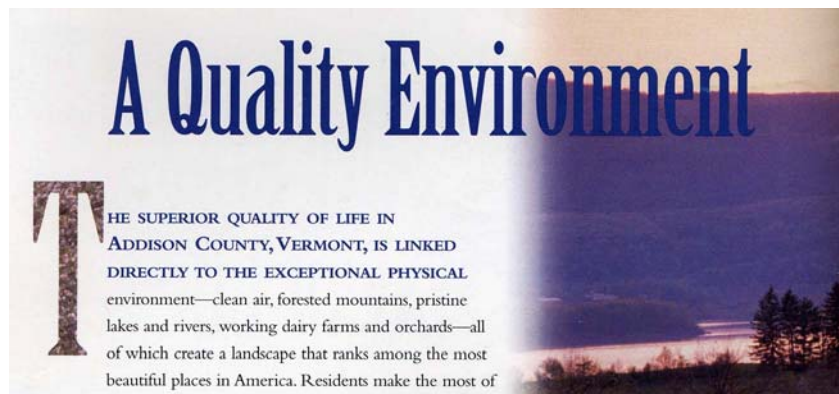
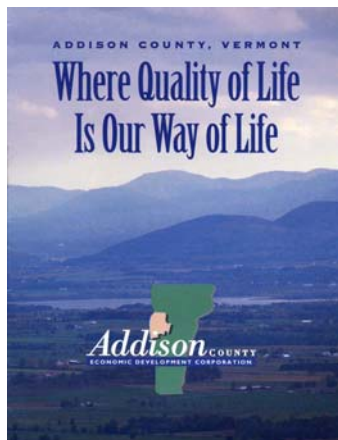
The farmers are faced with another inconsistency. The consolidation and growth of some farms, reflected in the loss of farms and farmland, the increase in milk production, and the larger farm size is the nature of the dairy industry today, and reflects one need of our society to make cheap and plentiful food for many. Yet, these trends that continue to remove the production of food further away from the traditional and family farmers threaten another aspect of our society that we also need: the image and idea of the farm.

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The conflict between our romantic ideals of farms and the paradoxes that emerge is not limited to the encountered visual images and the associations people bring to them. The images of the farm and farm life are often accompanied by words that direct the viewer in his thinking.



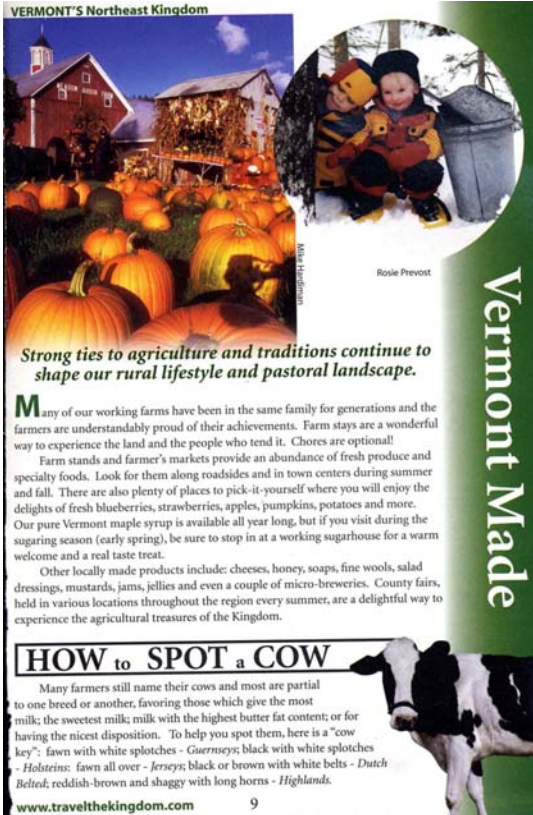
“The Land’s Bounty,”<sup>xxx</sup> “From Tourist to Townsperson,”<sup>xxxi</sup> and “A Quality Environment,”<sup>xxxii</sup> all use farm images and concepts to lure people to the area. These statements advertise a sense of place, the notion of being grounded in the area that stems from the farmers. “From Tourist to Townsperson” describes, “The many qualities that make the Berkshires a great place to visit also make the area a wonderful place to live.” To emphasize this point, the page exhibits a picture of a cross-country skier very small in comparison to the large red barn. Although farms are never mentioned in this advertisement, the goods and services provided by the agricultural landscape are implied.



“A Quality Environment” markets that “the superior quality of life in Addison County, Vermont, is linked directly to the exceptional physical environment—clean air, forested mountains, pristine lakes and rivers, working dairy farms and orchards.” The front of the brochure, put out by the Economic Development Corporation of Addison County, depicts a mountainous landscape dotted with green pastures and dairy farms.

Others leaflets use more explicit language, taking away the need of the viewer to interpret the image on his own. One full page in a Vermont guidebook uses the “Vermont Made” name, clearly explaining to the reader that “Strong ties to agriculture and traditions continue to shape our rural lifestyle and pastoral landscape.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> These

VERMONT'S Northeast Kingdom



**Strong ties to agriculture and traditions continue to shape our rural lifestyle and pastoral landscape.**

**M**any of our working farms have been in the same family for generations and the farmers are understandably proud of their achievements. Farm stays are a wonderful way to experience the land and the people who tend it. Chores are optional!

Farm stands and farmer's markets provide an abundance of fresh produce and specialty foods. Look for them along roadsides and in town centers during summer and fall. There are also plenty of places to pick-it-yourself where you will enjoy the delights of fresh blueberries, strawberries, apples, pumpkins, potatoes and more. Our pure Vermont maple syrup is available all year long, but if you visit during the sugaring season (early spring), be sure to stop in at a working sugarhouse for a warm welcome and a real taste treat.

Other locally made products include: cheeses, honey, soaps, fine wools, salad dressings, mustards, jams, jellies and even a couple of micro-breweries. County fairs, held in various locations throughout the region every summer, are a delightful way to experience the agricultural treasures of the Kingdom.

**HOW to SPOT a COW**

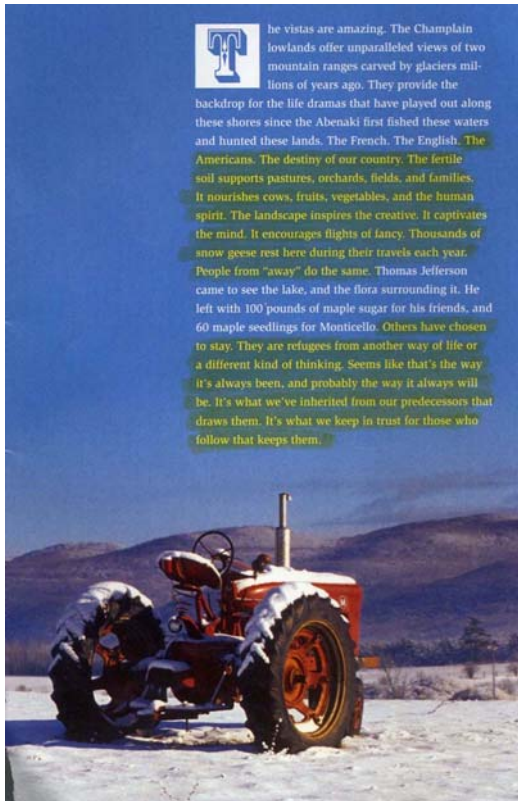
Many farmers still name their cows and most are partial to one breed or another, favoring those which give the most milk; the sweetest milk; milk with the highest butter fat content; or for having the nicest disposition. To help you spot them, here is a "cow key": fawn with white splotches - *Guernseys*; black with white splotches - *Holsteins*; fawn all over - *Jerseys*; black or brown with white belts - *Dutch Belted*; reddish-brown and shaggy with long horns - *Highlands*.

www.travelthekingdom.com 9

**Vermont Made**

statements are concise, leaving the reader no question about the role of agriculture in the area. The leaflet continues to promote the agricultural way of life in smaller text, "Many of our working farms have been in the same family for generations and the farmers are understandably proud of their achievements." All of this is true, but like the image above the description, these words omit the difficulties and day-to-day work of these farmers who have managed to stay in business over generations. Instead, it continues to romanticize the lifestyle, "Farm stays are a wonderful way to experience the land and the people who tend it. Chores are optional!" Again the paradox emerges. Farm stays can allow farming families to earn extra income as well as educate the public about their farm, but this brochure implies that they can only do so on a level where the romantic notion can still exist and no hard work, at least from the visitors, is involved.





Promoting the heritage of the region to tourists, this next brochure shows the image of a rusty tractor made pretty when dusted with snow. The tractor is portrayed as an art object placed in its natural setting—there is nothing around it but the mountains and snow covered fields. What is written above the tractor in the sky of the picture explains that this scene represents the heritage of America, where conquering the landscape was the “the destiny of our country.” The text continues, “The fertile soil supports pastures, orchards, fields, and families. It nourishes cows, fruits, vegetables, and the human spirit. The landscape inspires the creative. It captivates the mind. It encourages flights of fancy. Thousands of snow geese rest here during their travels each year. People from “away” do the same. Thomas Jefferson came to see the lake, and the flora surrounding it. He left with 100 pounds of maple sugar for his friends, and 60 maple seedlings for Monticello. Others have chosen to stay. They are refugees from another way of life or a different kind of thinking. Seems like that’s the way it’s always been, and probably the way it always will be. It’s what we’ve inherited from our predecessors that draws them. It’s what we keep in trust for those who follow that keeps them.”

the landscape, “It encourages flights of fancy. Thousands of snow geese rest here during their travels each year. People from ‘away’ do the same.” A few lines down, the text presents another option for the reader, “Others have chosen to stay. They are refugees from another way of life or a different kind of thinking.” The reader is taught not only about the connection of agriculture to the landscape, but what the landscape can inspire in people and how the reader himself can become a part of this history, this other way of life, by visiting or staying. The passage concludes, “Seems like that’s the way it’s always been, and probably the way it always will be. It’s what we’ve inherited from our predecessors that draws them. It’s what we keep in trust for those who follow that keeps them.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Yet the region and the farmers specifically can no longer guarantee that this ideal image the brochure promotes will continue.

While this type of analysis focuses on details to a level most of the viewers and readers of the brochures will not, they are nonetheless influenced by the images and text that appear repeatedly throughout the region. It is clear that the advertising of farms and rural life is not limited to the dairy industry, but extends to the rural character of which the dairy industry is a part. However, the red barns often accompanied by silver silos frequently indicate a dairy farm. These images are not only used to promote the region itself, but also to promote products and services.



On the surface, the bank above has little to do with farms, yet it uses the image to emphasize its name, *Community National Bank*, and its claim that it is an integral part of Vermont, “Serving Vermont since 1851.”

In other examples, farms and golf courses are shown together. Despite their similarities in providing open vistas, in many ways, a golf course could be seen as an antithesis to farming. Farmers work the land to produce food, while golfers use the land for recreational purposes. Despite this essential difference, the image of the red barn, the silver silo or the country roads are employed to promote golfing.

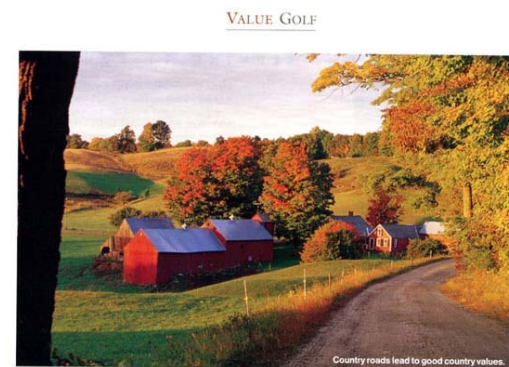


In this first image, a farm appears right off the golf course, a location that intuitively does not make sense.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The groomed and manicured golf course starkly contrasts with the reality of a working farm. Regardless, the farm in this ad is used to imbue a set of values, a purity or simplicity that is often associated with family farms, onto the game of golf.

In a second image, a farm situated off a country road with no golf course present is used at the start of an

article about affordable golf courses in Vermont. The golf course labels itself “a blue collar club,” proudly explaining that “local people did the work” on the course. A small phrase at the bottom of the photograph explains what they are getting at by using the image of the farm to conjure their own image as an accessible golf course, “Country roads lead to good country values.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Finally, the Vermont Department of Employment & Training encourages outsiders to move their business to Vermont. What is on the front of their brochure? You got it: a red barn, green field, and mountains in the background of a blue sky. I don’t think farms are the type of business they are



## Regal and Reasonable

BY WILLIAM NOBLE

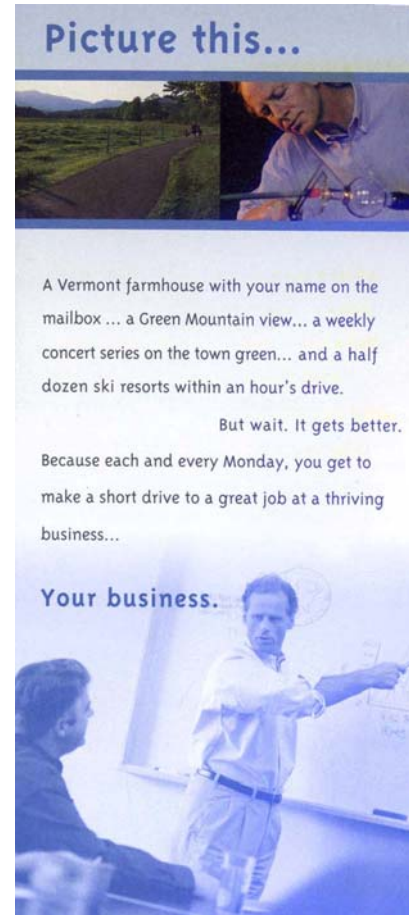
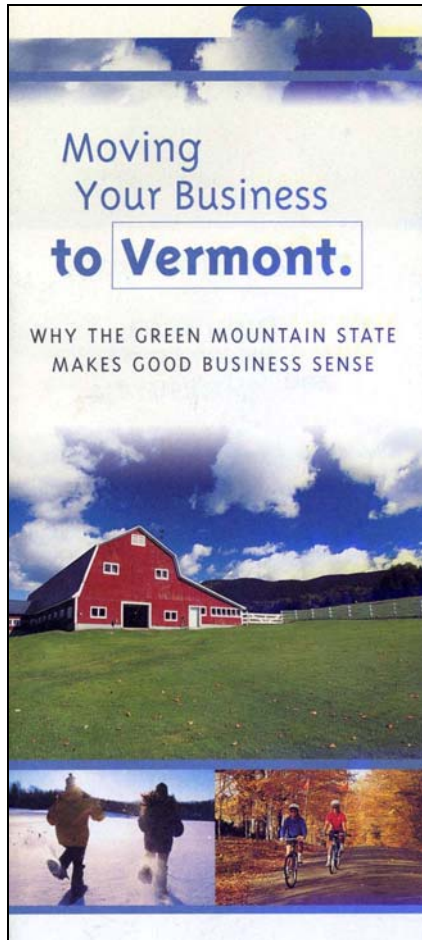


THESE TWO VERMONT COURSES PROVE THAT YOU CAN SPEND A GREAT TIME ON THE COURSE WITHOUT SPENDING A LOT OF MONEY

**Proctor-Pittsford Country Club:** In this day, when daily-fee golf courses spring up promising “member for a day” treatment, “championship” golf and exacting hefty fees, it’s refreshing to find a place where the golf is simple and reasonably priced yet still challenging. A few miles north of Rutland is such a place: The Proctor-Pittsford CC. It’s plain vanilla, no frills, no “specials,” no golf packages. ■ “We’ve always been a blue collar club,” says club manager John Ojala. It was founded by Mortimer Proctor, owner of nearby Vermont Marble Company, and he created it for his workers in 1927. Originally 9 holes, the course was expanded to 18 in the late 1980s, but you won’t find an upscale architect’s stamp on the design. Local people did the work. A



targeting. Opening the brochure, the reader is asked to “Picture this...A Vermont farmhouse with your name on the mailbox...” although the jobs they describe, “rang[ing] from high-tech leaders to sole proprietors to CEOs of every major international manufacturers,” have little to do with farms. The advertisement, then, assumes not that the business people are farmers, but that a Vermont farmhouse with “...a Green Mountain view...” is an ideal even for those who do not work the land.



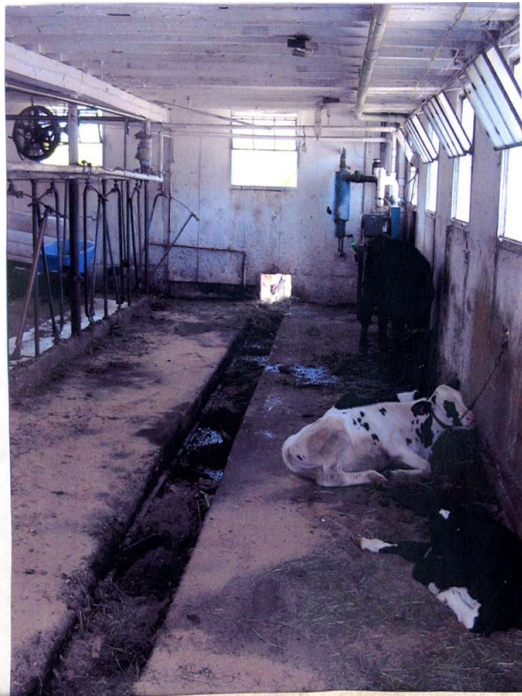
xxxviii

With the texts, we see what we are asked to see, that the farms are imbedded in the landscape, and are part of the tradition and people in the area. We come to understand that if we were to go “there,” we too would become part of the scene. A scene that the images tell us is pleasant, idyllic, and grounded. We accept what is advertised to us not only because we see the images, but also because the words ensure we look upon the images in the way they were intended.

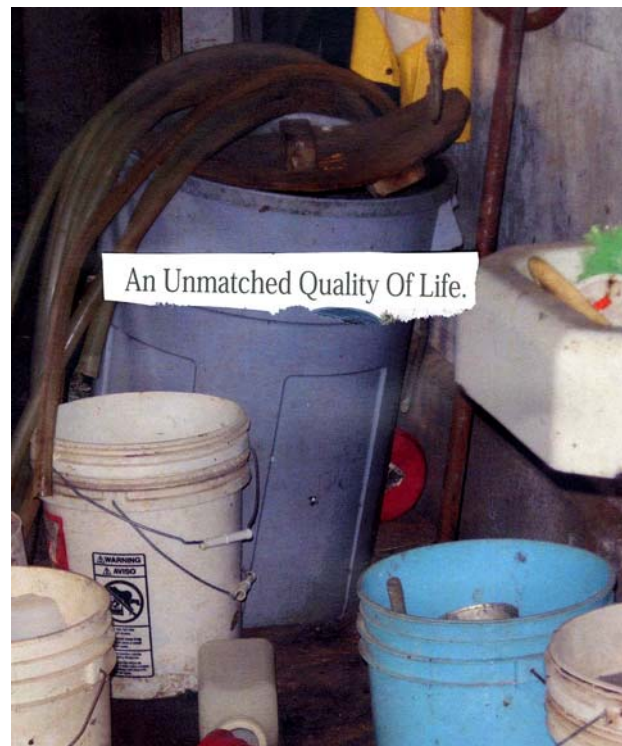
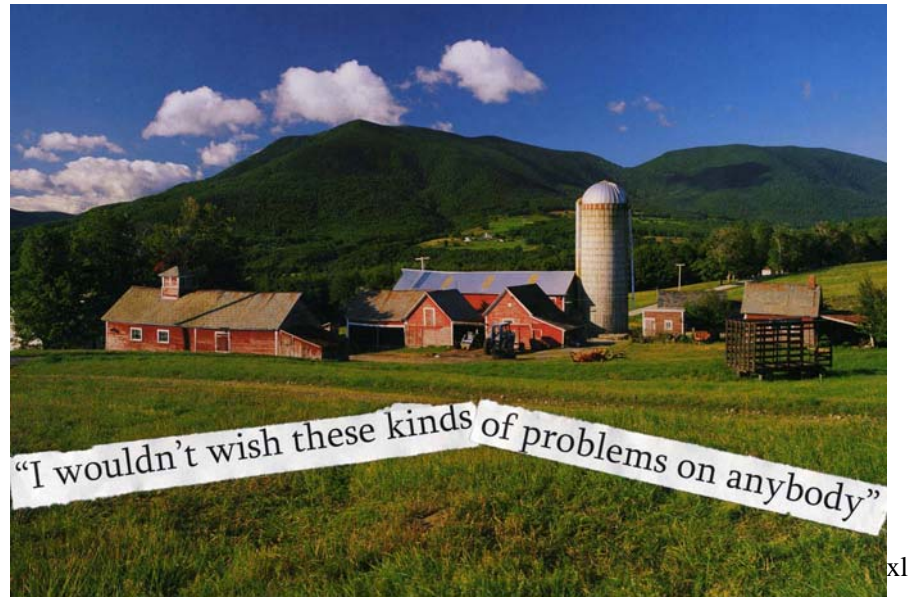
And so, as tourists, visitors, townspeople or farmers, we see the images of the landscape—red barns, fields furrowed with planted vegetables, silos, white modest sized farm houses with porches, and pumpkins, apples, snow, bright flowers, or rolling green hills depending on the season. What we do not see is family debt, borrowed money, mortgaged houses...the farmers are, as we perceive them, a presence on the land. We see them on their tractors; we see the lights in the cow barns early in the morning and late at night. We notice their presence in the community because the general store carries products that say, “locally grown” and the state numbered high

ways that run through rural Vermont, New York, and Massachusetts are littered with signs announcing the sale of farm goods a little further up the road, and because we cannot help but notice a stretch of cleared land in a place of forest growth. Perhaps we notice this and fail to notice that the reason they are present is that the farmers have no vacation. They have no days off. They can be seen buying coffee each morning at the local store or gas station because they go to work each and every morning of the year. They are perceived as steady, hard workers because their work is constant. A farmer cannot afford a day off because the cows must be milked.

In light of these inconsistencies, I have put together some of my own images to more accurately represent the two conflicting sides of farming in this area, the ideal and the realistic. Superimposing the familiar text onto “working farm” images, or actual words onto an ideal image, puts the traditional image of the farm in an entirely different light.



I'M HOME HERE.  
IN FACT, PART OF ME NEVER LEAVES. xxxix



I prefer these doctored images because they start to show both sides of the complicated story of farms and farm families in the Northern Berkshire area. Like any artist, my motivation in creating them is to make a statement. If these photographs were the prevalent ones, then the image of farming would not be romanticized in the way it is now. Rather than simple, it would look difficult, and instead of picturesque, dirty. These images with their disassociated text illustrate the contradictions in how

we see farms and the realities the farmers face. Consequently, the omissions of these farm realities from the typical photographs and texts shape our impressions and understanding of farm life.

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People travel from all over the world to tour the New England foliage, to look, not only at its leaves, but also at its open space, its character, its farms. Neil Olefield put it bluntly, “It’s not just the leaves that tourists come to see. They wouldn’t come if it were all trees. They want the open space.” I too want their image—I want to look out my window and see silos and I want to pick my own pumpkins. After a semester of studying farm life, I am still mesmerized by the ideal image. Why? Because like many others I see the image of farms, however misleading I know it is, as a respite from a fast-paced life. I am drawn to people who are grounded, whose work is physical, who get to be outside, and who understand the landscape better than anyone else in the area.

However, it is no longer as to work the landscape for a living as it was less than a hundred years ago. Only 2% of the population in the United States today is classified as farmers (Seitz, 15), 2% who experience the difference between the image and the reality. About these farmers, it is important to know that they do not just use the land in a good or bad, sustainable or unsustainable way, and then go home at night. Farming, and dairy farming in particular, is a way of life that pervades the very being of the people who do it. They are up late at night and early in the morning—sometimes all night with sick or calving cows. There is no separation between life and the work. These people are not independent from their landscape. Their relationships to family members who are involved in farming cannot be detached from the business. It’s an all-in-one deal, a scale that is difficult to balance. What is more, dairy farming has often been passed down as a tradition, a lifestyle that carries strong emotional weight. The state of the farm then is dependent on the state of the people, land, and business, so that looking at any one of these elements will tell about the others.

But, many individuals are more excited about what the farms stand for than the farms themselves. They call the farms with dates for their dinner parties and ask the farmers not to spread their manure then, as Henry Eldridge reported. They want you to spread your manure at this time, and not use your loud machinery at another, according to John Malcolm. He explains that what non-farmers who move to the area sometimes don’t understand is that farming is not all about the aesthetics. It is dependent on the weather—the temperature, the rains. Its success is often determined by the market, not the farmer’s will. Dairy farming involves cows, and cows produce manure that smells. Staying in the farming business takes an increased amount of machinery and machinery makes noise. According to Henry Eldridge, some non-farmers or those with second homes, get upset when there is no longer a farmer to cut the hay from their one or two acre field. There are fewer and fewer farms, and consequently fewer and fewer people with farming skills who have the machinery to get the job done.

This phenomenon, according to John Malcolm, is one that extends beyond the farm to the entire rural image in general. People move in; they want the country life.



But they also want their FedEx truck to deliver things that they cannot find in the general store. And they want school buses for their children. Then they complain about increased traffic. Country living is not about making a suburb out of these places to match the ones you left, Malcolm said. It is about living differently; it's about taking on the character of the region and living it. Non-farmers want farms, but not everything that comes along with them, and farmers want farms, but not the economic hardship, the endless day of hard work (Malcolm, Oct 2004). The great paradox is that there is an image of farming in the Northeast, and there is the reality of farming; it seems that by and large, the community wants the image, not the farm.

Farms are a symbol of what we often associate with "another world," with values not found elsewhere, with a break from materialism and consumerism. Ironically, the image that is advertised to us is one that is becoming increasingly unsustainable as more and more people who differ from farmers in some way—occupation, values, or income, move to the area. The very tourism that fuels the economy drives up the land prices, making farming even less economically viable. It is both harder to buy more land and there is more pressure to sell. Thus, farming is an ideal, something sought after and often held at a distance, much like the photographer's camera when they snap the conventional farm photos. The image of the farm is not attainable, not even by farmers. It is a myth. From this myth comes the paradox.

Thus, the sad story of many farm families is directly associated with the prevalent, quaint image of the New England dairy farm set in rolling hills. The price of losing the family farms in this region affects more than the individual farmers and those they know. It is not as simple as a changing landscape, strained identities and family relations, or the disappearance of a way of life, for these are all inevitable in our changing and globalized world. It is a combination of all of these things. What is lost is not just that which is physical or recognizable in the farmers, it is the sentiment and the idea of farms that is, through stories, advertising, and personal experience, embedded in the psyche of Americans. What is endangered is the notion that even if we are not living a life reliant on and close to the land, it is still there. We need these farms because they stand for something that many of us do not have in our daily lives: The outdoorsman, the hard worker who keeps to the task under any condition. The roughness of an occupation dictated by animals and the weather. The family chores that must be done. In short, the stories of previous generations, the stories we often associate with a past way of life because it no longer directly affects the growing urban, suburban, and ex-urban population in the United States, are an important part of the character of region and the country. The farmers, the tillers of the soil. We do not want them to disappear. Like the myth of the wilderness, these people and the land they keep open provide a comfort in the minds of the city-dwellers at night, that there is something else out there.

It is an ironic prestige, then, that these workers of the land hold over us, a job that is literally dirty and in many ways undesirable, yet replete with history and associations that captivate the psyche of many. They are a symbol of an ideal of the past, one perhaps that never actually was, but one that nonetheless represents a set of values our country often seems to lack. While in many ways the challenges of dairy



farms tell a painful and depressing story for the future of farms, their existence also stirs hope.

Farmers and the agricultural people in the U.S. are keepers of food and place. If they were to disappear, a sense of place would be lost, an attractive one of family enterprises grounded in values and the traditions of the region. It is not enough to look at the cropped views of images, videos, or statistics. There is a human character tied to the landscape, an appreciation of those who work it on a day to day basis that is irreplaceable—the immeasurable that is only found in the piecing together of the complicated history of human interaction with the land. The far away gaze of John Malcolm. The excitement in me as I pull the school car over again and again on Rt. 30 in Vermont to become the photographer taking the farm image. The farmhouse scene from my new calendar that hangs above my desk for January 2005. The farm boy, David Eldridge, who won't do his school work but draws pictures of tractors in class and reads a farm book in the library, and has a picture of him sitting proudly on his 4 wheeler on his 4<sup>th</sup> grade class bulletin board. And at home at the cabin on his family's land, he talks non-stop about what he can do, how he can fish and ride and hunt. In short, he knows and is confident in a place the kids in his class, some of whose parents moved to this rural area for the way of life, will never be.



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THE END

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## A Departing Thought



John Malcolm's pickup



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Note: All graphs are made by Christopher Gregg.

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