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The Times (on the Farm), They Have Changed!

BY VARICK A. CHITTENDEN

I've never been a farmer but have always been surrounded by them. Glen Parker, Herb Jones, Johnny Burgess, Curtis Benham, and my Uncle Lyndon Miller are long gone now, but my memories of them from the 1950s are still vivid. They kept small farms around my hometown in St. Lawrence County that produced enough to feed their families and bring in some cash for taxes and extras. I was reminded of them and their way of life when I participated in a very interesting project this past year.

For a program managed by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress (the Archie Green Fellowship), TAUNY (Traditional Arts in Upstate New York) was awarded a grant to document, with oral histories and photography, changes that have occurred in work on dairy farms in northern New York in the last few decades. Eventually, 13 farms from four counties participated. TAUNY folklorists recorded over 30 hours of interviews with farmers and their employees on farms ranging in size from 35 milkers to one with well over a thousand.

I worked with three families on farms of varying sizes. As fifth and sixth generations, Clark and Nancy Decker and their two sons operate their family farm in West Stockholm that dates back to 1849. They now milk about 150 cows and own about 700 acres. They also produce a significant amount of maple syrup each year. Kevin and Phyllis Acres of Madrid milk about 330 cows, own about 700 acres, and employ four men—two of them from Guatemala—on a farm they acquired from his father in 1982. Each is a modern farm. All of the owners are college graduates, most specializing in agriculture or related courses and continuously educating themselves about latest trends. They utilize up-to-date methods and equipment, with cost effectiveness and the market always on their minds.

The farms I remember of only 60 years ago were hardly like these. Typically, the farmstead included a small but substantial farmhouse, a “hip roof” barn with a silo and hayloft, several outbuildings for horses, pigs, chickens, a corn

crib, and machine sheds, and maybe 100 acres of meadows, pastures, a woodlot and, quite likely, a sugar bush. Many still used draft horses; some had small tractors and a few machines for mowing and raking hay or “thrashing” grain. What they knew about farming they learned from their fathers or from “ag” magazines and the Grange. A milk truck would come by a couple of times a week to haul away a few cans of milk to a local cheese or butter factory. Farm wives helped with milking or haying, kept a garden and chickens for meat and eggs, canned and pickled for the winter food supply, and “kept house” for the family. Some worked outside the home to supplement the family farm income.

Over the years, I confess I was not paying a lot of attention to changes on local farms. So, it was the third farm I visited, Adon Farms of Parishville—owned by brothers Andy and Tony Gilbert with help from their mother Adrienne and nephew Nick—that really opened my eyes to the most dramatic changes in dairy farming. Although there are several other larger dairies in the area, the Gilberts’ operation represents what is happening now in their industry. Adon is now a big business, with Andy and Tony, both Cornell graduates, overseeing anything related to the animals and to fields and crops, respectively. Here are some highlights from my conversations with the Gilberts:

- They operate one of only two dairy farms still left in their township today; they estimate there may have been at least 40 or 50 at one time.
- They milk about 1,200 cows daily, keep another 1,000 or so heifers and young stock; about 100 calves are born each month.
- They own or rent a total of about 3,000 acres of tillable land in four towns; that means about 40 former small family farms in a radius of more than 15 miles.
- They maintain several large, open, free stall barns, spread over several acres, with specialized uses for milkers, heifers, calving, etc.; no silos or haylofts, as they store feed in trenches.
- They plant 1,500 acres of corn and cut 3,000 acres of hay each year.

- They milk cows 24 hours a day in three shifts, shipping about 90,000 pounds of milk every day to cheese plants.
- They employ about 30 to 40 men and women; all are local, and the Gilberts train them on the job to develop skills needed for their operation. This is unusual, as most other large operations employ significant numbers of migrant workers.
- Cows are not put out to graze in pastures; they are kept indoors year round in a controlled climate.
- Specialists themselves, Andy and Tony also get services from contractors, most of whom are on the farm frequently: a veterinarian, nutritionist, artificial inseminators, a hoof trimmer, a genome tester, a manure management planner, and others.
- Six days a week, three tractor-trailers haul loads of liquid manure to be spread on distant fields as natural fertilizer for crops.
- Records are all computerized; information on each cow’s daily milk production, feeding, and health is constantly updated.
- Equipment is large, high tech, and expensive; a self-propelled feed mixer to feed all the animals individually daily and operated by one man arrived in 2013, costing \$390,000!

Change has come fast to all the farms we visited. All agreed that a good farmer today is a good manager, a survivor when others have given up or gone under. But whatever their size and their methods, they had certain things in common: while production and efficiency matter for survival, they do the hard, constant, and risky work because they love it more than anything else they can imagine doing. That hasn’t changed, and they don’t think it will. ▼

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