



Hanna Bail's husband and partner Hugh Williams and their children Emma, 2, and Christopher, 4.

Our Farm

HANNA BAIL AND HUGH WILLIAMS' THRESHOLD FARM. BY HUGH WILLIAMS.
PHOTOGRAPH BY SEDAT PAKAY.

May 10, 2005. Orchard in full glorious bloom.

May 11, 2005. Arctic air rolling in from Canada; hard freeze expected. Spray flower extract & stay up all night, tending fires.

May 12, 2005. Orchard temperature 27 degrees, one degree from total meltdown of years of work.

So why do you bother?

Why do you bother farming when you hoe 300 foot rows of carrots in a blazingly hot drought, and next morning the deer have dug up the whole bed?

Why do you bother farming when you come back from lunch and a woodchuck has eaten the hearts out of 400 lettuces for tomorrow's delivery?

Why does anyone bother to farm?

When you pull in 3,000 perfect butternuts in an afternoon, or you draw five gallons of creamy Ayrshire milk from Daphne, who eats nothing but grass, or just when you're getting anxious about pollination, and a bumblebee lands his big hairy tummy fair and square on a ready blossom, then it becomes very clear. Farming is a holy deal struck by man with God.

I think that's especially true of our kind of farming. My wife Hanna and I are those weird "new" farmers, who are actually a lot like the farmers of old.

A hundred years ago, precious little was bought in and whatever was called a necessary input was viewed with extreme skepticism. Fertility came not from a bag, but from a carefully nurtured humus fraction and from animal husbandry.

Howard Hendrickson was one of those farmers. I met him on Long Island in 1974, when I had a new baby and I heard a rumor that he sold raw milk. "Not pasteurized," he said. "You'll be dead by morning." Then, opening an ancient but immaculate refrigerator, he showed me the rows of bottled Guernsey milk with inches of cream on top.

Howard was 84 at the time. He had moved from Brooklyn to Bridgehampton in 1916 for his own survival. He had just been diagnosed with tuberculosis and the move to farming healed him. There he was, nearly six decades later, a walking legend, immaculate in khakis, red braces, gold-rimmed spectacles and a wicked sense of humor.

Long Island may have saved Howard in 1916, but by 1991, it was killing me. I moved from Bridgehampton to Claverack for *my* survival—physical, emotional and spiritual.

Here I met another living legend—Tjark Reiss, the 84-year-old son of the painter, Winold Reiss. Winold had bought the old Jones place on Roxbury Road in 1938. Insisting on a truly secluded property, he'd been taken by circuitous dirt roads from Copake into the "wilderness", never suspecting it was half a mile as the crow flies from the factories and mills of Philmont. He called the realtor an S.O.B., but when he walked the rugged shaly woods, and looked out on the classic Hudson River School views of the Catskills, he decided to buy.

By the time I met Tjark he and his wife Renate had granted an easement to the Columbia Land Conservancy and were struggling to get

the fields hayed once a year. I know a great orchard site when I see one—I grew up on one in Australia—so I said "Give me a twenty year lease and I'll put an orchard here".

That was the beginning of what is now Threshold Farm. Tjark, one of nature's aristocrats, had the rare quality of viewing land ownership as a responsibility, as stewardship. We occasionally locked horns with him, until we earned his respect. He had high standards. The Reisses, including Tjark's son Pete, have the foresight to see fertile farmland as renewable, only if cared for as if it were not.

That first impulse has evolved into a complex farm organism, highly individual, increasingly productive, with ever fewer bought-in inputs.

The first thing you see when you enter the farm are the manure piles. We keep them weeded, covered and cooking slow, never over 130 degrees. (The USDA requires "organic compost" to be kept at 150 degrees for five days and turned five times. Thus is the destruction of fertility, mandated.)

We use only our own aged cattle manure and bedding. The cows eat nothing but pasture and hay. More and more science exists to support the simple truth that *no harmful pathogens can grow in a grass-fed ruminant's gut*. (See Jo Robinson's *Why Grassfed is Best* and www.eatwild.com. See also *Glad Cows in Our Town*, June 2004.) This kind of compost has a wonderful effect on the health of our plants, which have a vibrancy completely missing, not only in conventional vegetables, but in most organic vegetables as well. Ten years ago, we would overplant to get enough food; now we plant half the ground and get even more.

We sell what we produce to local stores, restaurants, individuals, wholesalers up and down the east coast, and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) members in Philmont and Woodstock.

We grow apples, pears and peaches in our orchard, and in our fields, virtually every vegetable, and on our pastures we raise cows and pigs for grass-fed beef and organic pork. We also grow rye & wheat (to make straw for our bedding), and since last April, when Hanna returned from Agway with ten chicks (two of whom were roosters) we even have a few eggs.

"Just what we need," I said, gazing heavenward. The truth is, those ten chickens were just what we needed, and one of Hanna's best farming decisions. The kids love them, they create such a beautiful atmosphere, and they give us more eggs than we can eat. (Now one of the hens is sitting on a large clutch of eggs.)

One difference between the really old farms and our farm may be summed up in one word: Biodynamics.

Biodynamic farming is a way of working with nature. The core idea: a farm as a living whole, whose components combine into something very like an organism.

The vitality of the farm is strengthened by the use of special preparations made from herbs, mineral substances and animal manures, to be applied to the soil and the plants in tiny amounts, like homeopathic preparations for the body. No outside inputs, or as few as possible.

If farming is a kind of deal between the farmer and nature's forces, then importing fertilizer implies a lack of trust in nature. The question really ought to be "Can nature trust us?"

We hope so. We do a careful nutrient budget, and, with outside help, we're getting better at it. We're working with Conrad Vispo and Claudia Knab-Vispo of the Farmscape Ecology Program, and with Cornell University, to create systems for measuring the movement of nutrients—nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium—within a closed farm system. We do periodic soil tests, track major nutrients, and try to read our plants for signs of trouble. We move our cows from pasture to pasture daily to allow the grasses and legumes to mobilize ever deeper soil horizons, bringing up minerals and micronutrients once thought lost. (Which, when compared to continual grazing, will increase the productivity of a pasture by 375%.) Ninety percent of our farm is permanent cover; on the rest we use crop rotation, except we call it crop sequencing. In short, we act as if people can live from the earth without ruining it.

In fact, they can. There are places on earth that have been cultivated for two thousand years and are more productive today than ever before, even after years of less than careful farming. (Go to Italy, if you don't believe me).

Confession: We still bring stuff in. Too much stuff. Diesel. Metal in the form of tractors and implements. Seeds for most vegetables and some cover crops. Potting mix. Every few years, a bull calf for fresh blood in the herd. Some clay and sulfur for orchard protection early in the season.

But for most of these inputs, we have a strategy to reduce or eliminate. Why? Are we fanatics, or, even worse, self-sufficiency freaks? Absolutely not. We have no interest in self-sufficiency. We cultivate a high level of community interdependence. Here's an example: At the end of May or the beginning of June, we had to pick off, by hand, about 70% of the apples that had set on our trees. We need a lot of

people for that, and it's a great job for older folks and parents with little children. (But how could little kids play safely around the grown-ups if we used pesticides in our orchard?)

And even as we spray clay, we actively practice a long-term technique for doing without it. We collect the little apples with bugs, burn them and spread them back as ash. It's a biodynamic technique and our pest pressure is gradually declining. Sulphur is used against apple scab, but if we had sheep, they'd eat the fallen leaves that are the vector of the spores. Why don't we have sheep? Because we would need more managers. The more biodynamic a farm becomes, the more complex, and, therefore, the more social. Our farm is not that mature. Yet.

What we do is incredibly hard work. It's almost as hard as teaching or waiting on tables. All romantic notions need to be checked at the farm gate. Yet I believe that the new breed of farmers (60% women, by the way), represents one of the great grassroots insurgencies that will result in a truly better world. There are lots of us and we'll feed you better than you've ever been fed.

So if you own land, consider leasing it long term to a good farmer. And whether you're a landowner or not, join a local farm. There are two community supported farms in Claverack—ours and the Farm at Miller's Crossing—and six altogether in Columbia County. Buy the rest of your food at farmstands, farm stores and farmers' markets. We need you to become committed eaters, to value your health, and the health of the land, like good stewards. Like Howard Hendrickson and Tjark Reiss.

Hugh Williams and his wife Hanna Bail are the farmers at Threshold Farm on Roxbury Road. Visitors are welcome, but please call first: 672-5509. The Farmscape Ecology Program has a display at the Hawthorne Valley Farm Store.

Our Dairy Farms: And then there were four.

BY CHRIS CASHEN

"There is nothing more beautiful than a cultivated field."

I think it was the Roman philosopher Cicero who said that, and I couldn't agree more. Maybe it's because I am a farmer myself, but I really do find the agricultural landscape to be as beautiful as the natural landscape.

That landscape is still here in Claverack, but the times, they are a'changing. The change may seem subtle, but it's very real.

The percentage of Americans living and working on the farm in 1900 was close to 95%. The other 5% lived and worked in cities and towns. In 2000, those numbers were reversed, and by now, they're probably more extreme. As Ken Runyon, a dairy farmer, and son of a dairy farmer says, "We're lucky to have any farms at all, I suppose."

The farmer's sons and daughters don't want to be farmers anymore, because the money to be made in, say, milk or apples, isn't what it used to be. (It didn't used to be much.) The young people who do want to be farmers—usually those who didn't grow up on farms—can't afford to buy land. Claverack's 30,496 acres are much more valuable as house sites than as farmland.

Where I grew up, on Roxbury Road, cows, sheep, fruit trees, vegetable and field crops are all still part of the scenery, but it's the dairy farm's lush legumes and tall feed corn that paint the pastoral landscape, and the fact that the land is productive is what makes it beautiful.

The Hess, Runyon, and Northrup families have kept most of the land surrounding Route 217, just east of the hamlet, working. The Hess farm, owned and run by Ken and Marion Hess, along with their three sons Paul, Kenny-John, Myron, and Kenny-John's wife Denise, abuts our farm. The Hess family has been farming in Claverack since 1750, and Trillium Acres, is home to 270 animals and 600 acres of cropland (mostly rented) spread around the hamlet and here on Roxbury Road. Their cows produce over 750 gallons of milk on an average day.

The Runyon Farm, about a half mile closer to the hamlet, has been in the family only since 1957. Herb Runyon and his son Ken manage over 200 acres for their 140 animals, with the help of Carl Knox. Our own farm, by far the new kid on the block, is sandwiched between those two. The Northrup farm, just north of ours, is no more. It recently sold its herd and auctioned off its equipment, a poignant moment that almost always marks the end of a farm's productive life. The land is now rented to an out-of-town custom grower and produces corn and soybeans, but not for long. It's on the market.

As the number of dairy farms in town has dwindled to four (the other two are Peter Michielen's Echohurst Farm and Barry Burch's Burch & Sons Dairy, both in North Claverack), more and more farmland is lost. New farms do come, but they tend to be niche farms like ours, partly because young farmers like us can't



Dairy Farmers of Claverack Left: The Runyon Family. Right: The Hess Family. Photographs by Carlos Loret de Mola.

afford the large tracts of land and the tremendous overhead needed to start up a large capital intensive operation like a dairy. We sell most of what we produce at farmer's markets, and to regional stores, a couple of brokers, and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) members. We're not volume producers, so we don't cultivate as much land as a dairy farm which grows more crops for cows. (On our own approximately 140 acres, forty are dedicated to vegetables and cover crops; our beef cows make use of the other hundred for grazing and hay.)

The small family dairy farms, so common in the last century, have disappeared. The family farms that are left have adapted by becoming bigger and more efficient at producing milk. While the average farm size has increased, the number of farms has drastically dropped. The farmscape has become much smaller. Some prime cropland is still being farmed by tenants, but much of it sits idle. Fields and pastures are returning to brush and woods. Old barns are falling into disrepair.

Milt Meisner, who lives on Stone Mill Road with his wife Roz, was dairy farming in Claverack in the 1940's. Milt can recall seven or eight guys within a few miles of his farm who were milking cows for a living. "There was no wasted land," remembers Milt. "Everything was farmed." The flat land was for hay and crops, the hilly ground was grazed and the waterways were all accessible to the livestock.

These small milk pail dairies would make enough money to pay the bills, and rely on their own resourcefulness for as much as possible. Farming was not a job; it was a vocation and a way of life. The names of those farm families tell the story of Claverack, and many of them are still around, but few are still farming.

Ken Hess remembers too as he sits in his skid steer on a Sunday morning, in a break from chores. Farmers were able to share labor, equipment, knowledge and, perhaps most important, friendship. "This was a very active farm community," explains Ken. Competition for land may have been a bit tighter, but it was worth it.

"When I was a child, everybody had a farm," says Ken Runyon. "There were five on our road. There were five farms on every road. The farm community is not quite as effervescent as it once was. Your friend is not a farmer."

Still, I'm lucky to have access to years of experience, not to mention equipment I can borrow when I'm in a jam from a family that's been farming for 250 years, within the distance of a two-minute drive, and the Runyons just around the corner and down the road.

For a farmer, having another farmer for a neighbor is priceless and increasingly rare. Farming requires a farmer to be resourceful, but there are times when you just need help. Farming all alone, isolated from other growers would be much more difficult, and not as much fun.

"The people who are still farming are pretty darn good," Ken Runyon says. "If they've survived, they're doing something right."

Why is it such a feat to survive? Why is it so much harder to be a dairy farmer in 2005 than it was in 1970?

The simple but daunting fact is that even with efficient management, excellent feed, and high quality milk, dairying is a business of small and ever-decreasing margins. In 1970, when Ken Hess was farming with his brother John, the price they got for a hundred pounds of milk was \$7, fertilizer cost them \$50 per ton, grain, \$70 per ton, and a 100 horsepower tractor, \$10,000. Today, milk fetches \$16 per hundred pounds, but fertilizer costs \$350 per ton, grain, \$220 per ton, and a 100 horse power tractor, well over \$50,000.

Then there is the ever rising value of land. That the very landscape people find attractive and hospitable becomes less attractive and hospitable as people gravitate towards it, is an irony that does not escape farmers. When land values rise, so do assessments, and, often, taxes, making it ever harder for farmers to farm and resist the seduction of the developer.

When asked if he wants to keep farming, Ken Runyon says it's the wrong question. The question, he says, is "Can you keep farming?" So far, Ken's answer is yes. And when asked if he would sell his family's farm, his answer is no. He insists that he doesn't want to paint a picture of gloom and doom, that things are actually looking up ... a little. Milk prices have risen some lately and look stable. "If you have good land, you want to take care of it and keep it productive. That's what we're working for."

In some ways, farming hasn't changed at all. It's still very hard work. It's still more than a job. It's still a way of life. It becomes part of you and your family.

When Ken thought further about the consequences of selling his family's farm, He added wistfully, "I couldn't go out on the back porch and listen to the crickets."

Chris Cashen and his wife Katie Smith are the farmers at The Farm at Miller's Crossing on Roxbury Road.