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Vermont Life

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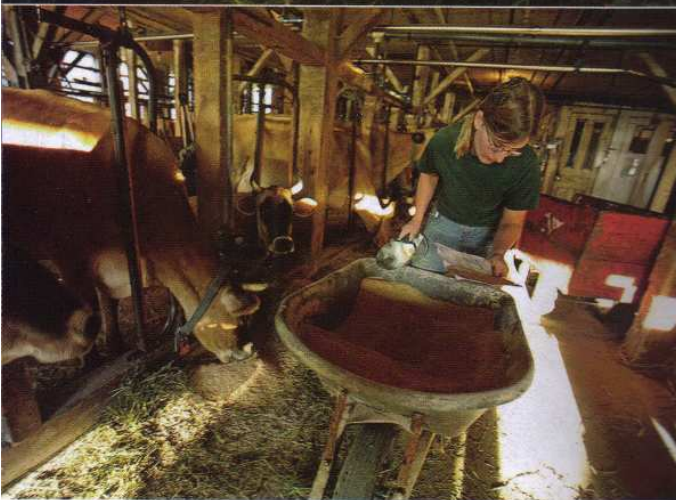
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THE WORKING LANDSCAPE

Back to the Land, Ahead of the Curve

'70s "homesteaders" ride the crest of the 21st-century food movement

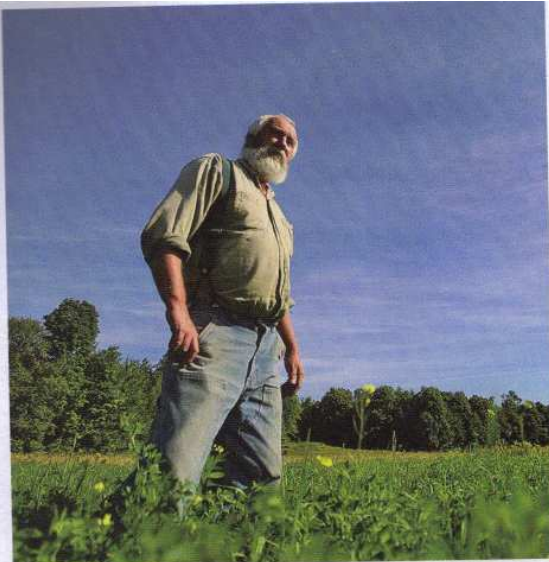


"We wanted enough hay to feed
a cow or two and a team of horses.

We wanted a pig.

We were
homesteaders."

By MELISSA PASANEN
Photographed by JORDAN SILVERMAN



THERE ARE PLASTIC YOGURT CARTONS everywhere at Butterworks Farm. Sitting on windowsills, shelves, tables and floors, the sturdy containers — graced with an illustration of a Jersey cow — hold everything from grain to paint to oil to odd nails. In the granary, the lids are even used as ingenious labels on the various grinders and mills. The cartons' main job, though, is to carry 7,000 quarts of Butterworks' signature product away from the Northeast Kingdom farm every week. They go up to Maine and down as far as Virginia, where the organic yogurt made from the milk of their 50 Jerseys has sold briskly at Whole Foods and other stores, generating a devoted following and close to \$1 million in annual revenue.

It's not exactly what Jack and Anne Lazor expected when they bought their first 60 acres in Westfield in 1976, using Anne's graduate school money. "We wanted enough hay to feed a cow or two and a team of horses. We wanted a pig. We were homesteaders," recalls Jack, 58. Both had other jobs: Jack as a teacher and Anne as a mental health caregiver. "I thought we were going to stop at 12 cows," Anne, 57, says, a little wistfully, over a summer lunch of salad from their garden and Jersey beef tacos topped with farm-grown black beans, homemade cottage cheese and sour cream, and cheddar made for them with their own milk. She takes the lead in caring for the herd of 100 cows, including 50 milkers, while Jack manages 350 acres of pasture and crops.

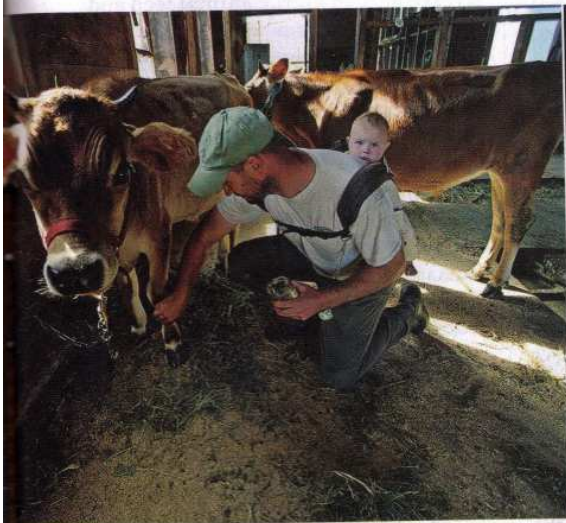
The farm also supports the equivalent of seven full-time employees.

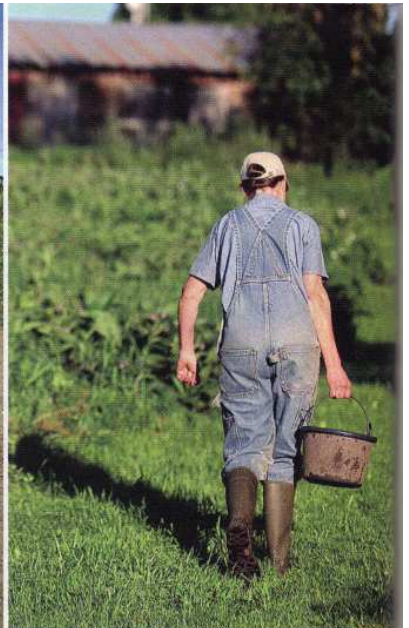
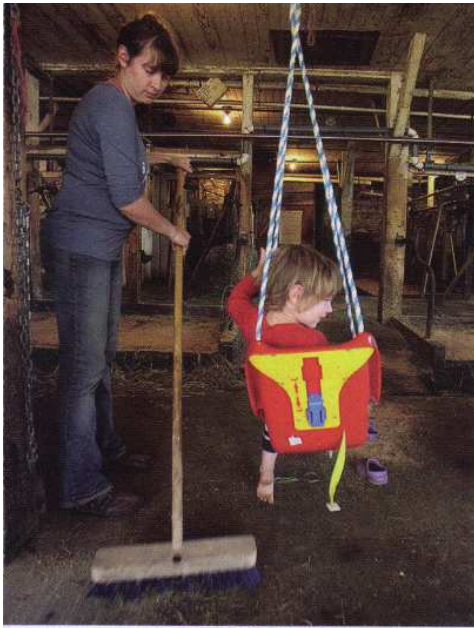
The Lazors are too busy now to make their own stovetop yogurt, the way it all started back in the late '70s, but their commercial product is not that far removed. They have never added anything but live cultures and natural flavors like Vermont maple syrup, never needed stabilizers or thickeners because of the high protein content of the Jersey milk. There was no grand plan when they began selling their dairy products to friends and neighbors. "Jack's such a born marketer. We would make stuff and he would just go door to door," his wife says. The fledgling business took off soon after their daughter was born in 1979, and by 1984, Butterworks was fully licensed. "We were up all night for the cottage cheese and yogurt, not for the baby," Anne says with a smile.

During the 30 years since those first sales, the Lazors have become legendary within the Vermont agricultural community for trailblazing organic dairy practices, building a profitable farm-based business without compromising their values, generously sharing their experience, and continuing

Above: Butterworks Farm owner Jack Lazor manages the 350 acres of pasture and crops, while his wife Anne, top left, cares for the herd of 100 cows.

From left: Erin O'Neil feeds the cows; Jack displays soybeans used for feed; Collin Mahoney works with baby Ursala on his back; a scoop of Early Riser cornmeal.





From top left, clockwise: Christine Lazor sweeps beneath her daughter, while husband Collin Mahoney goes about his chores with 9-month-old Ursala on his back. Anne hauls a bucket the old-fashioned way, while a worker stacks shelves full of the company's signature nonfat yogurt.

The license plate on his truck reads
"YOGURT" for a reason.
"The yogurt pays for everything else."

to break ground with new plant trials and farming methods. Burlington farmer and state representative David Zuckerman, who is also the former chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, agrees. "Jack and Anne Lazor have been pioneers in so many aspects of both organic production and diversified production," he says, "they really are role models for so many Vermont farmers." Even Gary Hirshberg, founder of Stonyfield Farm — "calls Jack Lazor his hero," reported a 2003 article in *The Atlantic*. "We're so many peoples' hero," Jack acknowledges with a mix of appreciation, pride, and wonder. "We've become this myth. It's hard to live up to."

On a late July afternoon last summer at one of his fields in Troy, about 10 miles north of Butterworks Farm, Jack followed the combine as it harvested rows of golden wheat growing picture-perfect with a brick-red covered bridge in the distance. Maple yogurt container in hand, the farmer climbed nimbly up the huge machine and scooped out some threshed kernels. He felt a few between his fingers and pronounced them good and hard. The six-acre field of soft white winter wheat, he explained, would yield about seven to eight tons of flour. "That'll feed a lot

of people a lot of pastry flour," he said with satisfaction. A quick tour of some of the farm's other off-site fields included 25 acres of soy beans for the cows, two different kinds of flint corn that had struggled with a wet summer but were "all tasseled out," much to Jack's pleasure, rippling fields of rye and more wheat, and acres of giant sunflowers poised to open their beaming blooms.

Since their early homesteading days, the Lazors have grown wheat and other grains, gradually increasing the variety and quantity while balancing the acreage needed for the animal feed and pasture forage upon which their herd depends. They were already making sunflower oil back in 1998, but the localvore movement of the last few years has boosted awareness and consumer demand for everything they produce, especially less easily found ingredients like dry beans, cornmeal and cooking oil. While the Lazors appreciate the enthusiasm and support of local foods advocates, sometimes, they admit, it can become overwhelming. A few years ago the sunflower crop failed and there was no oil; they felt as if they had let people down. The nondairy products are much more weather-dependent. "If we had to make our living off beans and grains, we'd be dead," Lazor observes. The license plate on his truck

reads "yogurt" for a reason. "The yogurt pays for everything else," he says.

Climbing up and up to the top of the farm's granary, Jack shared his "observation tower" where we could see some pastureland with the mountains of Québec in the northern distance. To the west lay fields of spelt and hard red winter wheat and the farm's windmill, which supplies about one-third of the operation's power needs. To the south, Jack pointed out "our beautiful compost piles. We turned them yesterday." Their richness comes from the herd's winter straw bedding and waste. And to the east, beyond his and Anne's home, some of the farm's toffee-colored cows grazed on lush pasture.

From this vantage point, Jack can see much to be proud of, but also much work still to be done. "We'd like to be more self-reliant," he said, echoing his wife who had said that one of their main goals remains "to grow more food with less oil." He's enjoying crossbreeding corn and working with UVM Extension on wheat trials, and he recently joined some grain growers in northern New England to help mentor more farmers so they can benefit from increased consumer demand. "There's so much potential for us to learn and also disseminate our knowledge and experience," he said. "Everything's just going round and round and it feels good."

Looking over the farm, Jack is perhaps most proud of the dirt. "Soil fertility is really a very important thing to me," he said, "that we have been able to nurture people and animals both on high-quality, mineralized foods and forages. Clover is everywhere. The milk is extra sweet. When you look around at 30 years of giving more than you took, you look around and the earth is giving back to you, that is rewarding." Another major source of pride, the couple agrees, is seeing their daughter return to the farm. Christine Lazor, 29, and her husband Collin Mahoney, 35, are raising their two daughters in a farmhouse Jack can glimpse from the top of his granary. "I always came back because the food was better and there was more space," Christine said with a smile, watching her 9-month-old daughter, Ursula, dig in the dirt. "It's a pretty special place. I hope it can continue to evolve in a way that people learn from — including us." 🌱



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