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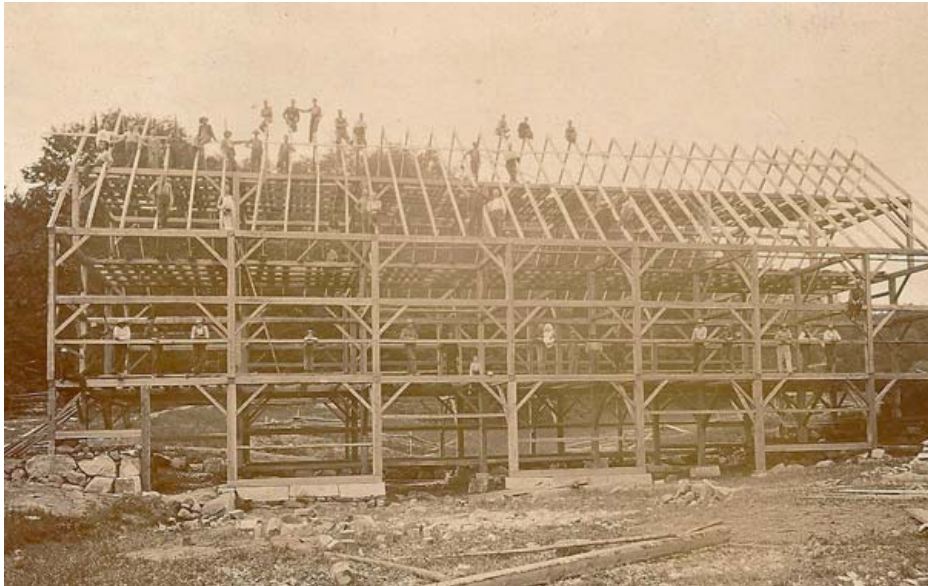
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BARRY ESTABROOK POLITICS OF THE PLATE: SELLING THE FARM

08.13.09

For a sixth-generation farming family, the time has finally come to let go.
Plus: See a slideshow of the Borland farm throughout its history.



ast Friday, for the first time in 144 years, no one at the Borland family farm got out of bed in the pre-dawn hours—rain, shine, searing heat, or blinding blizzard—to milk the cows. A day earlier, all of Ken Borland's cattle and machinery had been auctioned off. After six generations on the same 400 acres of rolling pastures, lush fields, and forested hillsides tucked up close to the Canadian border in Vermont's remote Northeast Kingdom, the Borlands were no longer a farm family.

It was not a decision they wanted to make. A fit, vigorous 62-year-old, Borland could have kept working. His son, who is 35 and has two sons of his own, was once interested in taking over. But the dismal prices that dairy farmers are receiving for their milk forced the Borlands to sell. "We've gone through hard times and low milk prices before," said Borland's wife, Carol, a retired United Methodist minister. "This time there doesn't seem to be any light at the end of the tunnel. There's no sense working that hard when you're 62 just to go into debt."

For several months I'd been reading headlines and following the statistics behind the current nationwide [dairy crisis](#). The math is

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stark. Prices paid to farmers per hundredweight (about 12 gallons) have fallen from nearly \$20 a year ago to less than \$11 in June. Earlier this month, the Federal government raised the support price by \$1.25, but that is only a drop in the proverbial bucket. It costs a farmer about \$18 to produce a hundredweight of milk. In Vermont, where I live, that translates to a loss of \$100 per cow per month. So far this year, 33 farms have ceased operation in this one tiny state.

Meanwhile, the price you and I pay for milk in the grocery store has stayed about the same. Someone is clearly pocketing the difference. Perhaps that explains why profits at **Dean Foods**—the nation's largest processor and shipper of dairy products, with more than 50 regional brands—have skyrocketed. The company announced earnings of \$75.3 million in the first quarter of 2009, more than twice the amount it made during the same quarter last year (\$30.8 million). (**Dean countered** that “current supply and demand is contributing to the low price environment.”)

But rote statistics have a way of masking reality. So last week, I drove up to the village of West Glover for a firsthand look at the human side of the dairy crisis by attending the Borland auction. “You will be witnessing what is going to be the fate of all heritage farms,” Carol Borland told me.

It was a breathtakingly clear morning in one of the most stunning settings imaginable. The Northeast Kingdom is an undulating patchwork of fields, woodlots, streams, lakes, barns, and white clapboard houses, set against the jagged, blue-gray backdrop of distant mountaintops. I didn't need a sign to direct me to the Borland place: For more than a mile before I crested a hill and saw the barns and silos, the gravel road leading to the farm was lined with dusty, mud-splattered pickup trucks. A crowd of close to 900 had gathered, in part because a country auction is always a major social event, a festive excuse for bone-weary farmers to take a day off, bring the kids, catch up with the gossip, and grumble about the weather, costs, and prices. That made it easy to overlook the sad, serious nature of the business at hand: selling off every last item there (and with any luck, providing the Borlands with a retirement nest egg). Among other things to go on the auction block was a massive amount of equipment, much of which had been shared with neighbors in loose, mutually beneficial arrangements stretching back generations. The demise of one family farm can affect similar small operators for miles in all directions. The auctioneer had to sell a half-dozen tractors, a dump truck, a couple of pickup trucks, manure spreaders, hay balers, wagons, seeders, mowers, milking machines, and assorted antique farm implements. There was feed that Borland had harvested but would no longer have any use for, 50 tons of shelled corn, 800 bales of hay. And, last in the photocopied catalogue, 140 prime Holsteins, a herd known for its excellence, having earned Borland 16 quality awards over the previous two decades. Unlike the cows that pass their lives in complete confinement on the factory farms that are replacing farms like his, Borland's cows went out on those hilly pastures every day, strengthening their bodies and feeding on grass. Borland worried that with most other farmers as financially strapped as he was, or worse, the cows might not sell. “I didn't spend my whole life breeding up a good herd to see them beefed” (meaning slaughtered for hamburger meat), he said.

Items were sold at a nerve-rattling pace as the auctioneer chanted his frenzied, mesmerizing, “I've got five. Give me ten, ten, ten. Five, gimme ten, ten, ten. A ten dollar bill. Five gimme ten, ten ten.” Three “ringmen” worked the crowd, waving their canes to cajole bids, and whooping when the price rose. A John Deere tractor started at \$25,000 and was dizzily bid up to \$30,000, \$40,000, \$50,000, and finally \$60,000, in a matter of three minutes. Lesser machines sometimes sold in half that time. All morning long, there was no let-up.

Just after the Deere was sold, I asked Borland's son Nathan how he thought things were going. “Online, that tractor would be listed for \$75,000, if you can find one half that good, which you can't,” he said. “But I guess you can't complain, given how hard it is for everybody.”

After attending college and working out of state for a few years, Nathan came home and joined his father on the farm. But he left to become a paramedic. “I like the work, but it got so bad financially that I felt guilty taking a paycheck,” he said. “My sons, they're young. It'd be nice if they wanted to farm one day, but there's not a living to be made in dairy farming.”

Carol, who was beside us, added, “The reality of farming is that as a parent, even if you'd like to and they want to, you can't encourage a child to go into something where he won't be able to earn a decent living.”

Once the last piece of machinery was gone, the throng moved to folding chairs set up around a fenced ring inside the barn. Borland, who had been taciturn and shy most of the day, stood before the crowd to deliver a short speech. After thanking everybody for coming and expressing his gratitude for the efforts of the auction crew, he said, “I just want to say that these are a good bunch of cows. This auction wasn't their fault. They've always done their part. They have produced well.”

Then he told a sad joke. “There was this farmer's son who left the farm and found work as a longshoreman in the city. The first ship that came in carried a cargo of anvils. To impress his new workmates, the boy picked up two anvils, one under each arm. But the gangplank snapped under the



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weight. He fell into the water and sank. He came up one time and shouted for help. No one moved. He went down and came up a second time. Still no help. The third time he came up he hollered, ‘If you guys don’t help me soon, I’m going to have to let go of one of these anvils.’

There was nervous laughter. Borland went on, “That’s what farming’s been these last six months, trying to stay afloat with anvils. This is the day that I let go of mine.”

The herd sold well. As an emotional bonus, 20 went to local farmers and would still be grazing on nearby pastures. Borland and Carol were pleased with the overall proceeds of the auction, and doubly pleased because they had been fortunate enough to find a buyer for the property and buildings who would take good care of the land that had supported their family through the generations. The Borlands severed off a piece of land where they will build a house. In the spring, they still plan to tap some maples. The sap will be boiled in the sugarhouse that Borland’s great-grandfather built in 1898.

Before the auction, Borland had told his son that he planned to sleep until noon the day afterwards. Fat chance. He was up at 3:30 in the morning, as always. A few cows that had been sold had yet to be picked up, and cows, even ones that now belong to another man, need to be milked. He finished that chore and drove the full milk cans over to a neighbor who was still in the business and had a cooling tank. Borland offered him a lift back to a hayfield he wanted to cut that day. As they rode along in the cab of the truck with the early morning sun streaming over the mountains, the neighbor said, “Ken, do you know how many farmers around here would give anything to be in your shoes? We have to keep struggling. You had a way out.”

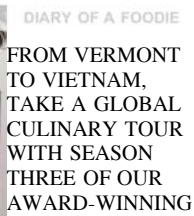
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