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Hard Work, Cows and Community

Why Young People in Bethel, Vermont are Choosing to Stay on Dairy Farms



Mikayla Peront

A research thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts in Environmental Studies

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College of Arts and Sciences Environmental Program and Honors College
University of Vermont

2016

Advisors:

Katharine Anderson, Ph.D., Lecturer, RSENR, Environmental Program

Ernesto Mendez, Ph.D., Asst. Professor of Environmental Studies and Plant and Soil Science

Abstract

The number of dairy farms in Vermont has been declining for years due to a combination of factors including unstable milk prices, the rising cost of living, production pressure from commercial farms and increased opportunities for alternative ways of life. Yet despite these challenges, there are still members of the younger generation who are choosing to enter the dairy farming industry. This study investigates the factors that are keeping the younger generation on the farm, using the rural community of Bethel, Vermont as a case study. Following the national trend, Bethel has been losing its dairy farms yet it has also seen many of its young people choose to remain on the farm making it a prime location to investigate factors that are causing people to stay. To explore this phenomenon, I engaged 14 young dairy farmers and potential dairy farmers aged 18 to 30 in a series of interviews. Preliminary interviews were designed to gain a sense of their lifestyle, rationale and goals for the future. A second round of interviews utilized participatory photography to give the farmers the opportunity to share their lived experiences in a way that words alone cannot convey. Using this in-depth interview method, I was able to investigate the motivations of young people to enter the field of dairy farming and found out that the primary reasons they are choosing to stay include the relationships they have with the cows and the farm owners, the work and the rewards of the work and the support of the community. I discovered that young farmers are gaining college educations and using these educations to increase their chances in the dairy industry. Furthermore, the factors they see as challenges in the industry are not the same as those identified in the literature; where the literature identifies primarily economic challenges, the farmers noted socially-based challenges as their largest concerns. Ultimately, I came to the conclusions that supporting the future of small farms in Vermont is vital and contingent on supporting youth engagement in the industry and that more qualitative research needs to be done to add to this understudied question of why young people are choosing to farm.

Keywords: agriculture, younger generation, farm decline, Vermont, trends in farming

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Finally, I would like to thank the 14 farmers who opened up their farms and shared their memories, fears and joys with me for this project. You taught me the dairy farming is not just a job but a way of life and I am honored that you shared so openly and allowed me to write about your experiences. I am so thankful for everything you do to make our community and world a better place, one cow at a time.

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Introduction

I didn't grow up on a farm, but I've grown up around them. Living in a small, rural community afforded me the opportunity to get to know the farmers whose fields populate the landscape, the cows who graze on these fields and the families who work tirelessly to keep their farms in operation. Settled just a few miles up a dirt road from my family's home in Bethel, Vermont was a 26 cows dairy farm run by Merriam and Jerry. This farm was in operation until 2011 when these lifelong farmers were forced to auction off their cattle and equipment. Increasing debt coupled with the pressure to increase herd size and thus work load left the owners with no other choice but to sell their farm while they still felt able to undertake other careers. At the time, none of their eight children was interested in taking over the farm and they were left with the reality of selling sooner or later. For them, selling the farm before conditions in the barn decreased due to the availability of funds helped them to cope with the difficult decision of selling.

This small farm, like many others in Vermont that have been forced to sell, is a casualty of economic, environmental and social factors that make modern dairy farming an uphill battle. As milk prices remain volatile, grain prices continue to increase and the cost of living exceeds inflation, running an economically stable dairy farm is an increasingly challenging thing to do on a small scale. Most consider themselves fortunate if they break even. Given these economic challenges, many farmers must either increase individual production or herd size to remain in the business and because individual production is already down to a science, bringing more cows onto the farm is often the solution. This strains existing infrastructure and already challenging workloads leading many farmers to bring on hired labor, an additional expense. Many people view farming as simply a way of life yet as farm children are going off to college, they find themselves presented with more opportunities than they have had in the past and have begun leaving the farm behind in search of more exciting, more prosperous and new endeavors. If no one is willing to take over the farm, the farm must be sold. Yet even if there is someone who wants to join the industry, the farm transfer process is enough to make them reconsider. Farm transfers often take many years and disclose devastating financial realities such as the fact that farms are often not

prosperous enough to support more than one family or that the only way to acquire the farm without incurring up to \$90,000 in taxes is to wait until the current owner dies. For many, this could mean not acquiring full ownership of the farm until one is in their 60's, at which point most would be thinking about retirement.

Given all of these challenges, it isn't difficult to see why Vermont has lost over 90% of its dairy farms in just over half a century (Klyza & Trombulak, 2015). Yet, despite this dramatic loss, there are still 868 dairy farms in the state (Ross & Moulton, 2015). If dairy farming were truly as terrible as the challenges would suggest, why do dairy farms still speckle the Vermont landscape?

My research addresses exactly this; when faced with so much opposition, why are people still choosing to enter the field of dairy farming. Through a series of 14 interviews with 18 to 30-year-old dairy farmers and potential dairy farmers in the town of Bethel, Vermont, I began to understand what attracts them to dairy farming when the odds seem stacked against them.

The rural town of Bethel, Vermont is located on 45.4 square miles in the east central part of the state. It is a working-class community full of working-class people: farmers and carpenters, industry workers and nurses. This town has not been sheltered from the rapid decline of dairy farming and has been losing farms at an increased rate in the past 20 years (Bethel Historical Society, 2012). However, it is also has seen a resurgence in dairy farming as several members of the younger generation are choosing to stay in the field, taking over already existing farms. Additionally, many other college-aged students have expressed an interest in coming back to Bethel and entering the dairy industry, even pursuing college majors specifically designed to set them up to be successful dairy farmers (Bethel Historical Society, 2014). In conducting my research, I used Bethel, Vermont as my focus area both because of my personal affinity to the area and because in Bethel, young people are choosing to stay in the dairy industry which is not the case in all towns which thus makes Bethel a prime study location for this phenomenon.

I hoped to include the interviews of 14 individuals in this research but due to some changes in the minds of participants this study is now based on data collected from six individuals.

By conducting this research, I gained an understanding of what is happening to the town's farming culture and came to realize that the factors keeping young people on dairy farms are simple; they love the cows and the work, appreciate the rewards of the work and the environment they get to work in and find a sense of fulfillment and support in the community that surrounds them. I also discovered that early exposure to farm life and farm animals is a key component in fostering a desire to farm later in life. This is a finding that I believe can be beneficial to any farm organization or community with a desire to support the dairy industry. It appears that very few people have taken the time to look beyond the endless list of social, economic and environmental reasons to leave the dairy industry in an effort to discover just what it is that makes the dairy industry so special and my research will add to this gap in the literature.

The aim of this research was to understand the motivations of young people in Bethel, Vermont to stay in the dairy industry when faced with so many reasons to leave and through a series of in-depth interviews, I believe that it has done that.

Literature Review

This literature review provides context for the work documented in this thesis. The first section outlines national trends in dairy farming and the second section provides a history of dairy farming in Vermont, both in an effort to provide background on the current and past trends that are shaping the industry. The third section examines the factors that are contributing to a decline of dairy farms, as this is what most current research focuses on. The fourth section provides a brief examination of youth participation in dairy farming and the fifth section documents some potential consequences of losing small dairy farms. The final section describes the study area for this thesis, Bethel, Vermont.

National Trends in the Dairy Industry

Across the country, dairy farms are going out of business and consolidating; that there has been a reduction in the number of dairy farms and an increase in the size of the remaining farms is undeniable (Tauer & Mishra, 2006). In the 1990's, the number of dairy farms in operation decreased from 180,640 in 1991 to 105,250 in 2000, a 42% loss (Tauer & Mishra, 2006). This loss was entirely based in the small-farms sector. The number of farms with fewer than 100 cows decreased from 159,866 in 1991 to 84,410 in 2000. Meanwhile, the number of farms with over 100 cows actually increased from 20,774 to 20,840 (Blayney, 2002). Research indicates that the increasing prices of farm inputs such as grain, labor costs and fuel prices are to blame for this national trend as the unstable price of milk can often be lower than the cost of the inputs causing farmers to lose money (Matulich, 1980). This national decrease in small dairy farms has also been attributed to a decline in youth engagement (Tauer & Mishra, 2006). According to a recent study, the average age of a dairy farmer in the United States has increased from 45 to 57 in the last decade and the number of people under 30 working on a farm has decreased by 31% (Zaloshnja & Miller, 2012). Furthermore, the number of children who grow up on a dairy farm and decide to pursue a career outside of the dairy industry has increased by 62% in the 50 years (Tauer & Mishra, 2006), a trend that is suspected to correlate with increasing levels of education (Zaloshnja & Miller, 2012). Across the country, the number of small dairy farms in

declining. Simultaneously, the rate of youth engagement on farms is also decreasing and this is a trend that is true in Vermont as well.

A History of Dairy Farming in Vermont

The image of rustic barns, open pasture and grazing cattle is one synonymous with Vermont yet as the number of farms continues to decline; this image is slowly becoming one of the past. Since the early 1800's, Vermont has had a strong history of farming. Beginning in 1811, sheep dominated Vermont's landscape until the dawn of the 20th century when dairy cows began taking over Vermont's pastures. This transformed Vermont's agricultural economy from one based in wool to one based on milk and it has stayed this way ever since (Klyza & Trombulak, 2015). As modernization set in during the period of time following World War II, technology found its place on the farm as tractors replaced horses and electricity, vacuum milking machines, barn cleaners and stainless steel storage tanks all became staples in the barn (Parsons, 2010). These advances were expensive, but drastically increased farm productivity.

Since the early 1800's, Vermont has had a history of farming yet over the years, hundreds of dairy farms have been lost leading to fewer farms with more cows and more milk per cow (Klyza & Trombulak, 2015). In the 1970's, the average farm had 40 cows and could be run by a single family. In 1990, farms averaged 60 cows and today, the average farm has 175 cows (see figure 1) and requires a team to function, (Ross & Moulton, 2015, Parsons, 2010). But farm size isn't the only thing that has increased. The production ability of each cow has also been on the rise due to careful breeding and trait selection. In 1965, the average cow produced 6,000 pounds of milk per year. Today, the average cow is producing more than 18,000 pounds per year with top herds hitting 25,000 pounds of milk per cow per year. Through an increase in herd sizes and individual production ability, Vermont has used 134,132 cows to become the #1 milk producer in New England (Ross & Moulton, 2015) and produce 1.3% of the nation's milk supply, or 2.3 billion pounds per year (Parsons, 2010).

Vermont: Number of Dairy Farms and Cows per Farm (1965-2012)

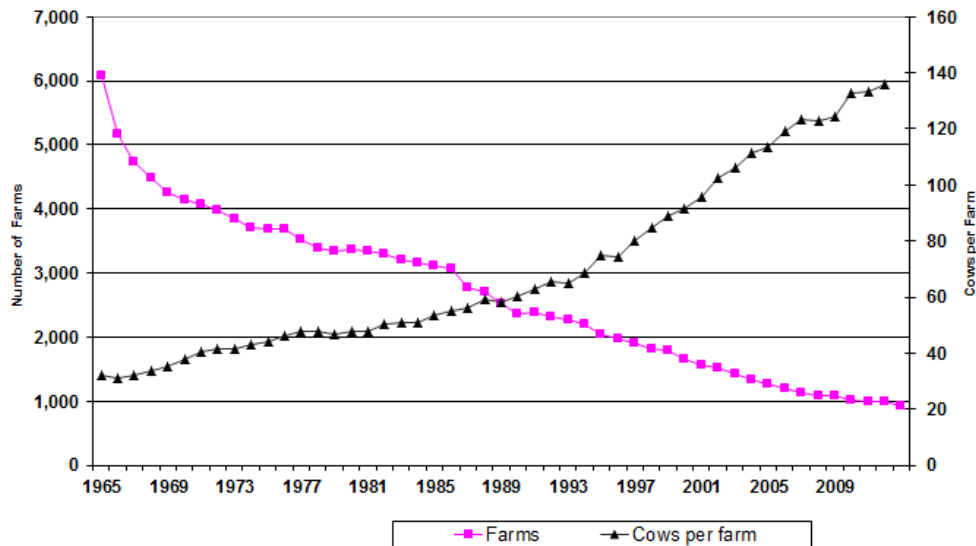


Figure 1 – Courtesy of Bob Parsons, University of Vermont, personal communication

While production has dramatically increased, Vermont has lost over 90% of its dairy farms in just over half a century; 10,269 farms have been shed since 1965 (Klyza & Trombulak, 2015). Today, Vermont is home to just 868 dairy farms (Ross & Moulton, 2015). Given this information, it’s clear that dairy farming is undergoing difficult times, raising questions about its future.

Factors Contributing to a Decline in Dairy Farms

Economics

During the past 60 years, a series of economic factors have influenced the decline of Vermont’s dairy farms, one of the largest being the milk market (Samuelson, 2009). Milk is sold as a bulk commodity and farmers are paid by the hundredweight which is equivalent to 100 pounds or about 11.6 gallons (US Department of Agriculture, 2010). The farmer must rely on market forces such as supply, demand and input costs to determine milk prices, which fluctuate depending on the unpredictable cost of inputs which can be volatile in themselves (US Department of Agriculture, 2014). The price of diesel fuel alone has

ranged from \$2.20 to \$4.68 per gallon in the past year and this is just one of many factors (US Department of Energy, 2016).

In Vermont, it costs about \$17 to produce a hundredweight of conventional fluid milk yet during the pricing collapse in July 2009, the wholesale price of conventional milk dropped to \$10.04 per hundredweight, the lowest it had been in three decades. Following record sale prices in 2008 when milk sales grossed \$502 million (US Department of Agriculture, 2010), 2009 saw milk sales plummet to \$341 million (US Department of Agriculture, 2014). This, coupled with skyrocketing feed prices as a result of drought resulted in Vermont's dairy farmers incurring financial losses of \$350 - \$500 per cow (Samuelson, 2009). Fallout was immediate and by December of 2009, 52 Vermont dairy farms had been lost (Parsons, 2010). Financial losses piled up for those in related services as well, impacting feed providers, veterinarians, equipment dealers and fuel dealers (Parsons, 2010). Prices recovered during 2010 and 2011 but not enough to regain losses and when they fell again in 2012, many farmers found themselves losing almost \$9.00 per hundredweight, sending their farms into unimaginable debt (Farm Aid, 2013).

Today, dairy farmers struggle on a daily basis to stay afloat in the after math of the pricing collapse and are further burdened by the costs of living. As the amount of income needed to support a family rises, farmers are finding that they need bigger farming operations to break even (Parsons, 2010). The cost of living in Vermont is above the national average and has far surpassed the rate of inflation over the past 50 years (Barone, 2014). As families struggle to make farms support a modern family, they are faced with two options. Either increase the milk production of each cow or milk more cows (Parsons, 2010). Because cows are already being milked to their potential thanks to careful diet regulation and tested milking practices (Farm Aid, 2013), farmers are forced to increase herd size if they want to make the farm economically sustainable. That being said, increasing herd size means more work for the farmer and often results in the need to hire additional labor, a further expense (Parsons, 2010). In 2010 Melvin Churchill, a native Vermont farmer who has been in the farming business for 70 years, put this problem in perspective, "Back when I started I milked 20 cows. You could make a decent living on that — you didn't have to keep thinking about getting bigger and bigger. (Hewitt, 2010)."

Hired Labor

As farms increase in size, the ability of the individual farmer to maintain the herd decreases and many find themselves looking to hire additional labor (Jenkins, Stack, May & Earle-Richardson, 2009). According to the US Department of Agriculture, hired farmworkers make up one-third of all those working on farms with the other two-thirds being self-employed farm operators and their family members (US Department of Agriculture, 2014). In the Vermont especially, where many farms can get by with hiring just one or two milkers, it's common for farmers to employ high school students looking to earn extra money before and after school (Carlson, 2008) but even this practice is proving to be a challenge (Jenkins, Stack, May & Earle-Richardson, 2009). Farmers have reported running ads for up to a year without interest and blame this on undesirable characteristics in the younger generation such as unwillingness to work the early hours and labor intensive positions (Carlson, 2008). Across the country, the average number of hired farmworkers has steadily declined from roughly 3.4 million to just over 1 million (US Department of Agriculture National Statistical Survey, 2014) yet the need for hired labor has increased. To fill this void, migrant workers have begun picking up the slack (Carlson, 2008). While data on migrant workers and those who are not legally authorized to work in the United States is largely based on estimation, it's believed that their presence in the farming workforce grew from roughly 15% in 1989 to almost 55% in 2001 (US Department of Agriculture National Statistical Survey, 2014). In Vermont alone, it is estimated that there are about 5,000 undocumented laborers working on the states dairy farms (Carlson, 2008).

“As farms are getting larger and the amount of people wanting to work on them is dwindling, some farms are faced with the reality of having to hire undocumented workers to manage the farm. Sometimes it's not a matter of wanting to surrender the farm; sometimes we just don't have a choice. I can't milk 150 cows by myself, and that's just a fact. I need to hire help and I need to pay for it. It's hard to win in a situation like this (Carlson, 2008).”

Farm Transitions

For the farmers who are fortunate enough to have someone to pass the farm along to, the process of transitioning the farm business is time consuming, difficult and often takes upwards of 20 years (Parsons, 2010). A farm transition covers all of the necessary legal steps to transferring farm ownership from one person or family to another (Heleba, 2007) including meeting with agricultural professionals and attorneys, changing business models, writing or updating wills and developing careful budgets and timelines. It can often be incredibly time intensive and stressful as it involves making important financial and future decisions and thinking about difficult scenarios, such as what happens if someone dies (Heleba, Parsons, Sciabarrasi & Anderson, 2009). Furthermore, most farms are incapable of supporting more than one family so once a farm transfer is finalized, the retiring party finds themselves at a loss (Heleba, 2007). Farm transfers can take anywhere from 10 to 50 years, in part because many farm owners are reluctant to surrender their assets. It isn't uncommon for ownership to be transferred in increments, with one family slowly taking over 1-10% of the business at a time (Roerick, 2011). While farm transitions are widely agreed to be an effective way of ushering in a new generation of farmers, their intensive nature makes them another challenge for those wishing to pursue dairy farming (Heleba, Parsons, Sciabarrasi and Anderson, 2009).

Additional Reasons for the Decline in Dairy Farms

Environmental pressures from emerging legislation and the effect of larger farms are also impacting modern farming. Farmers must modify their practices with implements such as new, regulated manure pits, leeching prevention plans and required riverine buffers, none of which are cheap or easy (US Department of Agriculture, 2014). For farmers based in the Lake Champlain Watershed, phosphorus management challenges are currently an issue as it is the dairy farmers who are primarily being blamed for algae eutrophication in the lake. Farmers must now install and construct costly implements to store and spread manure to ensure that phosphorus doesn't leech beyond the farm (Parsons, 2010).

Social factors are also impacting the dairy industry. In 1950, the average family had 5 children. By 2010, this number had dropped to 2 (Employment and Training

Administration, 2010). As farmers have fewer children, they are decreasing the likelihood that there will be someone willing to inherit the family farm (Fischer & Burton, 2014).

These children are also receiving more college education, increasing their options for the future and negatively impacting the rate of farm transfers (Fischer & Burton, 2014).

Finally, societal desires are impacting the level of neighbor and community support given to dairy farms forced to increase herd size (Parsons, 2010). As larger farms are becoming necessary, the impact of concentrating more cows in one area is noticeable. Increased manure, flies, pests, methane and odor problems can now commonly be associated with farms (Parsons, 2010). Smith et al. (2008) found that as a whole, society wants to see small scale sustainable farms when in reality, these are rarely economically sustainable. This can be seen in the rising number of neighbor complaints against farmers. As individuals move to the scenic, rustic, rural areas of Vermont they are confronted with the modern reality of farming, including the aforementioned problems of flies and odor, which deeply contrasts with their expectations.

Youth Participation

Studies have shown a drastic decline in youth participation in farm-related activities. 4 – H enrollment and retention data found that membership rates currently form a bell-curve and peak at age 11 with levels tapering off in students age 5 to 10 and 12 to 18. For those aged 12 to 18, 4 – H lost more members than it recruited and at any age, members only stayed with the organization an average of two years. This can be compared to data from 1995 in which membership was high in ages 9 to 15 with average membership lasting five years (Harder et al., 2005). A similar trend is occurring within Future Farmers of America where enrollment has dropped 27% since 1976 with median age dropping from 16 to 13 (Hoover & Scanlon, 1991). Across the nation, rates of youth participation in farm education programs are decreasing and without the community that they facilitate, young adults are becoming detached from the farming lifestyle and leaving the industry (Harder et al., 2005).

Despite the decrease in participation, research shows that dairy farming needs the next generation. The next generation is more likely to be formally educational and more savvy

when it comes to technology, both of which can improve efficiency. According to a European survey, the younger generation is also more productive in terms of worker output. Young farmers, classified as those under 35, are 12% more economically productive than the average worker and 51% more productive than those over 55 years old (Macalpine, 2013).

Potential Consequences of Farm Loss

As small Vermont dairies are lost, the rural working landscapes, careful animal care, jobs and related services all stand in jeopardy (Smith et al., 2008). The dairy industry in Vermont provides as many as 7,000 jobs and contributes \$360 million in wages and salaries each year for people not only directly involved in farming, but in support fields as well such as milk-truck drivers, tractor salesmen and auctioneers (Ross & Moulton, 2015). Each farm loss has the potential to take dozens of jobs with it (Smith et al., 2008) and for every cow the state loses, \$12,500 in economic activity is lost as well (Ross & Moulton, 2015). Additionally, because dairy is Vermont's #1 product, comprising 70-80% of the state's agricultural sales, the loss of each and every dairy puts pressure on the state's economy and on the success of fellow farmers (Ross & Moulton, 2015, Parsons, 2010).

For many rural towns, dairy farmers are the pillars of local communities and economies. As farmers are forced into bankruptcy, a ripple effect impacts everyone. For consumers, the loss of local dairies limits access to fresh, local milk products and often means a permanent loss of farmland to development (Smith et al., 2008). With fewer family farms, the fate of dairy products is left in the hands of factory farms who have repeatedly cut corners with additives and processes that compromise the health and safety of milk (Fischer & Burton, 2014).

Bethel, Vermont

The rural town of Bethel, Vermont is a prime example of the decline of dairy farming and its impact on the community; it is also an example of a town whose dairy farming culture is hanging on thanks to the decisions of several members of the younger generation to stay in the field. Located on 45.4 square miles in central Vermont, Bethel is home to 2,030 residents of which 17 families are involved in farming (US Census Bureau, 2010). Since the

town's establishment in 1779, various forms of farming have taken place with the first dairy farm being established in 1791 by a family who still farms today. At its peak in 1924, Bethel was home to 29 dairy farms but this number has slowly been declining (Bethel Historical Society, 2012). In 2014 alone, two farms were lost and another is scheduled to be auctioned in the fall of 2015 making the topic of a loss one that is painfully relevant to this community. As farms continue to disappear, the average age of the primary farmer has increased from 52 in 1924 to 68 in 2012 (Bethel Historical Society, 2012). Yet, despite this aging trend of primary farmers, the farming community is not devoid of young people. Between 2000 and 2010, seven couples under the age of 30 began the farm transfer process to eventually take over already existing dairy farms managed by aging farmers (US Census Bureau, 2010). This is indicative of the fact that the younger generation is still interested in dairy farming, regardless of the opposition they face (Bethel Historical Society, 2012).

Methodology

The goal of my research was to understand what motivates the 18 to 30-year-old dairy farmers and aspiring dairy farmers of Bethel, Vermont to enter the farming industry when the odds seem stacked against them. To conduct this research, qualitative research methods were used to gather data that reflects the farmers' lived experiences and the values they ascribe to different aspects of their life.

To understand their motivations, 14 people who either used to work on a dairy farm, currently work on one or aspire to work on one were interviewed. Following each interview, participants were asked to take pictures of the things that shape their view of the farm. Within two weeks of the preliminary interview, each farmer was revisited for a follow-up interview using the photographs that they took to understand their experience and what it is that draws them to the dairy industry.

To conduct this research, I used an interview and data analysis technique coupled with participatory photography, wherein I asked farmers to take photographs and then explain to me their significance. I found this to be the most appropriate technique because the focus of my research was to investigate the specific motivations of individuals involved in the field. The interview questions served to provoke deeper conversations which helped me to understand individual motivations. The interview format allowed for personalization, which was essential to this research. Additionally, incorporating photography allowed for a deeper level of understanding and helped many farmers to express concepts that they were not able to put into words or that I had not thought to ask about during the interviews.

Selection Process

Public records from the Bethel Town office were used to compile a list of all the registered dairy farms in the Bethel area. Once this list was established, my community informant helped me to eliminate farms that didn't have anyone between the ages of 18 and 30 involved in the farms operation. This involved calling each farm on the list using

information from the town phone book to ask if they had any children or hired hands in this age group. This age group was chosen because it allows access to a range of those who are making or have recently made significant decisions about their future careers. From Bethel and Easy Bethel, I contacted 23 eligible individuals and found 10 who were willing and able to participate in this study. To add more breadth to my interview pool, I also contacted four individuals from farms that are bordering the town of Bethel but technically are registered under addresses in Randolph Center. With the help of my community information, I was able to schedule interviews with 14 individuals, six women and four men, who held a variety of perspectives. Six participants were choosing to stay on the farm, five participants were choosing to enter the dairy industry for the first time and three participants were leaving the dairy industry, at least of the time being.

Preliminary Interviews

To conduct each preliminary interview, I met with each candidate at their family's farm or at the farm they currently work at so I could begin to understand the context from which they are speaking from. Interviews began with a brief farm tour followed by an interview session. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted on an individual basis with the aim of gathering background information and understanding the participant's context, lifestyle, options and goals and the rationale behind these. Interviews lasted between 20 and 65 minutes and at the end of each interview, I explained the participatory photography project as a way for them to share with me the things that they may not be able to describe or the things that they may not have thought about. To each farmer, I posed the following instruction, "take pictures of the things that influence your view of the farm." Participants were asked to use their personal cameras to take 10 pictures.

I followed IRB protocol to obtain informed, written consent from my human participants before beginning interviews and each interview was recorded using the free "Recorder" iPhone application. Interview questions, the Participant Agreement Form and the Participatory Photography Agreement can be found in the Appendices.

Follow-up Interviews

Roughly two weeks after conducting preliminary interviews, I collected digital copies of the photographs from the farmers via e-mail. I kept the time frame for this step relatively short because (1) extended projects tend to get put off or forgotten, (2) I wanted the conversations we had during our interview to be fresh in their minds as they took their pictures and (3) I wanted to make sure participants would remember their motivations for taking each picture. I hoped that participants would think of using the photographs to help translate the things they couldn't say during the preliminary interview, or the things they may have forgotten to say.

After receiving each participant's photographs, I scheduled follow-up interviews. These interviews happened as soon as possible, often within a few days of receiving the photographs. This stage of interviewing was the most important part of the process. The idea of participatory photography is to share lived experiences and present the world as it is seen through the eyes of a specific individual. By asking each participant to document a certain aspect of their life, I gave them the opportunity to define how myself and others understand their perspective. According to the Photo Voice project, when conducting participatory photography, "the subject becomes the creator, allowing them to reflect on strengths and problems within their worlds (Blackman and Fairey, 2014)."

A key part of this process is the follow-up interview because this is where farmers can explain their motivations for taking each photograph and describe what the subject of the photographs mean to them. My interpretation of each photograph varied from the photographers so it was important that I got their perspective. During preliminary interviews, farmers tended to be brief in their comments, very intentional with their words but during follow-up interviews, the photographs seemed to open them up and encouraged stories in a way that preliminary interviews simply couldn't. Having photographs in front of them of things that are instrumental to the way they view the farm really got participants to open up and share their thoughts, it gave them talking points and started us

down a chain of memories that we would not have reached had it not been for the photographs.

Follow-up interviews were unstructured because the goal was to simply have them tell me about the pictures. I asked them why they took the picture and what it meant to them but otherwise, I let the photos guide the conversation. At the end of each interview, I asked participants in writing for permission to display their photos on the University of Vermont campus and in the Bethel Town Hall. Participants have control over their photos and when they asked that their names be kept private or their photos be kept off display, they were respected. The Participatory Photography Agreement can be found in Appendix C.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a coding technique wherein I marked different topics that came up in the interviews and kept a running list of these topics, in time, distinct categories emerged and these categories became the basis of the results section.

Follow-up interviews were also transcribed and coded. Information from this second interview round was combined with information from the preliminary interviews to create a more complete understanding. Both interviews are described together in the results.

Participant Limitations

During the writing process, over half of the participants in this study changed their minds in allowing the use of their interviews. Their change of heart doesn't change the overall findings, yet it does limit the data pool. While their motivations in retracting their statements are unclear, community informants have posited that it may have something to do with the introverted nature of many of the participants. During the interviews, some participants were uncomfortable talking about themselves; proud of their farms but humble in acknowledging their role in the farms success. It's possible that they may have retracted their interviews because they were uncomfortable sharing so much about themselves with the knowledge that other people might later be reading their words, even

if under a pseudonym. I never mentioned to other farmers who I was interviewing but because Bethel is such a small community, I've no doubt that people talked about it. Along this line, I believe that once one person heard that could retract their interview, they felt more inclined to do the same. All eight of these participants were offered a copy of their interview transcript and three accepted but none changed their minds and I lost all eight interviews. While the loss of their insight is unfortunate, their initial willingness to participate is greatly appreciated.

After eliminating the data that these participants had provided, my data pool represented six participants: three people choosing to stay on the farm, two choosing to leave for the time being and one entering the industry.

Because not everyone in this study consented to using their name in this thesis, all participants were given fake names and farm names were eliminated.

Photography Exhibit

After writing the results of this thesis, I went back through the farmer's photographs and compiled the highest quality photos to represent the primary factors that are keeping young people on dairy farms. These categories are: The Cows, The Place, The Community, The Work and The Rewards of the Work. A selection of quotes was selected to accompany these photos. A sampling of the farmer's photography can be found in Appendix E.

Photos were printed locally and simply framed. A collection of 14 photographs will be on display in the Honors College building on the University of Vermont's campus from April 28, 2016 to May 13, 2016 with a gallery afternoon scheduled for May 5, 2016. For this display, two four-foot by four-foot display cases were made available to me. A notebook accompanies the display to provide an opportunity for onlookers to respond. Photographs of this display can be found in Appendix D. A second display of these photographs will take place in the Bethel Town Hall from June 1, 2016 to August 1, 2016. In the town hall, I will have access to a large wall to display the photograph. I will be present to talk about the photographs at Summerfest on June 3, 2016 and the notebook will be present at this exhibit as well.

Resources

Specific resources for this research included:

- Transportation: I travelled to and from Bethel, Vermont and to the farms to conduct interviews. I provided my own transportation and received grant money to cover the cost of fuel.
- Digital recording: I recorded each interview using a free iPhone application called "Recorder."
- Paper printouts: I needed print-outs of interview questions and consent forms. I used my personal printer to obtain these printed-copies.
- Photography display: I used grant money to print and frame 14 photographs. The Honors College at UVM and the Bethel Town Hall provided the space to hang these photos and grant money will cover the cost of providing refreshments at a small opening in the Honors College.

Risk Management

Discussing the fate of one's farm can be a sensitive topic and to respect the individuals I interviewed and in accordance with IRB protocols, I never pressed a topic that the interviewee did not want to discuss or one that upset them. All participants were informed before beginning that the interview could be stopped at any time and that any question could be skipped if they were uncomfortable answering it. I obtained signed, informed consent from each participant for both their involvement in the interviews and the use of their photographs. Each farmer was asked to sign a Participant Agreement form agreeing that the information they shared in the interview can be made public in connection with my thesis. The Participant Agreement form can be found in Appendix B. I discussed with each participant the extent to which they felt comfortable being identified, determining, for example, if I could use their name or characteristics that could be used to identify them. It was determined that both individual and farm names would be changed.

I obtained written permission from the photographers before using their photos in the photography display. See Appendix C for the Participatory Photography Agreement form.

Results

Participant Demographics

Participants for this research were all involved in the Bethel-area dairy farming community in some respect, either as a current, past or aspiring farmer or as a farm hand. For the purpose of this study, the Bethel-area included the towns of Bethel, East Bethel and Randolph Center. Out of six participants, two identified as female and four identified as male. They ranged in age from 18 to 30 and came from a mix of farming and non-farming families. They had one to eight siblings and a variety of farming experiences. Some participants have worked on multiple farms mentioned in this study, even working with each other at times. All told, this study investigated the views of six different farmers* who currently represent five different farms. In the future, these participants have many different aspirations. Some participants hope to run a hobby farm on the side while others have already begun the farm transfer process to begin taking over a family farm.

Basic Participant Demographics

Participant**	Age	Years Farming	Stage of Farming
Sam	21	7	Hired farm hand
Todd	19	4	Hired farm hand
Mark	30	lifetime	Co-owner
Ben	27	lifetime	Co-owner
Joe	26	lifetime	Worked on parents farm
Annie	18	lifetime	Worked on parents farm

*For this study, 14 people were interviewed but eight have requested that their interviews not be used in this research. That being said, the information they provided in their interviews support the views expressed by other participants and does not contradict the results.

**Names have been changed for the purpose of this study. Participants selected their own pseudonyms.

Farm Descriptions

Farm One

This farm was home to a mix of 45 Jerseys and Brown Swiss who produced conventional milk that was sold to a co-op. Unfortunately, this farm was recently auctioned because of financial struggles but before it's auctioning, it had been in business for 30 years. One of the owners is a fourth – generation farmer who raised a family of eight on the farm and utilized family to complete the farm tasks. This continued until the children went off to college at which point a farm hand was hired, but only to supplement the work that the owners couldn't complete themselves. While in business, the farm diversified with a variety of endeavors including eggs, beef, pork, meat birds and firewood.

Farm Two

This farm is a 70 cow certified organic dairy farm that is home to a mix of Jerseys, Ayrshires and Brown Swiss. Milk from the farm is sold to a co-op. The farm has been in operation for over 100 years and was run by an elderly couple until summer 2015 when they sold the herd to a younger family member who is also renting the farm. While still in their possession, the couple ran the farm with the help of several hired farm hands. To support the farm business, this farm diversified by producing maple products for local sale.

Farm Three

This farm is home to 125 Jersey cows and another 100 Jersey heifers. The conventional milk produced on this farm is sold to Cabot as part of the Cabot Creamery Cooperative. The farm is primarily owned by a couple who, within the past two years, have signed their two adult sons on as partners in the business thus initiating the farm transfer process. The sons are the eighth - generation of family to farm the land that was originally settled in 1791. This farm uses the help of one hired farm hand and diversifies with a variety of side

businesses which include a saw mill to supply local contractors, a modest maple syrup operation, horse hay production, baling, logging and the sale of heifers.

Farm Four

This farm is home to 60 Milking Shorthorns who produce conventional milk for sale to a co-op. The farm is owned by a couple who hire three college interns from a local agricultural program to assist with farm tasks and one relief milker from the community. This farm has been in operation under the same family since 1910 and now diversifies the business with the sale of pumpkins and raw milk to the local community.

Farm Five

Farm Five is a 100 cow farm, raising Jerseys to produce conventional milk for sale to a co-op. This farm is family owned and run, hiring relatives to help with day-to-day farm operation. It has been in the family for over 20 years and diversifies with the production of maple syrup for sale on a national-scale and the production of horse hay and corn silage.

Overview

The following sections will outline the main themes that were identified during the analysis process. The first section addresses the primary question posed in this study, “why are young people in Bethel, Vermont choosing to become dairy farmers?” and presents the key factors that motivate this decision. The following sections delve into the background that has led them to this decision. The second section addresses farm life, describing lived experiences had by participants growing up and working on a farm. The third section analyzes financial awareness and what participants are doing to create financial stability on their farms. The fourth section looks at what challenges the farmers perceive to be pulling them away from the farm and the final section looks at the life cycle of the farm, as described by participants.

Why Dairy Farming?

Each participant was asked about the reasons why they chose to stay on the farm, what makes farm life so special, and their answers were simple. Farmers appreciate the relationship they have with their cows and with the farm owners, they enjoy the work and the rewards that come from it and they appreciate the community that supports them. For these reasons, participants are consciously choosing to stay on the farms even though they have other options.

A Relationship with the Cows

“I really like working with animals, it’s what brings me a lot of joy (Joe).”

The farmers I interviewed had plenty of opportunities to live a life off of the farm, but they chose to stay and a relationship with the animals proved to be the most prominent reason why. Annie reasoned that from a logical perspective, this makes sense. “The animals are a really, really big part of farming. You see ‘em every day, so if you don’t like em you’re in the wrong place.” But there’s also an emotional connection that develops between a farmer and their cows. For some participants, a specific event involving cows is what had the most impact. One farmer described his first time birthing a cow,

There was one time, I was probably 16, when I came in in the morning and (the farmers) hadn’t been awake yet and come down to the barn so I got there and one of the cows was having a baby and I had to take my sweatshirt off, it was freezing in the morning, and I had to help the cow give birth because she was standing. That was a moment I’ll never forget. It was the first time I ever did that. I didn’t have any practice doing it. The lady who worked there with me, she told me when it comes out, if it doesn’t come out in a nice smooth motion, you’re probably gonna have to grab on and pull and that’s what I had to do. That was probably one of the happiest moments (Todd).

Once a participant started talking about animals, they began to focus on individual members of the herd; every single farmer had a favorite cow. Farmers favored different cows not for their value to the herd but for their personality and temperament and called them by name.

I had this one, her name was Dixie. We had to sell her which was pretty heartbreaking for me when I was younger but when I was older ... we got this Gloucester, her name was Sputty and she was my 4-H cow for a while but she wasn't friendly as little Dixie was. She would step on my boots and push me over in the ring which everyone enjoyed. One time the fly on my pants broke or something and she stepped on my pant leg and like my pants came down in the ring. That was embarrassing but she was a funny cow. I have fond memories of Sputty (Joe).

Her name is Betty. She was one of their (the owners) favorite Swiss cows. A lot of cows, they'll like to rush to get to the spot to eat their food but she just kinda walked in. She'd put her head down and wait for you to click the chain on around her neck before she ate, never kicked. She was a good girl (Todd).

The old cow Nevada, she's really friendly but pretty useless actually as a cow. I got her from a guy I used to milk for. She doesn't make very much milk so she's not the most profitable cow in the barn but she's real friendly. My wife owns a few cows of her own in the herd. One of her cow's names is Jenna. I gave it to her as a Christmas present six years ago. Jacqueline can just walk around and the cow will follow her. They love each other but she gets into trouble, knocks things over. It's really fun for everybody. No. She's only Jackie's favorite cow. The rest of us think she's a pain. There's also feisty there. She's the oldest cow in the barn and that's kinda why I like the farm. You get to see the cows. I like it when the cows are around for years and years (Ben).

I got a favorite cow. Probably Vershire, my oldest cow. Before we had the LLC, I had a few cows that I owned myself. They were the offspring of my 4-H project way back. She's the oldest one I have from that line. She's kinda my favorite. She's pretty friendly, likes when you scratch her head (Mark).

Even sad moments that were shared reaffirmed the importance of a relationship with the animals. Todd described the day a farm he worked on was auctioned off. He helped out at the auction, walking the cows around the ring so the farmers wouldn't have to.

They did the right thing for their cows at that point because they knew that if they kept em longer it was just gonna get worse for them. Conditions might have dropped in the barn. But that day definitely killed (the farm owner). I was balling my eyes out that afternoon too (Todd).

He says that even though it was a hard day, it made him realize why he loved working on the farm – it was because of the cows and the relationship he had built with them.

It's kinda like they're pets. It sounds weird but it's nice. They each have their own personality and they all do something positive. They produce milk.

They're not just there to eat food and that's it. It's a win-win for both of us. We're a team (Todd).

A Relationship with the Farm Owners

When working on a farm, your relationship with the owners can make or break the farm experience. Every farmer I spoke with brought up their relationship with the farm's owner and while not all of these were positive, the impact of a positive experience was remarkable. For some, the farm was owned by their parents. In this case, the parenting style deeply impacted the child's feelings about the farm growing up. Joe recalled doing farm chores when he would rather be hanging out with his friends. He despised the farm at the time but has now come to appreciate it. Mark and Ben described the fun things their parents let them do on the farm, the freedom they were given with the cows and their ability to roam the land. They have recently become partners on their parent's farm.

For those who didn't grow up in a farming family, the relationship that was developed with the owner was even more influential. For Todd, a bad relationship on his first farm almost led him to leave the industry until he took a temporary job at another farm that changed his perception. When he took the job, the farm was in its last few months before being auctioned but he still enjoyed it and spoke highly of the owners.

They were really open from the moment I started. They were like, we love having you work here but it's probably not gonna be very long. They never hid anything from me.... They would always send me home with some milk, sometimes I stayed for dinner.... She would just yell in her sweet voice and the cows would come running to barn. Everyone and thing loved her and he was a real good guy (Todd).

Because of this positive relationship, Todd now aspires to become a hobby farmer in the future. Sam had a similar experience. In High School She took a milking job on the weekend where she worked alongside the farm owner and within a month she was milking every day and dreaming about having her own farm in the future.

Participants also reported that receiving the support of the farm owner and the community is instrumental in their decision. Seeing that the owners of other farms and other citizens in the area respected farm work validated their decision to farm.

The Work

While relationships built on the farm are essential to valuing farm life, the work is also a major factor in why people are choosing to stay. Several farmers pointed out the variety that is inherent in farm work and noted that without it, the job wouldn't be the same. "You're doing something different every day. You have to tend to sick cows so you're a veterinarian. You have to fix stuff so you're a mechanic. You gotta build stuff so you're a carpenter. I like it." When asked what they like to do in their leisure time, many participants stared for a few seconds before coming to the conclusion that farm work and leisure activities are one in the same.

I get two nights off a week when I'm not supposed to be around here but this time of year I don't ever leave. I just go do stuff on one of the tractors because I enjoy being out in the field and driving around. I've always enjoyed doing that so that's kinda like a leisure activity (Mark).

The work also allows for a certain autonomy. According to Ben, "I like the independence. I like the work, the freedom and variety. I don't have to answer to anybody between 8:00 and 5:00. You're working for yourself. I never did like the idea of working for somebody else too much." Mark held similar feelings about the independent nature of farm work, not only is he independent in his day-to-day tasks but when it comes time to change something around the farm, or build something new, the farm resources allow for a self-sustaining independence.

Sometimes the days and years all run together but I remember every stage of the barn project. It was such a big change and everything. We did a lot of it ourselves. You know like most of the wood, what lumber we could for the barn we cut it ourselves. I remember these posts that run down the barn. The carpenters were here, the carpenters were my brother-in-law and his brother, and they're like 'oh, we need the posts' so I hopped on the skidder. I went and cut the trees and hauled em down to the mill. We sawed em out and they were standing in the barn the next day. So it went from a tree to a building in two days and that was kinda cool. It felt good (Mark).

The Rewards of the Work

The rewards of working on a dairy farm can be enough to keep a person in the dairy industry. Many participants mentioned how much they appreciate having fresh milk available at any time of day. They described a sense of pride that comes from knowing that the milk in the glass in front of you came from the cows you care for, the land you manage and the barn just a few steps away. One participant expanded on this feeling of pride,

Most of the time it's hard work and it can be messy and unpleasant and it's not always a picturesque work or job but it's, I don't know, at the end of the day it's very rewarding to have raised a product that's fair quality and that you can be proud of and that you can give somebody else and it's not like 'well, should I have done that? Because I'm not certain if it's good or not.' You can be like yes, that's excellent, I've worked very hard and I'm not upset (Joe).

Participants described a feeling of satisfaction that comes with seeing the direct results of your labor, saying that at the end of the day you can look back and see concretely what you've accomplished, a trait that isn't present in all lines of work.

Benefits that can be provided to the local community through work on a dairy farm were also noted as a reward of the work. Todd and Annie both hope to sell milk to the local community to provide people with an alternative to store-bought brands. Sam elaborated on this idea, dreaming up a program wherein she would be able to provide high-quality milk to local cheese and yogurt makers or to low-income families through a town-funded distribution initiative. According one participant, life on a farm provides the opportunity to support the community in more traditional ways.

The drive is being able to run an operation that can help other people and employ other people. I remember even on that note we would trade like half a side of beef for a hoof trimming or something along those lines. So not everything was a cash transaction ... you get to meet needs without bringing money into it, you don't have to worry about a monetary exchange (Joe).

Another identified farm reward was the environment that the work took place in. Every participant commented on how much they enjoy walking the pastures or working outside. Mark summed up the collective thoughts, "I just like being out, working the land. The open

space.” For everyone but Sam who preferred the barn, a favorite spot on the farm was somewhere out in the landscape.

The Community

There’s kind of a stronger dairy farming community then there is a vegetable farmer community. The dairy farms tend to go back years and generations and vegetable farms maybe not so much. Maybe in that way, we’re probably more stubborn too, not willing to change. But I don’t know. I think most all farmers are hard working so we’re the same that way (Ben).

During their interviews, participants were asked about the local farming community and the Bethel-area community as a whole. They were asked to describe what they liked, what they didn’t like and how the community might have influenced their current position.

The first thing that every participant commented on when asked what they liked about the community was that it’s small. Participants said this makes it feel welcoming because “Everyone knows each other. You walk into the general store; you know whose there (Todd).” Another participant elaborated on why a small community is so important,

I really like that the community is involved in taking care of each other. I think small towns should always look out for each other, within the town and without the town as well. You know, you got stuff set maybe help Randolph out with something or South Royalton. I guess it’s the same thing with the Fire Departments in that sense. If somethings going on, they can’t handle a fire, they call other people to come in and help so I kinda feel like small communities are like that (Joe).

When asked specifically about the farming community in the area, participants described a feeling of comradery. Newcomers said that the farming community is willing to teach and mentor anyone who wants to learn in an effort to support an interest in dairy. “It’s dwindling,” Todd commented, “and no one wants to lose the small family farm.” Mark described the relationship that different farms have with each other,

There isn’t anybody’s farm around town where if we showed up we’d get kicked off of it you know, it’s all friendly or at least a friendly competition if nothing else.... We all know the struggles. We’re all on the same bus even if we got different seats (Mark).

Overall, participants said they were grateful for both the local and farming community because it created bonds that led to a sense of safety. Many pointed toward the comradery that resulted after Hurricane Irene, as neighbors got together to pump out flooded basements and shovel debris out of houses. One participant said that farms at higher elevations opened up any extra space they had in their barns to shelter cows from farms in the flood plain. “That doesn’t happen everywhere, we’re lucky to have those kind of people here (Sam).”

When asked what they didn’t like about the community, some participants felt that it was “too old” to be vibrant and others regret that it isn’t as farm oriented as it used to be. One participant mourned a potential school merger that could endanger the sense of community that had built up in the area, “The community is involved in the school and the school is involved in the community. I’m a little worried that that’s gonna be gone (Joe).” While no other participants directly mentioned the merger, they did worry about how a dwindling school would impact the community as a whole since it is often school events, such as soccer games, that draw community members together.

In regards to the farming community, no one had any complaints.

When asked if the community influenced their decision to farm, participants overwhelmingly said yes. Some participants said that if they grew up in a city they don’t know if they would want to farm. Perhaps they would have picked a different career path. Following this statement, Ben added, “If I didn’t grow up knowing better!” Others said that growing up where they did taught them the value of a farmer. They said that so often, farmers are looked down upon but coming from this area, they learned that farming is an honorable profession. It’s hard work. It takes skill and creativity and people depend on you whether they know it or not.

It’s not a job for people who have nothing else to do. It takes a special kinda person. You gotta love it or there’s no way you could motivate yourself to do it. If I didn’t have so much support from the dairy community and the town I don’t know if I would know this (Mark).

Choosing to Stay

During the interviews, each participant was asked if they felt they had been given the opportunity to do anything besides dairy farming, and the answer was an overwhelming yes. Every single participant said that they could have been anything they wanted to be, but they chose pursue a life in farming. In the words of one farmer, “Our parents were always really encouraging us to go out and try other stuff. We could have done anything we wanted to but even the off farm jobs we found in High School were on other farms. We love it (Joe).” Others agreed saying, “Our parents are pretty good about, you know, not saying we had to farm. I just never really had the desire to do anything else (Annie).” “I’m going to college and it could have been for anything but I want to farm (Sam).”

As a follow up question, I asked each participant if they had ever considered doing anything different. Joe went off to college to study exercise science and later came to realize that his heart was in dairy farming. Todd has dreams of being a fire fighter with a small hobby farm on the side but other than that, aspirations to work outside of the barn were minimal. Participants joked about wanting to drive a dump truck when they were 10 or being a milk tester but all told, their hearts are set on farming. Every farmer I spoke with made it clear that they farmed because they wanted to, not because they had to.

While not all participants agreed on why exactly they wanted to stay on the farm, they all felt certain that they would stay as long as they could. Whether it was a relationship with the cows or the owners, an appreciation for the work or the rewards of the work of some other factor, choosing to farm is choosing a lifestyle and even though participants had many other options, the farming lifestyle is the only one they want – even if it isn’t easily obtained.

It’s what I plan on doing with my life in general so just because this one didn’t work out doesn’t mean I’m not going to farm somewhere else... dairy farming would always be something I’d come back to. I want to farm, I like doing it and I love the cows (Sam).

Farm Life

This section describes the lived experiences of farmers, detailing what it was like to grow up on a farm and what their role in its operation was.

Growing up on a Farm

“It was really good” is a sentiment that was frequently used to summarize what it was like to grow up on a dairy farm. While many participants were quick to share their High School grievances of working on a farm when they would rather have been hanging out with their friends or getting up at 5:00 AM to milk before school when they would have rather slept in, they acknowledged that growing up on a farm gave them one of the best childhoods they could have hoped for.

I like that you can just go. You got all this room to do whatever. And you know, Mom and Dad had us doing stuff on the farm soon as we could so we got to do some fun things (Annie).

There was always something to do. I was never really bored. I guess I didn't used to like splitting wood when I was younger but there's always certain chores that you don't like doing at certain times of your life (Ben).

Participants remembered walking with cows when they were only three or four years old and said that it taught them responsibility and respect. One farmer noted that growing up on a farm taught him that life has its own speed and that it's not always on par with your plans. He learned that farming can't be about keeping a tight schedule and set routine.

Growing up on a farm also heavily influenced the participant's family life. While extremely frustrating at times, the participants acknowledged the lessons it taught them and the bonds it built. “You got to really value the help of each other and really spend a lot of time getting to know each other. A lot of funny stories. A lot of trust was built working very closely together (Mark).” For many, farm life created memories as siblings muddled through tough chores together. Joe described a common chore wherein he and his brother would unload all the unsellable blocks of wood into the backyard, put on some Styx music and go to town splitting fire wood to heat the house; all of this in between the other farm chores they were responsible for. “We still reminisce about those times splitting wood out behind the house. It makes us happy.”

When trying to describe what family life on the farm was like, many participants chose instead to describe a picture that they might take. There were various interpretations but most agreed that it would look like,

A family together just tired at the end of the day but still smiling knowing the work is done. Just resting and being content with one another, not always the case but that's how I remember it. Being done and taking it easy at the end of the day (Joe).

They acknowledge that this may be idealistic, but when they think back these are the things they remember.

What many participants ended up circling around to was the idea of quality of life. All of the individuals I interviewed said that they felt like they got feelings of peace of mind, comfort amongst the elements and a general happiness from growing up on a farm that they would not have had otherwise. They said that they felt like growing up on a farm gave them a better life than they would have had otherwise and the way they approached the interview made me believe them. When I was speaking with them, all of the participants seemed to be very deliberate and thoughtful in their statements. They were quietly matter-of-fact and didn't waste their words. They had a gentle, humble, honest sense about them. They seemed to be living at a pace that many of us are not accustomed to; utterly unhurried and I can't imagine that they have any urge to change this. When asked about the pace of life on the farm, Ben summed it up perfectly when he said,

Well, the thing is that there will always be a list of to-do's and if you're constantly trying to get to everything you're wear yourself out. No one's got the spirit for that. You know the story of the tortoise and the hare? We're the tortoise and we're happy to be. The tortoise enjoyed his walk (Ben).

Farm Tasks

Each participant was asked about their role on the farm, the tasks that they were charged with, and their answers reflect a wide spectrum of farm responsibility

Participants from non-farming families tended spend most of their time doing chores in direct interaction with the cows. One participant described his time on the farm as showing up, doing the milking chores then leaving. Another went into more depth,

You have to clean off all the stalls and then you have to put saw dust down, then you put the hay out and call the cows in. You put the cows in and hook the cows up. Then you milk. Afterward there's all kind of cleaning and washing but then I go home. It takes a while (Todd).

Participants who grew up on a farm described a much wider range of tasks that took place throughout different stages of their life. One farmer spoke about his childhood tasks, "Sawdust was usually my deal. Scraping manure under the cows into the gutter. Feeding animals that weren't as consequential such as the pigs and chickens (Joe)." When these participants got older, their role of the farm changed to include tasks such as keeping an eye on the animals, helping with birthing's, haying and maintaining farm infrastructure.

Division of Labor

Participants were also asked about who handled different aspects of the farm business including management, finances and labor. On three of the five farms that participants currently work on, it was a woman who owned the farm originally and her husband who handled the finances. On the other two farms, it was the opposite. The men were the original farm owners and their wives kept the books. There was always a distinction between initial owner and financial manager. Additionally, most participants reported that the same people who owned the farm managed its daily operations.

Every single farm represented by participants hired non-family members as farm hands. Most farms only hired one person at a time, but Farm Four hired as many as four at once, three of which were college students enrolled in a nearby agricultural program. The involvement of these hired workers ranged from sporadic, wherein the farm hand would be called if someone was sick or unable to make a milking to full time, six days a week. According to participants, on two of the farms the farm hands were the primary ones in charge of the labor with one farm hand charged with training their replacement. This is attributed to the age of the owners and the fact that some owners had jobs off of the farm.

Duties included milking and occasionally helping with the hay. Participants reported that on the three other farms, farm hands worked alongside the owners and shared the labor during their shift. Tasks ranged from milking to moving brush and farm hands in these situations stayed on the farms much longer than they did in situations where they had no connection with the owners. Hired farm hands who worked with the owners stayed on the farm anywhere from one to seven years. Those who didn't work with the owners spent anywhere from two weeks to two years on the farm.

In situations where farm hands were hired, participants reported hourly pay as the method of payment. These hired workers earned between \$10 and \$15 an hour, depending on the farm and worked anywhere from 4 to 36 hours a week. On farms where farm hands had positive relationships with the owners, payment was made weekly. On farms where farm hands had negative relationships with the owners, payment schedules were inconsistent. Two participants explained,

They would keep track of when I went to work and they would always tell me, 'we'll pay you, we'll pay you' and it took a couple weeks, maybe a month, month and a half before I ever actually saw a paycheck (Todd).

I don't know if you'd call it volunteer work because I was paid for milking. I wasn't paid for anything else I did like fixing fences or stacking hay but it had to be done. Once we started talking about a farm transition, my share was traded for work so I stopped getting paid really and when the transition was cancelled I got nothing (Sam).

For those who are involved in the farm as adults, payment is based on salary because "if it was an hourly rate, we couldn't afford to do this probably (Ben)." Two participants who were recently made partners reported making between \$20,000 and \$26,000 a year, each. They acknowledge that it's low but are content with the arrangement because they live rent-free in houses owned by the farm, have minimal mortgages and are in a situation where the farm is able to absorb its own debt.

Participants were also asked about the hours they spend on the farm. For hired farm hands, hours typically fell around milking times: working shifts between 4:00 and 9:00 in the morning and 3:00 and 8:00 at night. For those who grew up on the farm, the days are much

longer with hours ranging from 5:30 in the morning to 8:00 at night, depending on the schedule. These full-time farmers, either part of a farming family or a partial owner, have enough help on the farm so that they can each have two nights off and two later mornings a week. They estimate an average of 13 hours a day with the caveat that they don't do much on Sundays.

Creating a Financially Sustainable Farm

I do love cows; I love working with them but I also don't see a ton of money in it. You'd have to have a second job just to keep the farm going sometimes (Joe).

For many participants, farming is a labor of love, not one that will make them rich. However, it can't be ignored that farms need money to survive and during the interviews, I asked participants about the financial situations on their farms and what they are doing to improve this situation.

Farm Debt

When speaking to participants who served as hired farm hands at any point in their life, they had mixed levels of awareness about debt on the farm. One participant described varied levels of openness across farms and farm owners.

On (Farm two), you could tell. Certain days there wouldn't be enough woodchips for the floor and they would just tell you they didn't have the money for it. On (Farm one) they were really open with it from the moment I started. They never really hid anything from me. They let me know that they weren't doing so great but I didn't know the numbers (Todd).

Another participant, who also worked as a farm hand, agreed. In her experience, she said she could only guess at the finances based on how long it took the owners to write her a paycheck. Sometimes, she would go months without a paycheck and that's when she knew it was really bad. It wasn't until she began having conversations with the owners about taking over the farm that she was given a "ball-park figure" of the debt. She also explained

that on that particular farm, farm business money was used for personal expenses rather than being put back into the business, which took a toll.

For participants who grew up on a farm and/or are currently involved in the farm transition process, farm debt was well known. "Growing up, you could tell when Mom and Dad were struggling but once we got older, they started telling us the numbers (Ben)." Every participant in this category reported knowing or having easy access to the farms financial records and farm debt. They were adamant that nothing is gained by hiding the farms finances.

Financial Awareness

Participants were also asked about their level of financial awareness: specifically, do you know how much money you need to live off of for a year? Not one participant knew, and none seemed very concerned. Some commented that they knew how much they DID live off, but that sometimes they think it should be more.

When participants who are in the process of becoming farm owners were asked if the farm would be able to financially meet their needs, they all believed that it would. Some noted that it might take some time before they are able to make money off of the farm because there are a lot of things that they would want to fix once they take charge, but they had no doubt that ends would meet. Another farmer, currently a partner, had no fear about the economic future of his farm. When asked if the farm would be able to support everyone involved he replied

I think as long as we stay creative and work hard it can. We've got some other resources up here that we haven't utilized to the fullest. We could tap a lot more trees if we wanted to, we got a lot of logging to do just to keep up with our Forest Management Plan so things like that could bring in some extra income. The mill, I'm sure there's some room to grow that too without a huge investment (Mark).

Overall, the participants were confident that they would be able to run a successful farm business; this was especially true for those who grew up on a farm.

Choosing to Diversify

In an effort to survive financially, many farmers noted taking extra steps to provide for their farms stability. The most common step was diversification. Every farm represented in this study diversifies in some way, most commonly through maple syrup production. Additional diversification strategies include timber and hay harvesting and raising heifers for market sale. Farmers cited diversification as a necessary part of farming, noting that developing opportunities that could be expanded if needed is the only way to ensure that the farm has a future. Furthermore, participants who attended a college program said that diversification was emphasized throughout their education.

Organic

In many interviews, participants brought up organic certification as a way to obtain stable milk prices and prolong the life of the farm. For several farmers, the switch to organic was seen as a strategic financial move. The environmental and ethical benefits weren't a factor. In some cases, they were contested. Some participants believe that the organic standards don't make the cows any better than conventional cows, in fact the cows sometimes suffer because they aren't permitted the medicine they need. One participant said, "I don't think it made them treat their animals any better either but it makes it harder to treat them for diseases. I've seen cows die that way when all they needed was a single vaccine (Annie)." Participants also pointed toward observed flaws in the enforcement of organic standards saying that it's easy not to follow the rules and get away with things because farm visits aren't made frequently enough.

Only one farm represented in this study was certified organic and the hired farm hands on this farm had no concept of what the farms organic practices were beyond eliminating vaccines. Some hypothesized that grazing patterns or woodchips might be part of the regulations, but they said the farmers had never talked to them about how or why they were organic beyond a brief mention of the milk prices.

The other four farms represented in this study were not certified organic and said that if milk prices dropped really low or got any more volatile, they would consider it just to bring

stability to the farm business but otherwise, they are content with their practices. They noted that many of their practices are already in line with organic standards.

Farm Scale

Participants highlighted the importance of farm size in its ability to remain viable. In this study, I interviewed participants with anywhere from 40 to 125 cows and found that farms with 60 or more cows were more financially stable and profitable, based on their own reports. However, participants who worked on farms with fewer than 60 cows admitted that with better management strategies, they could be more stable. Participants identified 40 to 50 cows as the minimum that they would need to continue making a profit and on farms where profits were split between multiple owners, 40 cows per partner share was identified as the minimum viable number of animals.

Participants in this study want to work on a range of farms; some desire their own hobby farms with fewer than 10 cows while others want to keep their farms where they are, at 125 cows. Some participants identified the Bethel-area as a special place because most farms still support 30 to 40 cows, the state average in the 1960's, and attributed farm size to the decline of family farms. "If you need at least 40 cows to break even and your barns only for 30 then you either gotta build up or sell out. Sadly, the available time, money and labor means that selling out is the only option (Ben)."

The largest farm represented in this study is home to 125 cows and is the second biggest farm in the area but compared to other farms in the state, the participants from this farm say they're still considered small. According to them, they're still 10 cows under the state average.

When asked if they needed to get any bigger, participants said that even if they wanted to, they didn't have the land for it.

It's hard to find land, you have to have a certain number of acres per cow and it's too hard to find more land because so many people are milking cows in this area right now. Up north, there's acres and acres of land that's laying there not being used but it's not like that down here (Mark).

None of the participants had any desire to grow their farms much beyond where they are now and said that having too big of a farm changes the farm experience.

Perceived Challenges in Dairy Farming

When reflecting on what worries them about being involved in the dairy industry, those relatively new to dairy farming vocalized the well-known struggles associated with the industry.

Milk prices are always a concern. We've been on this cycle for a lot of years with really high highs and really low lows. It's always a concern (Sam).

The cost. It's so expensive to try to start a farm that you have to go into a lot of debt to make it count (Todd).

Having to be there every day, even when you're sick you gotta go out and you gotta take care of them. Not a lot of younger people want to do it (Annie).

Farm Relationships

However, once they voiced these initial grievances, all participants began to express their deeper concerns. For one aspiring farmer, it was the farmers she worked for that provided the biggest obstacle. She pointed toward the owners need for complete control over the farm as the biggest frustration. When speaking about the farm owner she said that it was this relationship that caused her the most stress on the farm and ultimately, the reason she left.

Other farmers described the stress of farm relationships as well concluding that if the relationship "went south (Todd)" then working alongside the farmer every day would be a miserable experience that might be enough to force them off of the farm. Annie likened this to having a bad boss saying,

If your boss is miserable – overbearing, awful, rude – then you wouldn't want to work for them. If it got so bad you'd probably quit, even if you loved the job. This is the same thing. You work so closely together that if you don't get along it can be a big problem (Annie).

Regulations

For others, new regulations are the biggest concern. One farmer talked about the impact of new water quality regulations and the changes that will need to be made on the farm. Most farmers I spoke with felt like they were better off than others because they already have manure pits but not all farms have yet made this investment. For those bothered by the new water quality standards, the frustration came from the money, work and timeline that is now required, not a lack of environmental concern.

Some of it, we're in good shape. But the water needs to not be running into the brook and here it's kinda hard. The rain water comes down through here (hill above the farm) and the brooks right there (just down the hill, on the other side of the barn) so that might be a challenge for us to change that (Ben).

Public Opinion

Another farmer pointed toward outside opinions as an obstacle "Activist groups are always trying to paint you out to be some kind of villain, you know, it's always happening (Mark)." Participants agreed that on many occasions, there are people from outside of the dairy industry trying to tell them about what's right and wrong and how they should run their farm. Farm Two, Farm Three and Farm Five all reported being recipients of letter writing campaigns targeted at topics such as animal welfare. In these instances, they say that the letters are commonly from those outside of the community and are speaking toward generalizations only.

It hurts really, because we spend so much time caring for our cows and making sure they're happy and healthy. I love the animals in that barn and would never do anything to jeopardize them. These letters, they come from people who don't know what we do up here. They saw some documentary and now they think all farmers are bad guys. That's just not true. I've seen those documentaries too. That's not what happens on this farm but they don't know that because they've never been here. They're always invited though (Ben).

When these letters come in, participants said that they read every last one just in case there is something that they could be improving on. So far though, arguments have been generalized and inapplicable.

Social Life

Another challenge noted by those engaged in the day to day operations of a farm is the social life. One theme that was brought up throughout multiple interviews was the sense of isolation that can develop on a dairy farm. One young farmer spoke of the challenge that meeting people your own age through the dairy farming community can be. "Meeting's kinda hard because you spend so much time on the farm. It's not like you switch around farms that often (Todd)." Another participant agreed with the isolation that can settle around the farm,

Social was lacking. We only just spent time with our family really because we were always isolated. When I was in High school I didn't really appreciate it much because I wanted to be with my friends all the time.... My friends at school, they were always doing things together and I never was because I was always working on the farm. Not that that's a bad thing, I've changed my tune but growing up it was hard, yea. It was hard. I think probably that was the hardest, in fact, because people wanted to spend time doing things in the summer and I'm like 'oh I can't, I gotta go hay' (Joe).

Even at prominent social events for the dairy farming community, such as the annual Tunbridge World's Fair, meeting people your own age can be difficult. One farmer described meeting a few people, whose cows were next to his, but not many. Even though farmers are all around, they're all busy with their own animals. That being said, participants did report attending social events held specifically for the dairy farming community, although these events didn't necessarily bring together people of the same age.

I went to the Grange a few times. Most of 'em were older than me, except for the boys that my aunt would try to set me up with, no thank you...there's a lot of older people and young kids, not too much in the middle (Sam).

Farming organizations also attempt to bring people of the same age group together and often do so successfully, although in the minds of several participants, these events don't happen frequently enough to foster friendships. Todd described his involvement with Future Farmers of America. "You do (meet people) because there are hundreds of chapters and they have meetings, but not often. You kinda forget."

Just because many farmers reported feeling isolated on their farms and having few opportunities to meet people their age through the farming community itself, none seemed to be lacking in friendships or social experience. Although, they did highlight the unconventional schedules and interesting dynamics that they fell into. “You had to plan stuff with your friends after 8:00 at night. But it wasn’t that big of a deal, people tended to be flexible and understood the farm thing (Mark).”

While many farmers touched on the initial grievances of low payment, high investment and long hours, the challenges that seem to be weighing most heavily on them were less economically rooted. Participants worried about the relationship they held with the farm owner, changes they would need to make to stay within regulation, the often vocal public opinion and their social life.

The Life Cycle of the Farm

Throughout the interview process, it became apparent that farms are continuously moving through a continuum of ownership, size and condition. This section describes participant’s views on different stages of the farm life cycle.

Farming Experience

There are two primary ways that people become involved in the dairy industry: one either grows up on a dairy farm or helps a community member in need. “They needed help and I lived close by. We were kind of neighbors,” “My sister knew someone who was currently working there and they needed help milking on days that they wouldn’t be able to make it,” and “Her son had graduated from the same school I went to and she was looking for help” are all identified as ways that those new to the industry became involved. None of these people are from a farming families, yet after these early experiences, all want to be involved in dairy farming on some scale.

Every young farmer interviewed reported having a diversity of farming experiences growing up and all of them have taken jobs on multiple farms, even if their family has its own farm. The number of farms that people worked on ranged from two to 15, with an

average of five farms worked on during their life time. These farms vary in size from 40 to 800 and are spread across multiple states including Vermont, Maine and Idaho. Several farmers identified having a diversity of farming experiences as a way to become a better farmer.

I had four other people during High School and College that I milked for and I think that taught me a lot. Four farms all in this are but they're all completely different. You pick up some things along the way. How to do some things, maybe how not to do some things (Ben).

Participants also identified a range of farmer training programs that were instrumental in shaping their farm knowledge. First and foremost, participants named growing up on a farm as the most valuable means of farm education. Elementary and High School involvement in experiential learning programs such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America also provided valuable experiences. "I did 4-H since I was eight until I was 18, I did 10 years of it and learned a lot. It was a lot of fun (Joe)." Participants also engaged in experiential learning through internships. One participant took a summer internship in Wisconsin and later picked up an apprenticeship at a nearby farm. Another interned on an 800 cow farm in Idaho. College farming programs are also being taken advantage of by aspiring farmers. The Dairy Farm Management Program at Vermont Technical College is a popular, local program that two participants have graduated from. One participant took advantage of the FARMS 2 + 2 program between the University of Vermont and Vermont Technical College to build his knowledge. FARMS 2 + 2 is

...a tuition scholarship for four or five students to get a four - year degree in dairy in Vermont...you'd do two years at Vermont Tech and then you'd go to the University of Vermont for basically a year and a half plus one semester you go over to the minor research farm (Mark).

All participants engaged in a variety of these training programs to build their knowledge on farm labor and the farm business.

Farm Transition

During the interview process, I spoke with three individuals who have experience with the farm transition process. Two are currently partners on Farm Three and are progressing

through a successful farm transition to transfer ownership from their parents. The other was involved in a failed farm transition on Farm two. When speaking with these participants, the number one difference between their experiences was the relationship with the farm owner. When there isn't a strong relationship with the farm owners from the beginning, all the challenges associated with a farm transition are made more difficult and can tear the transition apart.

At the time that each participant decided to enter into the farm transition process, their relationships with the owners were very different. On Farm three, the two participants spoke highly of their parents and working as a family saying that, "we always liked working together." Because they had a good working relationship, they were able to work together to outline a plan for a transition and reported talking about the transition quite a bit, especially early on before they hired a lawyer to draw up the paper work that was mutually agreed upon and signed. The paper work outlines a transition plan for the business ownership, but not the real-estate so they will need to make additional plans, but both participants noted that this will be difficult.

Mom and Dad were ok to bring us in but it's hard for them to talk about, you know, a day where they won't be part of it at all so we've got it set to where we will more or less be the majority owners but how it goes after that will be another discussion (Mark).

They admitted that there is work to be done have no doubt that it will happen. Both participants were ok with the idea that their parents may have partial ownership for many years to come because they make all decisions as a team anyway. When asked if the farm would be able to support them all, the participants agreed that it would as it is now and said that if they got into a tough place, they had several untapped resources on the farm that they could take advantage of.

On Farm two, this was not the case. While the participant had a close relationship with the male owner, saying he was like a Grandfather to her, she disagreed with the female owner's management style from the very beginning. It was because of the male owner that she had agreed to begin the farm transition process and because of the female owner that she backed out of it. She cited the female owner's inability to surrender any control as the

deciding factor, noting that “She wasn’t willing to let go of the things she needed to let go of to make it easy or possible for me (Sam).”

While the transition for Farm two was still in place, the actions of the farm owners deeply impacted the viability of the transfer. When asked if the transition plan was ever written down, the participant replied, “supposedly but I never saw it.” She said that they spoke about the transition whenever the owners felt like it which was not very often and whenever they did have a conversation, something was different because the owners would forget something or remember something else.

In order to have a successful farm transition, participants agreed that a strong relationship with ready owners is the most important factor. The owner needs to be ready to surrender at least partial control in order for the transfer to move forward and frequent, intentional discussions about the farms future need to take place. Participants also identified the importance of a written, legal agreement for farm transfer. “Even if it’s in the family, the agreement keeps things civil and keeps people from getting greedy or flip flopping on an anxious whim (Ben).”

Farm Loss

Unfortunately, not all farms are viable and some have to sell out. During my interviews, participants identified two broad categories of reasons for farm loss. The first is that some farms simply have no one to take over once the current owners are unable to work. The second is that people become disillusioned by the industry and realize that farm life is not for them.

While everyone I spoke with was passionate about farming, they acknowledged that many others are not. They pointed toward a lack of interest in younger populations, a dislike for the hours and pay, increasing levels of education and smaller families as factors influencing this overall farm loss.

Participants also noted that people can become disillusioned by what they think farm life will be like and come to find that reality doesn't meet their expectations. One participant described this scenario,

People get an ideal. A very visionary look of like a red barn on the hill and clean animals and grass and in Vermont that's not the way it is. Maybe in the summer it is sometimes but most of the time it's hard work and it can be messy and unpleasant and it's not always a picturesque work or job (Joe).

Participants pointed toward the role of the farming community in farm loss. During one interview, the participant stated that there aren't enough examples of sustainable farms in the area or if there are, they aren't sharing what they know. Other participants echoed this sentiment and while they acknowledge that farming can leave little free time for teaching others, it is a responsibility that a successful farmer has to support their less successful counterparts. Participants said that while the closing of small farms might cut down on the competition, no farmer wants to see his neighbors lose their animals.

Future of the Farm

Farm loss is a serious concern for many communities but many farms are still looking optimistically to the future. Participants were asked about their future farming ambitions and for many, the list is endless.

Several participants who own their own farm said, "We've always got a list of things, of projects were looking to change as time and money allow(Mark)." These projects range from things you can "peck away at" such as updates to meet water quality standards and increasing the use of natural resources to larger endeavors such as updates to farm facilities and even a farm shop so that farm equipment can be fixed inside rather than out in the elements.

For participants who don't own their own farm, ambitions are different. One participant said simply, "I'd like a small farm. A small garden, nothing too big, maybe four or five cows, something to keep me busy (Todd)." Another had a similar dream,

I'd do a lot of beef, do a few cows, not too, too many. Maybe get involved in like butter and cheese making perhaps just for curiosities sake. I've always liked chickens so I'd have to have a few of those and some piggles but yea, it would probably be hobby farming (Joe).

Participants have a variety of visions for their farms, sometimes there are multiple visions for the same farm, but all have aspirations to keep improving. One farmer summarized these aspirations when he said,

Well you have to keep making improvements because the world is improving. If I'm down here with my crank engine I'm not gonna be able to compete plus it's not as fun. I'm not saying you have to be entirely modern, but making changes can be a good thing and there's some helpful things out there that can make me a better farmer. I want to be a better farmer (Ben).

Discussion

There are many reasons for young people to leave the dairy industry. The literature says that in many social and economic ways, dairy farming is no longer a viable career path yet in Bethel, Vermont, the younger generation is embracing life on the farm. The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons why young people are staying on dairy farms when logic seems to dictate that they do otherwise. I wanted to explore the perceptions that people hold about their farms and what it means to be a dairy farmer. I set out to better understand the act of sacrificing time, money, weekends, holidays, vacations and sick days to become a rural dairy farmer.

Preconceived Notions

Going into this research, I had mixed ideas about why anyone would pursue a life in the dairy industry. To some degree, I suspected that there might be a familial pressure but it turns out that this is not the case. Participants chose to enter the field of dairy farming simply because they want to farm. None of them felt any pressure from their parents to take over the family farm, rather they all attested to the fact that their parents encouraged them to work off the farm and to gain experience in other fields in an effort to broaden their horizons. However, for many, even off the farm work took the shape of dairy farming. It turns out that for the young dairy farmers of Bethel, Vermont, farming is the only desired life style, no pressure needed.

In Bethel, not many students go on to college after graduating High School. To a certain degree, I believed that perhaps they didn't have the opportunities they needed to do other things aside from farming. This too was a misjudgment. Amongst the young dairy farming community of Bethel, there seems to be plenty of opportunities to choose a life path that doesn't lead back to the farm. However, participants in this study chose this path anyway. Every participant is either pursuing or has completed a college education and for everyone but Joe, this education has centered around a future in dairy farming. When faced with the opportunity to study anything they wanted to, they chose to improve their skills as dairy farmers and this says a great deal about the purity of their motives. Many commented that

they contemplated whether or not college would be worth it, but ultimately decided that if they wanted their best chance at success, a little more information couldn't hurt. In addition to showing a pure motive, this also shows a drive in the younger generation enter the farm with as much information as possible.

I also came into this research under the impression that farm ownership in Bethel was stable which is true, but not in the way that was expected. I believed that farms were primarily passed down through families but came to realize that this is not always the case. While there are many farms that are passed down through familial lines, there are many others that, for one reasons or another, cannot be. In these situations, farms sometimes sell out to others interested in farming or begin the process of slowly transferring ownership to someone outside of the family. In both scenarios, the farm ownership is moved to someone else who is interested in farming; the farm remains operational but the owners change. This indicates farm stability because the farms aren't being lost and ownership would need to eventually transferred at some point. The only difference is in the person who ownership is transferred to. In this way farms are stable, yet not trough familial lines as anticipated.

Thinking about the Literature

A survey of the literature revealed very little about why anyone would want to pursue a life as a dairy farmer. Fischer and Burton (2014), Parsons (2010), Rich, Faulkston and Lichau (2009) and Svensen (2013) all survey the reasons for leaving which include a lack of interest and work ethic in the younger generation, an increase in opportunity which has led to young people seeking jobs off the farm, the work hours, the scarcity of money and the isolation, just to name a few. However, this study uncovered the fact that for those choosing to stay, none of these things are seen as significant challenges. In fact, some of these factors were invalid all together amongst the participants. An increase in opportunity has led to more people attaining higher levels of education and being exposed to more opportunities as Fischer and Burton (2014) and Svensen (2013) report, but this education was used to increase farm knowledge, not leave the farm. Additionally, the never ending work is something valued by many of the participants, not a dissuading factor. They love the work

and if it weren't for this reason, they would not be farming. The challenges identified in the literature seem to only highlight the participant's superficial concerns rather than delving into the challenges that they hold to be most important.

The challenges perceived by those in the dairy industry are much different than those identified in the literature, depending on the group of participants. For those who did not grow up on a farm, the participants who only have experience working as a hired hand on the farms of others, the primary concerns revolved around money, time commitment and relationship with the farm owners as. These align with the concerns expressed by Fischer and Burton (2014), Parsons (2010), Rich, Faulkston and Lichau (2009) and Svensen (2013) and I believe that this is because they have a different level of experience. These participants are viewing the industry from an outsider's perspective, analyzing the pros and cons of having a farm before diving in themselves and this puts them in a different situation than those who grew up on a farm and those already immersed in the industry.

For the second group of participants, those who currently co-own a dairy farm or work for their parents on the family farm, concerns are much different. Among their perceived challenges are rough relationships with the farm owners, new regulations that require modifications to the farm, negative opinions by others about farmers and the lack of social life which can sometimes lead to isolation on the farm. It makes sense that these concerns would be on the minds of those who work on their own farms versus those who are hired out by others because they might not become apparent until one has come into this position. If someone has only worked as a hired hand, they have a much different perspective than someone who works on their own farm because they are able to leave the job at the end of the day. The farm is not their life. These are the problems that owners face that hired hands may be sheltered from.

These concerns differ from those described in the literature in that they depend not primarily on economics, but more on quality of life, which seems to be missing from the research. A positive relationship with a boss, sufficient infrastructure, a positive image and a social life are all things that most people would appreciate in their jobs and dairy farming is no different. Yet these challenges, while concerning to the participants, were not seen as

roadblocks but rather accepted as part of farm life. While volatility in milk prices and long hours were initially noted as struggles, they were brushed off when farmers identified their real challenges which even they explained were “just part of the job.” While farming is hard work riddled with challenges, the benefits for those involved in the industry well outweigh the downfalls. It is this attitude that contributes to a successful farm. When the priorities shift from economic success (rather than economic stability) to something rooted in quality of life, the experience of dairy farming goes from being a chore to an act of love.

Winsten, Kerchner, Richardson, Lichau and Hyman (2010), Samuelson (2009) and Parsons (2010) tell us that in order to have a farm that can sustain itself, it needs to go big. Across the country, farms are consolidating and doubling, even tripling the size of their herds. Yet many of the farmers interviewed with are proving otherwise. Participants in this study identified 40 to 50 cows as the minimum herd size per family needed to create a sustainable farm. But they have also proven that milking cows alone is not enough to be successful in the dairy industry; diversification is essential. Every farm represented in this study diversified in some way, most commonly with maple products. While some farms diversified more than others, they all used the resources available to them through life on the farm, whether it be timber or the sale of heifers, as a backup in case they fell on tough times. Many farms have diversified in one way or another for years, but in the modern age of farming it may be possible that successful farms are defined by their ability to produce farm products in addition to milk. The sale of milk alone can be unstable but supplementing with maple, timber, hay or other value-added products can provide assurance and stability to the farm without the pressure of increasing herd size and losing the connection that comes from working with a small herd.

The literature also points out that the next generation of farmers will be better educated than those in the past and my research supports this. During the interviews, it became clear that those choosing to become farmers know of the obstacles that lie ahead and are doing their best to equip themselves with the knowledge they need to overcome them. All of the participants are pursuing or have already attained a college education and have participated in other farmer training programs in their youth such as Future Farmers of

America or 4-H. They have supplemented first-hand, on-farm experience with college courses and have broadened their knowledge base by working on multiple farms, many of which have given them various perspectives on what to do and what not to do as well. This broad base of experience shows that those choosing to enter the field of dairy farming are not doing so empty handed, and this is a hopeful sign for the future of small dairy farms.

Farmers in this study noted their cows as the number one reason for staying on the farm. They perceived a mutual relationship with the animals and this connection is not mentioned in the literature. Knowing how much these farmers love their cows made realizing the criticisms that they encounter in regards to animal welfare even more surprising. There seems perception among farmers that those on the outside of the farming community don't understand what really happens on the farm and what their intentions are. In several interviews, the participants felt like outsiders were nagging them about their farm practices and ethics without knowing the facts. Half of the participants reported being the recipient of letter writing campaigns and this was not an issues that was anticipated when this study began. There are many activist groups out there with good intentions, yet making assumptions about farm practices without having visited the farm can be a very dangerous thing to do. Farmers vary widely on their farming practices and this study has touched on the importance of understanding the farmer before making assumptions about the farm.

Farm Transitions

Much of the literature on transitions focuses heavily on procedure and struggle (Heleba, 2007 & Roerick, 2011), yet very little analyzes the readiness of those entering the transition. Throughout the course of this study, what it means to be ready for a farm transition has become more defined. First and foremost, it means an open, honest and communicative relationship with the farm owner. Without this, managing the challenges that come up during the transition process can be nearly impossible. Additionally, a comprehensive understanding of how much money one needs to live off of and of farm finances is needed. It can be easy to say, "we'll make it work," but when it comes down to it,

there either is enough money or there isn't and understanding ahead of time how much money you need to live off of can help prevent overstepping finances.

What it Means to be a Dairy Farmer

Throughout this study, dairy farmers noted several differences between themselves and other types of farmers. Many people outside of the farming industry tend to group all farmers into one category, assuming shared experiences and motives, but this is not the case. While both may appreciate the ability to work the land and create a product, dairy farmers tend to identify with a sense of tradition that they don't believe all vegetable farms have. Many dairy farms have been in operation for decades, under one owner or another, and therefore have developed a sense of community with one another. This community serves as a support system and without the history, it seems logical to believe that other types of farm communities might not be as strong. This farm community provides stability to the farm, a stability that comes from knowing that there are resources and supportive neighbors surrounding you should you ever fall on hard times. More often than not, this safety net is never utilized, but the rural farmers interviewed seem to agree that knowing it's there makes all the difference. That being said, there also seems to be a certain stubbornness about a dairy farmer, an unwillingness to change as one participant put it, that is more associated with dairy than any other type of farmer. This stubbornness often means that even in times of hardship, one is reluctant to reach out to the surrounding safety nets. Regardless, a certain confidence seems to come from knowing that help is available, if it is needed.

Conclusion

The intent of this thesis is to highlight the reasons why young people are entering the dairy industry in a conversation that largely overlooks those who are choosing to stay. Across the country, dairy farms are shutting down and people are getting out of the dairy industry. Yet, in the small, rural town of Bethel, Vermont, just the opposite is occurring.

This thesis attempts to contribute to the discussion by asking dairy farmers in this specific community about their motivations in choosing a farming lifestyle. There is ample literature documenting the reasons why life on a farm can be challenging (e.g. Fischer and Burton, 2014; Parsons, 2010 and Svensen, 2013) yet very little has taken a look at the other side. Through the course of this research, it has become increasingly clear that those choosing to enter the dairy industry are motivated not by economic success but rather by a genuine love for the work they do and the animals they work with and the things they worry most about are not economically but socially based.

The participants interviewed for this research came from a variety of backgrounds and held varying levels of experience, yet all agreed that the work they do and the animals they work with are their main drivers for entering the industry. In some instances, these young farmers came from farming families and are looking to eventually take over the family farm. In other instances, people who have not grown up on a farm but have experience working as a hired hand are looking to start their own farm by entering into a transition with farmers who are looking to get out of the industry. In both of these scenarios, the young aspiring farmers are working hard to make sure that they have the best possible chance of success in the future by pursuing a higher level of education than many have in the past. Additionally, these young farmers are acknowledging the importance of diversification in maintaining a sustainable farm and are doing so with a variety of natural resources available to them through their farmland. When thinking about the concerns they have about dairy farming, newcomers to the farming community often worry about economic status. For those who have grown up on a farm, the concerns are much different. This latter group is concerned with the relationships that exist between farm owners, managers and laborers, the sometimes judgmental views of outsiders and the unique social

life, which can be a blessing and a curse. Regardless of these obstacles, the young farmers of Bethel, Vermont still want to farm and point toward the strong, local dairy farming community as a major support in this endeavor.

As a result of this thesis, I have come to believe that supporting these small family farms is crucial, both because of the community services they provide and also because of the kind of people that they foster. Dairy farmers genuinely love the work they are involved in and there are very few other careers populated by people who can say this. For the participants in this study, farming isn't about the money or the easy life rather, it's about living a fulfilled and content life that comes from doing the work you love and loving the ones you work with. For dairy farmers, this includes the cows who are the primary reason that dairy farmers are in the business. This way of life and respect for the animals is a rarity and I believe that there is immense value in it from the perspectives of food systems, ethics, humanitarianism, environmentalism and overall well-being.

Small farms provide support, commodities and character to communities and they allow for a bond with the animals that simply cannot be had on farms with larger herds. Yet, as people leave the industry the possibility of this way of life decreases. To support the future of small dairy farms and future dairy farmers, the exposure of children to farms and farm animals from an early age is necessary. This thesis has found that early farm experience can be instrumental in fostering future farmers. The ability to develop a bond with farm animals and farm life from an early age has an influence on how inclined one is to become a dairy farmer down the road but moreover, the ability to develop a bond with an animal such as a cows that provides daily commodities helps connect one to their food, their environment and perhaps even their community. By exposing children to aspects of dairy farming, especially cows, from an early age then an appreciation for farming can begin building. For the young dairy farmers of Bethel, Vermont, early exposure to farming through programs such as 4-H, Future Farmers of America and farm visit field-trips were key to developing a bond with the animals later in life and I believe that these programs should continue, especially those that work directly with schools as they capture an audience that might not other engage in the dairy industry.

While the sample size for this study is less than originally intended, the data collected interestingly seems to contradict the current literature and at the very least, address noticeable gaps. This raises interesting questions about the current state of farm research and the indicators that are being used to measure success and concern. This thesis utilized qualitative methods to uncover the fact that farmers in Bethel, Vermont view their lifestyles through a quality of life lens, rather than an economic one. While this study had many limitations including the size of its data pool and geographic scope, several opportunities for further research have emerged from it. As stated above, the goal of this research was to shine light on why people are choosing to stay on dairy farms. Of course, it should not be assumed that this is a trend that is occurring nationwide but it is true for the study area of Bethel, Vermont. I would suggest a more comprehensive study in the Bethel-area or in similar communities that are observing this phenomenon modeled after this study wherein in-depth interviews are used to investigate the root causes of farmer motivations, ideally with a larger sample size. Key practices should include on-farm interviews to begin understanding context as well as some form of participatory photography because in many instances, farmers were unable to express their true motivations until they were able to photograph it first. Key questions should ask about the local community, things that are liked and disliked, feelings of responsibility to become farmers and opportunities/ desires they have had to do something different.

If more young people continue to make the decision to become farmers, this phenomenon will be an important one to understand and studies such as this one can help us to do that. I believe that people want to feel a sense of contentment and accomplishment at the end of the day and if people are increasingly finding this feeling on dairy farms as was indicated during this study then it is worth investigating why. Perhaps there are characteristics of farm work that could be extrapolated and applied to other industries to improve overall well-being and contentment in other lines of work. I think that the knowledge gleaned from studies such as this is important in its potential and well worth researching.

I came into this research with a variety of assumptions, some of which were right and others which proved to be wrong. I learned that the dairy industry is changing and that

those involved are a passionate, humble, hard-working and happy bunch. While nationwide, the future of small dairy farms may be bleak, in the rural community of Bethel, Vermont, I believe that there is hope for the future of dairy farming thanks to a dedicated group of young farmers who have far more going on in their minds and hearts than meets the eye.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Preliminary Interview Questions

Background Information:

- How old are you?
- Do you have any brothers or sisters?
- What is your interest in dairy farming – are you looking to get started? From a farming family?
- Can you talk a little about your past experience with dairy farming? (farms, sizes, breeds)

Questions about the farm:

- How long has your family been farming?
- Can you describe your herd?
- How did your family come to run the farm?
- Does your farm produce and sell other products besides milk? Can you specify?
- Does your farm use any hired labor? Family or non-family?
- Who does the tasks on the farm? Who does the labor? Management?
- What are your hours on the farm?
- How does payment work?

Community:

- What was it like growing up on a farm? Social/ family life?
- What did you like best about growing up on a farm? What was the hardest?
- What is the dairy farming community like? Are you involved in 4-H or FFA? Do you meet people your age?
- What do you think of the Bethel area community? What is appealing about it? What isn't? Does it influence your decision at all?
- Do you think you would feel differently about dairy farming if you lived in a different community?

Future actions toward dairy farming:

- If staying on the farm....
 - What attracts you to the idea of dairy farming? What don't you like about it?

- Why do you want to stay on the farm? Have you ever considered doing anything different? Do you feel like you have the opportunity to do anything different?
 - Would you consider coming back later and be a dairy farmer? Would you change things about the farm if you did?
 - Do you feel a responsibility to take over your family's farm?
 - If you weren't staying on the farm, what do you think will happen to it?
 - What are your main concerns about staying in the field of dairy farming?
 - What are your plans for the next few years?
 - If you could do anything you wanted to, what would you do?
- If leaving or undecided....
 - What attracts you to the idea of dairy farming? What don't you like about it?
 - Why do you think others might want to stay?
 - Would you consider coming back later and be a dairy farmer? Would you change things about the farm if you did?
 - Are you interested in any form of farming?
 - What would the farm need to do to encourage you to come back?
 - Do you feel a responsibility to take over your family's farm?
 - If you don't take over the farm, what do you think will happen to it?
 - What are your plans for the next few years?
 - If you could do anything you wanted to, what would you do?
 - If entering the field of dairy farming...
 - What attracts you to the idea of dairy farming? What don't you like about it?
 - What are your main concerns about entering the field of dairy farming?
 - What are your plans for the next few years?
 - How do you start up/ take over a farm?

Farm Transition:

- Who owns the housing on the farm?
- Do you currently live on the farm? Describe the situation (who pays for housing? is it supplied? will you keep living where you are?)
- How much have you talked about the farm transition?
- Do you and the current owners have an agreed upon plan for the transfer of the labor? Management? Ownership? Can you tell me a little bit about it?
- Have you sat down with the owner and discussed the plan so that both of you are in full agreement? Is the plan penciled out?

- Will the farm be able to support both yourself and the current owners during the transition process?
- What is happening to the current owners once you have completed the transition?
- How long will it be until you have full ownership of the business and the land?
- Will you have to buy the farm from the owners or is it being given/ traded for work? If buying, where is that money coming from? Do you think you'll be able to pay it back?
- Are you aware of the farms debt?
- How much money do you need to live off of? Will the farm be able to meet that need? What does it need to be able to do to pay you? Does it need to get bigger?

Final Thoughts:

- Do you have any stand out memories from your time on the farm?
- What things would you say shape your view or perception of the farm? (what is your perception of the farm?)

Appendix B: Participant Agreement Form

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. My name is Mikayla Peront and I am a student at the University of Vermont. For my senior thesis, I am conducting a series of interviews to understand why young people are choosing to enter the field of dairy farming. Interviews will be recorded and later transcribed but neither recording nor transcription will be included in the final thesis.

I am aware that my participation in this interview is voluntary and I understand the intent and purpose of this interview. I am aware that information from this interview will be used in a Senior Thesis that will be publicly available through the Environmental Department at the University of Vermont and may potentially be published to an online database.

This discussion will be audio taped for later transcription to help the interviewer accurately capture my insights in my own words. The tapes will only be heard by the interviewer for the purpose of this study. If I feel uncomfortable with the recorder, I may ask that it be turned off at any time.

I also understand that I have the right to stop the interview at any time. In the event that I choose to end the interview, it will be my decision whether or not the interviewer is able to keep the things I have already said.

If I have any questions about this research at any point, I am free to contact the student researcher, Mikayla Peront at Mikayla.peront@uvm.edu or by phone at 802-431-5964.

I have read the above and consent to participate in today's interview.

Participant name: _____

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____

Interviewer's signature: _____

Please initial before each of the following statements if you agree:

___ It is acceptable for the interviewer to identify me by my first name in the final thesis write-up.

___ It is acceptable for the interviewer to use information that could potentially be used to identify me, such as characteristics of my farm, for the purpose of the thesis write-up only.

___ I prefer that my identity be kept anonymous.

Appendix C: Participatory Photography Agreement

I understand that I own the pictures that I have taken for this thesis and give permission to the researcher, Mikayla Peront, to use them in her thesis. Any pictures submitted for this thesis will only be used in connection with the thesis. These pictures will only be published by the researcher if they are included in the final thesis write-up.

I understand that photographs I submit may be printed, framed and displayed as part of a photography exhibit at the University of Vermont and in the Bethel Town Hall. Each photograph displayed will be done so in a way that accurately depicts what I intend the picture to represent. My photographs will not be used outside of this thesis without my permission and I give consent for these photographs to be included in this thesis in the event that it is published.

By signing below, I _____ agree to the above statement.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Photography Display in the Honors College Building at UVM

Display Case #1



Display Case #2



Appendix E: Farmer Photography



"The Cows"



"The Rewards of the Work"



"The Community"



"The Place"



"The Work"

