DRAWN TO THE LAND

The Romance of Farming

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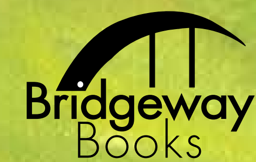
Elizabeth J. and Barton M. Cockey



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In memory of Piggy Pie, beloved companion 11.05.03–09.08.09

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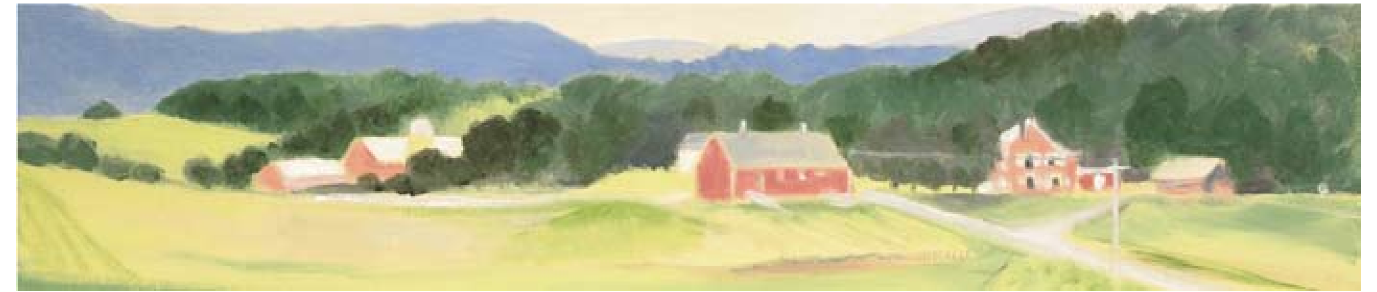

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INTRODUCTION

To God and home and country
We dedicate our toil.
To God and home and country,
As tillers of the soil.

Our roots are in these fertile vales
And in these rocky hills.
We graze our heifers in these dales
And fish the rushing kills.

Old memories are strong here;
Our fathers worked this land.
The ghosts of heroes throng here;
'Twas here they took their stand.

With firelocks at the ready,
They met the Crown's attack.
Their aim was sure and steady;
They drove the tyrant back.

Then bent they to the arders
And did not shirk the chores.
They filled our country's larders
And fought our country's wars.

And those who come behind them,
They hold this land in trust.
The ancient hills remind them:
Your dust is of our dust.

To God and home and country
We offer up our best.
In God and home and country,
Our future shall be blessed.

This volume is a celebration of the farm country of upstate New York, in and around the part of Washington County where Elizabeth grew up. It is a love letter to the land and its people. When Elizabeth and I visit her hometown of Greenwich, we are always drawn to the surrounding countryside: the wooded hills, the river valleys, and, most of all, the farms.

When Elizabeth and I had completed our first book, *Upstate New York: Towns That We Love*, and found it well received, we thought about what to write next. At first, we had the idea of Maryland port towns, since I am a Marylander and love the tidewater. But a chance conversation with Meg Southerland at Gardenworks Farm in Salem changed our plans completely. When we asked her what she thought we should add in a second printing of *Upstate New York*, she suggested including more of the farms, with pictures of the people and animals. She told us of friends and neighbors who were keeping up the farming tradition, and she and her husband showed us their own beautiful farm and store. We decided then and there that we needed to cover this topic, not as an addition to the first volume, but as a whole new book. Our publisher liked the idea and set us a six-month deadline. Although at first I was dismayed by the short time available for research, interviews, and writing, I soon realized that it was actually a blessing. There are so many different types of farming operations, so many delightful and inspiring people to meet, and, even within the small geographical area of interest to us, so many farms competing in the same lines of production (such as alpacas, sweet corn, milk, maple syrup, and so on). The short deadline made it manifestly impossible to do a systematic evaluation of the different producers. Of course, an exhaustive report was never our intent. Rather, our attention landed serendipitously on some farmers and not others, through fortuitous meetings and tips from friends. No one was intentionally left out.

Farming holds a special place in the human consciousness. The fact that farms produce the raw materials for most of our food and clothing ("No Farms, No Food," as the bumper sticker reminds us) is quite beside the point. Neat rows of crops, well-tended barns, and contented grazing animals all speak to our hearts with an intensity of feeling that cannot be explained by merely utilitarian considerations. With its rich evocations of home, hearth, and harvest, the very word "farm" has a feeling of security about it, as well it might, derived as it is from the Latin *firmare*, "to make firm." Even in these latter days, we can imagine what a sense of relief our ancestors felt as they looked out over cleared, tamed land, having hewn it out of the howling wilderness.

Yet the farm also reminds us of the fragility and transience of all human endeavors. Unworked fields revert to forests. Barns and houses do their best to fall into ruin. Drought, flood, lightning, wind, hail, frost, blights, and insects threaten the crops. Even a good harvest may be a disaster if it creates a supply that exceeds demand. And whatever nature has left standing, the government may destroy through some change in the rules: taxes, regulation, or deregulation—anything that upsets the plan. Or human innovation may render old ways obsolete. The spirit of the pioneer must animate the farmer even today.

The seasons, which set the rhythm of farm life, are at once an organizing principle and a metaphor. The life of the land is a cycle of renewal, day by day, season by season, generation by generation. Farming itself is in transition and has been since Stone Age people in Mesopotamia started it thousands of years ago. Working

We visited an antique tractor show at the Washington County Fair, and I fell in love with this old 1950 Farmall (H series) tractor that was on display. It was hard to paint; this was my third attempt because Barton said that if I didn't get it right all of our farming friends would never let us live it down.

Cows seem to huddle in groups, probably as protection from predatory animals. These animals are owned by my good friends Glen and Jessica Townsend in Argyle, New York. They are surrounded by rolling pastures and beautiful vistas that look out toward the Adirondack mountains.

the land and making it pay continue to be a challenge. Specialization and bigness seem to be the trend. International competition further undercuts prices of farm products. The almost completely self-sufficient farm of the nineteenth century is no more, and the small family farm is said to be dying out. Yet some small farming enterprises are thriving, as their owners find new opportunities in the growing demand for organic food, locally grown produce, and specialty products.

The land in this part of New York has been under cultivation since before the Revolutionary War. With the end of hostilities between the colonists and the French in 1765, Indian attacks ceased along the frontier, and pioneer families began to clear the land and plant crops. The respite was brief. In 1777, General John Burgoyne, with British regulars, German mercenaries, and thousands of Indian warriors from the frontier, terrorized the region for a season. The British defeat at Saratoga removed the most pressing danger, but life did not return to normal until the close of the war, when sporadic raids by Tories and their Mohawk allies came to an end.

The planters who took up arms to bring about the birth of the American republic were risking all that they had labored to acquire. Schooled in the stories of classical antiquity, the officers of George Washington's army looked to the example of the Roman patrician Lucius Quinctius, who was called Cincinnatus because of his curly hair. Cincinnatus, at the request of the Roman senate, assumed the title of dictator in 458 BC and again in 439 BC to lead his countrymen against the invading barbarians. He left his farm, took up his sword, and did what needed to be done. On each occasion, the enemy having been defeated, he relinquished his power and returned to his farm. Eighteenth-century paintings of the hero show him handing back the *fasces* (a bundle of sticks with an axe blade, symbolizing strength in unity) to a female figure representing the Roman republic.

This powerful image, linking heroic virtue with the renunciation of tyranny, is one of the central icons of our nation's founding. I think there is a basic modesty that comes naturally to the farmer, a recognition of the essential order of things. You can't make a plant grow any faster by issuing a court order or passing a legal statute. Cows behave like cows, and pigs behave like pigs. Abstract theories don't last long unless they accord with practical realities. Farmers have enough to keep them busy without minding other people's affairs, and have too much sense in any case to want to order other people around. It is no wonder that Thomas Jefferson considered an agrarian economy to be the font of liberty and the reservoir of public virtue.

As the heirs of this noble tradition face the uncertainties of the twenty-first century, new challenges bring new opportunities. In Washington County and the nearby parts of upstate New York, much of the agricultural activity used to focus on dairy farming. But with competition from industrial agricultural methods and supply outpacing demand, milk prices have dropped, and formerly prosperous farms have fallen on hard times. Elizabeth remembers that in 1956, when she was little, she went with her grandfather, Guy Barber, to a milk-processing plant, where he gave a speech to the other dairymen assembled there and persuaded them to dump their milk rather than accept the prevailing price. Guy emptied his milk cans, and the other farmers did the same. After that, her grandfather told her, "It's all over for the small dairy farmer." He sold his herd, and today what was once the calf pasture is a forest.

Yet others have stayed on. Our friend Glen Townsend and his wife, Jessica, own and operate a small dairy farm with a herd of forty cows. Jessica, whose family has milked cows since the eighteenth century, says this kind of farming is in her blood and that she feels an attachment to the life of the dairy farmer. "We have a small herd, and I know every cow by name," she said. "They are like members of the family."

Glen loves the cows too, but he is more practical in his approach. "At this point, every day I'm doing this, I'm losing money," he said. "It costs at least eighteen dollars per hundredweight to produce the milk, and it's selling at twelve dollars. Dairy farmers are borrowing money to stay in business. In this economy, you can't make it up on volume. The big operations are borrowing more, but they have the greater potential for profit when things turn around."

This arrangement sounds suspiciously like that of a highly-leveraged commodities speculator, but with the added benefits of fifteen-hour workdays and manure on your boots.

Teri Ptacek, the executive director of the Agricultural Stewardship Association, is quoted in the Glens Falls *Post-Star* as saying, "If prices remain like this, we're not going to have dairy farms."[1] The association helps farmers sell the development rights on their property to the state of New York, so that the land remains dedicated to agriculture. But even if a dairyman receives a cash payment, he is still in the position of the farmer in the old joke, who, when asked by a reporter what he's going to do with the million dollars he won in the lottery, replies, "I guess I'll just go on farming 'til the money runs out."

Yet even in this atmosphere of anguish and uncertainty, there are many rays of hope. And one thing is certain: the indomitable spirit of the Yankee farmer will prevail.

1 Reisman, "Fearing prosperity Farmers worry."

WINTER

Winter and discontent have occupied the same space in our minds as a species since long before Shakespeare immortalized the connection in his *Richard III.* For one thing, it's cold. And in upstate New York, it's *really* cold. But the hardy settlers and their successors made the most of the low temperatures. They cut blocks of ice from frozen ponds and rivers and packed them in straw in their icehouses: refrigeration without electricity. They built the famous Yankee clippers, which sailed so fast that they could sell ice in India.

As an alternative to distillation, they froze fermented apple cider to concentrate the alcohol, creating applejack. For those with less patience, there was a drink called a "Stonewall," favored by Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, made from hard cider and rum, so called because its consumption eased the construction of all those stone walls on the farms. Elizabeth and I are particularly fond of the cider that comes from New York McIntosh apples, but it doesn't go hard the way fresh cider used to do. The sterilization process, required by law to prevent the spread of salmonella, kills the natural yeasts and bacteria too. We'll just have to save up for our own cider press.

The sap is down in the winter, and felling trees for lumber and firewood keeps a man warm. There are few activities more deeply satisfying than splitting logs. Well, maybe that's a minority opinion, but *I* like to split

Chambers Valley is nestled in the hills of New York and Vermont. The surrounding area is used solely as farmland and of course maple syrup production. Located between the historic villages of Salem, NY and Manchester, VT, Dry Brook Sugar House is a great place to visit in the early spring during boiling season. This painting was based on one of Jon McClellan's beautiful photographs.

We do not travel to our hometown of Greenwich much during the winter months; perhaps our blood has thinned over the years or maybe we are just too old to stand the icy conditions. Fortunately my good friend Bob Olbretch took pity on me when I told him I was in desperate need of winter images from which to paint. He was able to e-mail me his photograph that I used for this painting of barns in winter.

logs, and not with a newfangled hydraulic splitter, but with an old-fashioned splitting maul. If the grain is too contrary, I use wedges, but that feels like cheating. The grain of wood is a model and metaphor for everything in life: there is a grain to reality, and we succeed best when we pay attention to it. The earth will bless us with her abundance if we pause to pay attention to how things work. The speed of light, Planck's constant, the way the fibers run in a tree crotch: is any of it a good idea? I don't know, but it's the law.

There is a reason for the thrifty character of northern peoples: if you don't save up food, fuel, and fodder for the cold months, you may remove your family from the gene pool. The same principle applies to money. The old farmers in these parts distrusted banks. They were capable of holding onto their own money, and when they found it necessary to part with some of it, they would peel the bills off of a big roll that they carried with them. Those who have continued to live frugally and avoid debt have fared the best in the most recent market downturn.

The Hendersons are such a family. Farming the same land in Easton since the early 1900s, they have remained in the dairy business through good times and bad. Elizabeth grew up with Alan Henderson. She still calls him by his nickname, "Mister," and he still calls her "Betsy," like all of her old friends in Greenwich. They both still call his younger brother "Squirt." Alan showed us his barn, milking parlor, and calf pens. As we walked through, we met Squirt's son and daughter with the prize cows they were grooming for the county fair. These two cows, like all of their animals, were beautiful and well husbanded. The milking parlor was clean and well maintained.

With the quiet competence and brilliant modesty of the successful farmer, Alan explained that his family has held on because they all help with the work. His mother milks the cows every morning at four, and his father gets an early start too. A thin man with a twinkle in his eye, ninety-year-old Taylor Henderson has more energy than most men half his age. Shifting from one foot to another as if he were hearing music and looking for a dance partner, Taylor explained that his job on the farm is to get into trouble. Well, somebody's got to do it. He also drives the tractor, sowing and harvesting corn, wheat, and soybeans.

The Hendersons know how to repair their own equipment, and they have not gone into debt to buy shiny new tractors and milking machines when the old ones work just fine. They still use their silos, and they mix their own feed from crops grown on their own land. Working over seven hundred acres, they keep a herd of about one hundred ten milking cattle, and have resisted the temptation to expand beyond a workable size. Teamwork, frugality, and multigenerational farming experience are their formula for success. May it long continue.

When the leaves are off the trees, it is easier to see the farm buildings. Many of the structures in Washington County and its environs are from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, of sturdy post-and-beam construction, with roofs of local slate. Barns and other outbuildings define the farm landscape and add human scale to the vastness of the fields. Icehouses, corncribs, even a few privies still stand on many of the old farms. Although no longer used for their original purposes, the old buildings have stayed put for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the fact that they were crafted with a keen aesthetic sense. An economist would say they add value as improvements to the lot. I think the improvement goes beyond any utilitarian calculation and speaks to our basic need for order and structure in our surroundings. The old outbuildings are a comforting presence, a reminder of bygone ways of doing things, and a tangible legacy of those who planned and dreamed and built.

I think this painting captures how lonely it can be in the dead of winter when you can hear and feel your feet crunch on the icy, hard packed snow. The temperature sometimes gets to sub-zero in these parts. This house and barn are part of the original Jablonski family's homestead, who have been farming in Argyle since the early 1900's.

At Gallery 668 in Battenville, the barns that used to be full of cows and hay are now full of art. Lovingly restored by Solange Batsell Herter and improved and maintained by her daughter Veronique de La Bruyere, the nineteenth-century structures are a perfect venue for artists, musicians, and patrons of the arts to gather for