



## Part V: Ceres' Children

*Part V takes a deeper look at some of Vermont's cherished traditions: participatory democracy and the conservation ethic, from the ideas of George Perkins Marsh, one of America's first environmentalists, to contemporary volunteer groups and activist movements. The film captures 21st century debates over natural resources, then circles back in time to show how these concerns originate in the ethics of farmers, who depended on the natural world for their survival. The disappearance of dairy farms has raised a tough question: how big is too big? How can Vermont survive in a world economy? Can Vermont be a model for small, local and self-sufficient farming?*

### Fin and Rye

By Ben Hewitt

In September, after he's taken the second cut of hay off the hilltop field that borders the long row of maples towering over our shared fence line, our neighbor Melvin turns his milk cows loose to graze whatever fringes the mower missed. At 4:30 every afternoon, my sons climb on their bikes and wheel into the field to drive the girls down for evening milking. It's a quarter-mile or more to the barn, down the steep hill that not so long ago was home to a ski tow Melvin's boys had rigged up by suspending the front end of an old car at the hill's crest and running the rope around one of the drive wheels.

The boys love this task. Fin and Rye have reached the age at which they are eager to prove they are growing into the young men they will become, and there is perhaps no better proof of such a thing than successfully driving a herd of 30 milk cows across a high, green hayfield and down into the barnyard below. Perhaps, like me, they recognize that at 65, Melvin is approaching the end of his milking days and they can sense that some year in the not-too-distant future, it is likely there won't be any cows to drive to his barn for evening milking. Still, I suspect that's not much of a factor; they're only 11 and 8, after all. They're too young to be motivated by sentiment.

I, however, am not, and one recent evening I traced the boys' path to the barn, ostensibly to relay to Melvin the boys' account of how one of his cows had spooked during that afternoon's round up and pushed through a weak section of fence. But of course a phone call would have sufficed and the real reason for my walk (although I couldn't admit it to myself at the time) was no more complicated than the simple fact that I know it won't be many summers before I won't have such a ready excuse to stroll across that field. I won't have such a ready excuse to tromp down the meandering path cut into the hillside by the force of literally hundreds of thousands of hoof prints over all the years Melvin's cows have shuffled their unhurried way up and down that slope. I won't have such a ready excuse to stand in our neighbors barnyard, him on one side of a windowless window

frame and me on the other, chatting about the weather and haying and pasture and all the meaningless minutia of our day. Meaningless to anyone but us, that is.

Our northern Vermont home is situated directly between two small dairy farms, and this has proven to be one of the greatest unanticipated and unplanned blessings of living on this hill. We did not buy this property with such a thing in mind; we would not even have known to look for such a thing. And yet now I can't even imagine anything else, and I find it literally impossible to express the ways in which it has enriched our lives, perhaps because some of these ways defy logic or reason.

I don't like to think of Melvin's inevitable retirement, although of course I want what's best for him. But when I see Fin and Rye coming back from herding the cows down to evening milking, riding or pushing their bikes along the hayfield's ridge, nothing visible behind them but sky, as if one false step would send them plummeting off the edge of the world, I just want time to stop. When I stand in on one side of that windowless window frame with Melvin leaning against the other side, the late day sun washing us both and behind him, the soft outlines of his cows as they stand for milking, I want time to stop.

But that's the thing about time: It keeps on going. Kids grow up; dairy farmers retire. Things change, both in ways that can be anticipated and those that can't. Someday, Melvin will stop farming. Someday, my children will no longer herd his cows, either because he no longer has cows, or because they are no longer interested. Either will be difficult to witness, and yet given the passage of enough time, both are inevitable. It's just a matter of which comes first.

I was born in rural Vermont, and if I am as fortunate as I plan to be, I will die here. As of this writing, I am 42 years of age; my hope is to be around for another 42 years or more, and I know that I cannot even begin to imagine what might change over those years. Occasionally, I am visited by a sense of nostalgia, not for an earlier era, or for some past event, but for the future nostalgia I know I will feel for now. I suspect that is what I'm feeling in those moments I want time to stop: The storage of the present experience for a future recalling. My boys, etched against the sky. My neighbor, framed by the window opening of his dilapidated barn. The cow-worn path, hard and rutted under my feet.

I know it is not merely my memory that is absorbing these small moments. It is my emotional cortex. It is my character. It is my spirit. It is everything that makes me *me*, and in the brief, flickering moments when I feel the small influence of these moments on the very core of how I think and feel and perceive the world around me, I have this sense of being held in the palm of this place. Of *here and now*.

I cannot tell you how comforting that is.

Ben Hewitt is a writer whose work has appeared in many newspapers

and magazines. He has written three books, “The Town That Food Saved,” “Making Supper Safe,” and “Saved: How I Quit Worrying About Money and Became the Richest Guy in the World.” He lives on a small, diversified hill farm with his family in Hardwick, Vermont.

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