

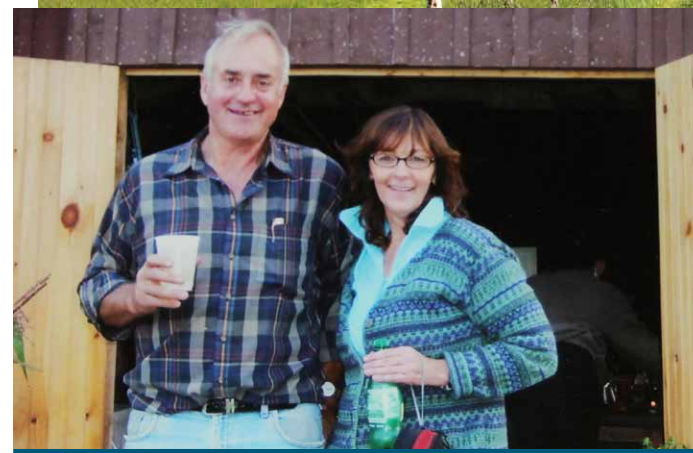
LIFESTYLE

Fulfilled

How diversity and multi-tasking allowed
one couple to realize their farming dream

photography and text by Janet Wallace

The Dixson's home overlooks Chignecto Bay,
part of the Bay of Fundy.



Claude and Lynn relaxing after a long day's work.

*Lush hayfields now produce forage
for the cattle. Forty years ago,
this was covered with alders*

On a beautiful fall day in 1975 with not a cloud in the sky, Claude Dixson and a friend were exploring a vacant piece of land. From the road, they walked almost a half mile on an old cart track overgrown in alders to reach a clearing where a century-old farmhouse stood.

The paint had long since peeled off the clapboards, but in the distance, through the trees, Claude could see the Bay of Fundy. He said to himself, "if this land can be bought, I'll have it."

"I had a vision of what I wanted and I could see, plain as day, everything we have here now, even though there was no hydro, no plumbing, not even a road to the house," recalls Claude. The next day, he took his wife, Lynn, to see the land.

"It was magic," she says. "I fell in love with it right away."

Forty years later, the farmhouse has been renovated and is surrounded by flower beds and vegetable gardens. Near the house, hayfields and meadows have replaced acres of alders and white spruce.

Laundry flaps on the line, the white sheets a contrast against the green grass and blue Bay of Fundy in the distance. Claude is on the tractor cutting hay while Lynn prepares dinner. Cattle lie drowsily in the shade. On a hill, ringneck pheasants run and fly in large aviaries.

The Dixsons, as Claude says, "always have three or four irons in the fire." This beautiful farm is the site of the Shepody Hunting Preserve, a family farm and a special care home. For Claude and Lynn, it is also a dream come true.

A TRADITION OF WORK ETHIC

Claude and Lynn were born and raised not too far from Harvey, NB, where they live now (between Moncton and Fundy National Park). Hard work was the norm in both families. A day off, explains Claude, was a Sunday when they would pick four to five pails of blueberries. He grew up on a cattle farm and wanted to keep farming.

"I loved every bit of it," he recalls. "I would sit in the barn and listen to the cows eat. I loved the smell of the hay."

In adulthood, Claude and Lynn moved, separately, to Alberta to work. They married out west, but soon returned to the Maritimes and ran a grocery store while looking for a farm. After falling in love with the land in Harvey, Claude asked the owner, an 85-year-old gentleman in a nursing home, if the land was for sale. The answer was "no!"—but for months Claude visited the owner and described his dream of farming the land—and eventually, the man agreed to sell.

So in 1975, the Dixsons owned a 99-year-old farmhouse with 86 acres of marginal farmland. To make ends meet, Claude worked as a game warden while Lynn worked off farm, including selling Mary Kay Cosmetics. She was awarded three pink cars (two were Cadillacs) which she drove down their unpaved, rutted road.

Lynn also ran a licensed special care home. The farm offered a peaceful, nurturing environment for the residents, as well as the couple's five children.

In their “spare time,” the Dixsons grew their own vegetables and raised cattle, pigs, chickens, turkeys and a family cow.

Claude’s real passion is cattle, and they raised purebred Limousin livestock (highly muscled beef cattle). Lynn took a course in artificial insemination and imported genes from the top North American bulls. The couple no longer breeds cattle, but they still buy calves and raise them from spring to fall.

The 86-acre parcel of land has grown to 350 acres. When neighbouring lots went on the market, the Dixsons bought them. Many older people in the area were thrilled to see the land being farmed by a young family.

In the late ‘80s, an adjacent property went on the market. The Dixsons didn’t want another house, but they sure wanted the 100 acres.

In his day job as game warden, Claude learned about pheasants, whose preferred habitat is a mix of cropland, hay, wetlands and brush at the edge of wooded areas—a perfect description of the 100 acres. He bought the land, converted the house into a hunting lodge, created additional pheasant habitat, and raised the birds.

Shepody Hunting Preserve opened in 1989 with 500 birds. Now Claude raises 7,000 pheasants a year in large outside aviaries. He maintains ideal habitat by planting strips of grain, haying pastures and mowing brush.

The preserve is divided into five clearly marked zones separated by wide buffers. In each zone, pheasants are released into the wild and hunters are accompanied by a guide.

Well-trained dogs are a key part of upland bird hunting and Claude and Lynn train their own German short-haired pointers. The dogs enthusiastically search the brush until they scent a bird—then go “on point” (which is to poise rigidly still and indicate the location of the hidden bird or birds). The hunters approach with stealth and, once it flies, they try to shoot the fast departing bird. Birds may only be shot while flying, and when a bird is downed, usually into heavy cover, the dog makes the retrieve.

The preserve attracts clients from all over the Maritimes and New England. Most bring their own dogs, but some use the preserve’s dogs and guides. Others bring young dogs for training. The place is ideal for field dog training because of the diversity of habitats, controlled conditions, and the guarantee of encounters with live pheasants.

When developing the facility, the Dixsons relied heavily on a book about raising pheasants and running a preserve. One day, their daughter Jennifer baked pheasant pie using a recipe from the well-worn book.

“We had never heard of pheasant pie before that,” Lynn says. “We jazzed it up a bit and pheasant pie was, and remains, my favourite food. The secret is in the gravy. Our regular customers now expect to have pheasant pie every time they come.”

And it’s those regular customers that make the business so satisfying for the Dixsons.

“We’ve met so many wonderful people and have made good friends. Some people have been coming here every year for 20 years,” says Lynn.

Below: Claude raises 7,000 pheasants a year in large outside aviaries.



Right: Contented cattle relax in the shade.



When Claude Dixon looks out from the window of his house, he sees signs of his work. The land he cleared is divided into pastures and hayfields. The fences are made from trees cut in the Dixon’s woodlot.



At some point, however, the Dixsons realize “there will be a time we have to pass the torch to younger blood.”

The couple’s five kids have no plans to return to the farm, but, says Claude, “I really feel there is a couple out there who have their own dreams like we did.”

“We had nothing but a dream. Now we have everything set up perfectly but will soon be too old to work it. But we haven’t even scratched the surface of the potential of this place.”

“To make a farm work, people need to be willing to work hard, to be focused on a goal and to be motivated by reasons other than money. This type of life doesn’t lend itself to a couple who want to go golfing on the weekend,” Claude cautions.

“There is a lot of responsibility,” says Lynn, “and that’s more tiring than the work.”

“But, I don’t see it as work,” Claude offers. “When I go out after dinner and feed the cattle, it’s fun. I’d way sooner do that than go fishing. There’s a great sense of accomplishment to be gained in nurturing animals or nurturing plants.”

“When I look around, I see my own creation,” he continues. “Every tree around the house was planted by me. It is meaningful to watch trees grow and see the land change, and I get great peace from seeing the cattle.”

“Sometimes, we sit out on the sun porch and ask ourselves how could we live anywhere else? We have always had space and privacy in our lives and we love every square inch of this land,” says Lynn.

“And being with the cattle is so much more relaxing than playing golf,” says Claude. “This place suits me right to a tee.”

Right: Eli Goodwin (14) says he loves “the whole experience of hunting” including the family atmosphere, being outside and the exercise.

Below: Amelia Goodwin (16) carrying the “over-under” Beretta shotgun her grandmother just gave her.

Claude Dixon loads the skeet station so the hunters can practice their aim before going into the woods

The preserve attracts clients from all over the Maritimes and New England. Most bring their own dogs.



FALL ON SHEPODY PHEASANT PRESERVE

There’s frost in the air. The smell of pancakes and sausages wafts from the lodge. I hear men yelling “pull” and shotgun blasts from the skeet shooting range, followed by cheers and clapping. Bird dogs whine in their kennels, eager to go to work.

A half hour later, the mist is rising and we’re walking on a grassy path. The pointer pauses in the brambles.

The dog is “birdy” (exhibiting excited body language as it scents a bird).

“The bird’s close but not right there,” says the guide. “You learn to read the dogs.” The dog moves on cautiously.

We hear shots in the distance while chickadees chirp, seemingly unaware of the drama going on next to them. A moment later, the chime on the collar starts beeping faster. The dog is on a firm point.

Sure enough, we spot him—a straight line, it seems, from the tip of his nose to the end of his extended tail as he points at an unseen pheasant in a thicket. The hunters gesture to each other to get into position. The pheasant suddenly rockets noisily out of the brush, a shot booms, and the bird falls among the tamarack.

The 16-year-old hunter gets a hug from her father and a high-five from her brother.

The guide calls, “Fetch ‘im up, boy,” and the dog trots into the trees and returns with a bird in its mouth.

The family has at least one pheasant to enjoy for dinner, along with stories of the day’s hunt. 🐾