

roots & folks: meet your local farmer

Farm school

Living and learning on Green Meadows Farm

Story and photography by Janet Wallace

THE PIG barn is filled with the sweet scent of clover and grass as the pigs race up to us, excitedly grunting. Jacob, a tall 16-year-old, forks silage to them at the other end of the pen. Running back and forth, the pigs seem torn between their appetite for food and their curiosity about visitors.

They are healthy and content like all the animals at Green Meadows Farm, named for the lush farm pasture which provides food for cattle, pigs, chickens, ducks, turkeys, rabbits and goats.

Green Meadows is a family farm in the truest sense of the word—David and Sandra Bunnett and their three kids all help on the 125-acre farm in Havelock, NB, 30 miles west of Moncton. The land is part of the original family farm where David spent his teenage years. The Bunnetts grow hay, silage (fermented hay) and grain for animals, as well as vegetables for a CSA (Community Shared Agriculture) program. The farm was certified organic



Top: David Bunnett with his sons Jacob (front) and Daniel (back). Above: Daniel raises rabbits in hutches in the winter and in outside enclosures from spring to fall.

for 20 years but recently switched to Certified Naturally Grown, a grassroots certification process that the Bunnetts feel is more like organic certification used to be—farmer-driven without bureaucracy.

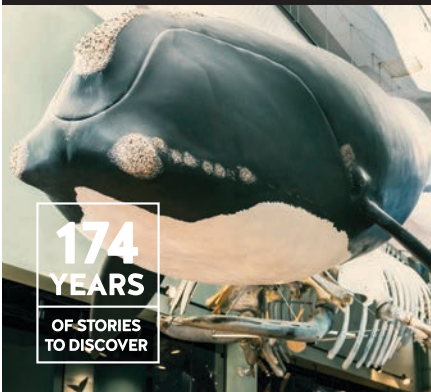
The two boys are completely engaged in farm life. They each have their own

project—the youngest, Daniel, with rabbits and Jacob with goats.

When the eldest, Marta, was 14, she started a CSA and provided a weekly mix of vegetables for nine, and later 20, families. Now 19, Marta just finished her second year at the Canadian Mennonite University in Winnipeg, in an interdisciplinary international development program which, as she describes it, “examines the connection between land and social justice.”

With his aptitude for problem-solving, Jacob is the farm’s designer and engineer. Whether using machinery or building chicken coops, he constantly finds ways to make the farm work more efficiently. “He can fix anything,” says his father proudly. “We’ll be using any machine in the house or the shop or the barn, and he’ll say it would work a lot better if it was done a different way.”

Jacob also likes the livestock, particularly his goats. He’s “pretty sure” he wants to continue with farming,

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whereas his young brother is interested in being a farmer or an airplane pilot.

"My favourite part of the farm is the cows," says Daniel (11). "Right now, I'm taming a Jersey calf." He started raising hens when he was six years old but didn't like washing eggs. After several years with hens, he switched to rabbits. As Daniel holds a young rabbit, he explains that baby rabbits are born blind and hairless and stay in their nest of hay for a few weeks.

"I can touch them after a few weeks," he says proudly, "if I touch their mother's nose first. Besides, they know my smell." From late spring to late fall, the rabbits are outside in moveable shelters.

As we walk, the boys explain farming methods and point out their favourite cows. They're experienced tour guides. On open farm days nearly 200 people visit the farm. Green Meadows is also a favourite site for school and daycare field trips. When a busload of students arrives, each member of the family leads a group. "It means so much to the kids to be able to see, touch and hold animals," says Sandra.

The only ones less thrilled by the visits are the hens. After one visit of 60 rambunctious elementary students, the

Above: The Bunnetts' billy goat, Professor Billy.

Opposite page (clockwise from top left): Daniel's favourite part of farming is working with the cattle; Sandra works on the farm and homeschools the boys, Marta, now in her second year of university, was homeschooled from Grade 7 on; the pigs of Green Meadows Farm; the rabbit doe is protective of her young when visitors enter the barn, but is comfortable when being handled by Daniel.



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hens took a few days to recover before they resumed laying eggs.

Farming roots

Ever since he was little, David Bunnett knew he wanted to be a farmer. His family farmed in a Mennonite community in Ontario until March 1977, when a neighbour saw a notice for land advertised in *Harrowsmith* magazine. He mentioned this to David's father and by 2:30 that afternoon, the two men were on their way to New Brunswick. Within two years, several Mennonite families had settled around Petitcodiac, NB, including the Bunnetts and Sandra's family.

"When we got here," recalls Sandra,



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a physiotherapist for 20 years while David worked with his father and brother on the pig farm. They added beef and gradually switched to organics.

Eventually, their father stopped farming; in 2004, David and his brother Murray split the farm into two.

Innovation and changes

At first David and Sandra focused on grassfed beef but later incorporated pastured pork and poultry. In the last few years, they reduced the size of the beef herd while adding rabbits, ducks and goats. They also developed an innovative marketing program. Similar to a vegetable CSA, subscribers commit to buying four boxes of mixed cuts of beef and/or pork.

"People can order the boxes at their own pace," explains Sandra. "Some want a box every month and others every two months. Some just tell us whenever they want the next box. They're committed to buying four boxes and pay much of that upfront."

The program was so successful that the Bunnetts stopped going to the farmers market.

"We feel like we're farming more," adds Sandra, "not just marketing."

"people had either no idea about what Mennonites were like (and kept confusing us with Mormons), or they thought we would be Old Order with conservative dress and horse and buggies. So when we came and we looked the same as them, they realized that there were different types of Mennonites."

Sandra and David went to the same church and school but she had different ambitions.

"A friend of mine from high school just reminded me how I used to say I was never going to marry a farmer and settle down here," she says, laughing.

Sandra went to university but came back to marry David. She worked as

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Hands-on learning

Eight years ago, Jacob struggled in grade two. After Sandra noticed the stomachaches from Monday to Friday and did some research, she realized her son was dyslexic. She decided to try homeschooling.

After six months, the family felt that the experiment was a success and Jacob didn't return to school. Marta, now doing well in university, decided to stay home for grade 7 and never went back. Daniel has never gone to school. Sandra teaches school curriculum while David teaches carpentry and farm skills.

The kids have a certain degree of freedom but also responsibility. "We set out what needs to be done every day and for each school year. The boys decide how quickly they want to get the work done," says Sandra.



As the days warm up in the spring, the boys are eager to be free of schoolwork but this makes them work all that much harder so their classes will be completed. If they want to reschedule their schoolwork so they can work on another project, that's fine with Sandra. "All life is learning," she says.

Customers pick up the boxes at Dolma Food Market, a multicultural grocery store that specializes in high-quality, local produce. The owner, Hossein Barrar, is very supportive of local farmers, including the Bunnetts.

This past January, Dolma Food in Moncton was destroyed by fire, however, their second location, in neighbouring Dieppe, survives along with a temporary store site in Moncton. Within days of the fire, a benefit concert was arranged and donations were raised to help Barrar and the people who rented apartments above Dolma.

The story is all too familiar to the Bunnetts. In September 2008, their beef barn caught fire. The animals were safe on pasture but the building was destroyed, along with the winter's supply of livestock bedding. The 201-year-old farmhouse was spared.

"The fire happened Monday night," recalls David. "On Tuesday morning, the yard was filled with people helping out."

"We needed 400 round bales of bedding. One man hadn't cut his hay yet and had a standing crop of hay. He hadn't used any chemicals for several years so it was allowed by organic standards. It was a nice sunny week

and many farmers went out to help. By Friday night, we had all the bedding hauled in," David shakes his head, still overwhelmed by the generosity.

"A friend donated a bioshelter [a barn-like structure] and that was put up quickly. An 80-year-old neighbour came over with his tractor to help haul things away," he continues. "It was amazing what people did to help."

The new barn and renewed sense of community are more positive changes.

Finding the right balance

David explains how the farm is now working better than it has ever before—it's in balance, he says, in terms of both the workload and from an ecological perspective. Reducing the size of the beef herd, adding a greater diversity of animals and marketing less have all helped the farm.

"We grow a lot of hay and that's better for the soil," he says. "Grass holds the soil in place. We just grow enough grain to feed the chickens and pigs."

"The farm has been changing all the time," adds Sandra. "But you have to keep changing to keep up."

"The farm is good now," says David. "It's good all around."