

Heartland

Emery District farmers wage losing battle to save their working farms

Story and photos by Nan Lincoln

Freshly bound bales of sweet-smelling hay, like giant bedrolls, dot the newly mowed fields as they rise up from meandering Northeast Creek and disappear into dark stands of spruce, balsam and pine. Farther up the narrow, patchworked road, a small herd of brown and white spotted cattle amble in a cluster along the wire fence of another large field. Across the road in a hillside meadow a few sheep graze in the shadow of an old pewter-colored barn.

HEARTLAND

This is the heartland of Mt. Desert Island — the Emery District. For almost two centuries, the men and women who settled here raised the crops and livestock and tended the orchards that fed the island. Although the brackish water of the creek and, on a still night the moan of foghorns from Frenchmans Bay, are gentle reminders of a not-too-distant sea, the land here seems to have forgotten that it is ringed by a rock-bound coast and a cold Atlantic ocean.

Visitors, drawn to the drama of that rock-bound periphery, rarely discover the subtler beauty of this agricultural inland. And even some native islanders, who use

the more-traveled roads as they traverse the island, have forgotten its existence. In another decade or so, there may be nothing left here for visitors to discover. The rolling hayfields and hillside-grazing meadows of the Emery District may be nothing but a memory to those who were fortunate enough to have lived here or, once, just happened to pass by.

A LIFESTYLE IN RUINS

The Fogg farmhouse sits deep in the shadows of ancient maples and beech trees. Abandoned now and up for sale along with its untended acres of farmland, the building has assumed the same dark hue as the surrounding shadows and, except for the dull glint of its dusty broken windows, has become almost invisible. It's yard has been invaded by thick scrub and waist-high hay. Though a few brilliant blossoms of a tiger lily struggle through the tangled yard no one will look through those empty windows to

applaud their effort. Behind the house, a few dilapidated outbuildings collapse into the unmown hay and an old farm vehicle rusts beneath an apple tree grown wild with neglect.

It hasn't been that long since the Fogg family lived, farmed, and raised their cattle and their children here. Anyone who has lived in the Emery District more than 20 years or so can remember cows grazing in the rolling pastures and a handsome rambling farmhouse with bright lilies in the dooryard. But, as neighbor Merval "Rocky" Porter says, "It doesn't take long for things to go to ruin around here when they're untended."

THE LAST DAIRY FARM

Porter is not speaking only of the Fogg farm. His own pale-green barns and outbuildings also show signs of neglect, though only three years ago they housed the last herd of dairy cows on the island. Now only a few boarded horses are shel-

tered there and graze his fields.

As a boy growing up on his uncle Lloyd Frazier's farm, Porter says he wanted to be a dairy man himself one day. And he was. In 1982, when his uncle decided to retire he bought the farm and took over the operation of the dairy business. Although his dream had come true it was a short-lived one. In 1986, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture set about limiting the number of dairy cattle in order to lower the nation's surplus of milk, Porter's small operation was one they wanted to eliminate.

"We were asked to submit a bid based on a three-year average of our business worth," Porter says. "And they'd pay us that amount to either ship the cattle out of the country or slaughter them. I did a lot of soul searching and thinking — didn't want to lose my cows, but I knew by then that the farm just wasn't going to work out.

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Working in his garden is increasingly harder work, but Chandler Gilbert says he couldn't have chosen a better life for himself.

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The growing cost of maintenance for his equipment, the dearth of skilled farmhands and competition with the big dairy farms are some of the reasons he gives for the downhill slide. Still, he says, the bid he submitted was so high he never expected the government to accept it.

"But they did, and once I'd given them the bid there was no backing out — I really miss those cows."

He also says he misses the opportunity to offer his children a way of life he feels is spiritually, if not financially rewarding. Though he makes more money working as an electrician now, Porter acknowledges that if he ever had an opportunity

to farm again, he'd jump at it.

"You have to have grown up with it to understand it," he says pensively, "but once you do, you never lose it."

A HARD ROW TO HOE

A few miles west of the Fogg and Porter Farms, the Crooked Road forks. The right hand branch, the Gilbert Farm Road, winds and climbs through dark evergreens, then suddenly opens up to yet another sloping field. Several old barns and outbuildings form sagging silhouettes near the crest of the hill.

Moving slowly behind his rototiller, Chandler Gilbert churns the soil of a

half-acre garden plot.

"Been a terrible year for gardening," says Gilbert, cutting off the engine of his tiller, and indicating, rather apologetically, the rows of inch-high corn.

Gilbert, with the help of his brother Burnell, a retired government worker, is perhaps the last of the Emery District farmers to try to make his living off the land. All that is left now, though, of the once-active dairy farm and flourishing 100-acre truck farm their parents bought shortly after the turn of the century, are three or four patches of lettuce, tomatoes, cucumbers and corn. The Gilbert brothers, who are well into their 70s, plant and tend the gardens themselves and sell their produce to local grocery stores.

Chandler Gilbert acknowledges that the work is hard for him now, and on bad days downright impossible. But he says he has no regrets about the rigorous life he has chosen for himself.

"Never knew anything else, or wanted to know anything else," he says. "Never really wanted to go anywhere else either. Why would I?" he asks, as he turns to face the blue mountains rising over his pale green hay fields. "This is my life."

Like Porter, Gilbert realizes that it is not a life that will sustain the younger generations of his family.

"No, you can't make a living farming these days, everything's changed," he says. "You can't get help. You ask some youngster to gather, and he'll ask 'how much.' You tell him \$4 and he'll just laugh and tell you he can make more washing dishes in Bar Harbor."

Then there are the taxes. "Few years back I was paying \$95 now I've got to come up with \$2,500 a year," he laments. "They ought to cut back our taxes instead of raising them — like they do in some other states."

Gilbert says he doesn't want to see his home and property end up on the auction block like the Fogg Farm. He would like to keep his 100 acres in the family. But he's not terribly optimistic about the chances the land his parents bought 80 some years ago will be recognizable 80 years hence.

"Oh I guess it'll all go to developers — they're coming by all the time — or the park'll take it and nobody will be able to use it," he says with resignation. "I don't suppose there's anything can be done to stop it happening."

But there are those who are trying do something to preserve, if not the farming lifestyle of the land, at least the character of the Emery District.

LOSING BATTLE

Harry and Cindy Owen, came to the Emery District 30 years ago and settled in the home and the land once farmed by the Shea family at the turn of the century. The big stone barn, that once stabled the work horses used for road construction on the island, now serves as a storage for dormant farming equipment, and a kennel for their galumphing, giant schnauzer puppy.

For a number of years the Owens were able to make a small profit by farming their land and selling their produce to local markets. But eventually, when the time and labor far outweighed the financial returns, they gave it up. Although they are well aware of its potential value their acreage would mean to developers, subdividing their property is not a move they are considering. But Owen worries that others will succumb to the pressure to parcel off property.

His pessimistic vision of the future suburbia the Emery District may someday become is not a far-fetched one.



Among other Emery District residents Harry and Cindy Owen worry that one day the pastoral character of the area will develop into suburbia.

Although he and a group of other area residents tried several years ago to get the zoning in the area changed from one-acre to two-acre minimum lots, the planning board denied the request — despite evidence that the water tables in the district might not support the burden of such intense development.

Nor is his suburban vision that far off. He points to the Acadian Farms development on McFarland Hill as an example of what the future holds.

Although Owen and other large land holders in the area, who share his concerns, have been accused of selfishly denying others the chance to own a piece of the pie they were fortunate enough to acquire, he sees a different analogy.

"This land is like a life boat," he says. "If you fill it up with too many people it's going to sink and no one will survive. If you divide this land up into little housing

lots, the character of this area will not survive."

Like the Owens, the Chagnons just up the road, at Blueberry Hill Farm and the Hardings a few miles beyond at the old Von Garten Farm are not born to farming. But if it were their own ancestors who made the stone piles at the edges of the fields or were buried in the little family plots on their properties, it's hard to imagine they could feel more connected to the land they now own.

Although Roger Chagnon pastures a few sheep for a Seal Cove farm in return for a freezer full of lamb and he and his wife tend a large kitchen garden, he is not a farmer, but a Cleveland lawyer who moved to the 150 year old farm in 1970. As he walks down an old cattle road that borders the upper meadows, of his property, he expresses a sense of wonder at the work of those who originally cleared and



These bovine Emery District residents represent a small part of Peggy Rockefeller's farming operation. She also has cattle and other livestock on Bartlett Island and a farm in Pretty Marsh.



Walter Sargeant, who died last year ran one of the island's largest dairy farms here. Present owners, Joseph and Janice Minutolo, in a cooperative effort with several friends still mow and sell the hay.

drained his fields.

"Look at this," he says pointing to what appears to be the graveled bed of a dried up stream running in a vertical 200-yard line down the meadow.

He explains that beneath the gravel is a French ditch, a virtual pipe made of stone slabs, constructed more than a century and a half ago. In the spring, he says, he can still hear the water gurgling underground as it rushes down the hillside to join the brackish waters of North-east Creek.

The only land owner in the Emery District who uses the fields and meadows of her extensive property to breed and raise livestock is Peggy Rockefeller, wife of the millionaire president of the Chase Manhattan Bank, David Rockefeller.

"Mmmph," snorts Chandler Gilbert at the mention of Rockefeller's cattle operation. "That's not farming, that's just fool-

ing around."

But Rocky Porter does not share Gilbert's skepticism. After talking cows with Rockefeller, and seeing her walk among his livestock dressed in old jeans and gum-rubber boots, he is convinced that she is serious about her cattle-breeding enterprise, and despite her different background has the same love of farming that has dominated his life.

"I wish people gave her more credit for what she is doing," he says. "She is saving the land and using it for what it was originally intended for. Sure it's a shame you have to be a millionaire to be able to afford to farm these days, but at least she's doing it. And I'm glad to see it. She may be the only reason that my kids and other island kids can come out here some day in the future and see what a real cow or a field looks like."