**UPPER VALLEY AGRICULTURE**

# LAST HERD LEAVES HARTFORD

## Sale of dairy cows is poignant milestone for family farm

**By CHRISTINA DOLAN**

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HARTFORD — On a gray, drizzly Wednesday morning, George Miller, his son, cousin and brother pushed, pulled and cajoled 27 reluctant Jersey cows and six heifers out of the barn and onto livestock trailers that would take the animals to their new owner in Canton, N.Y.

It was a bittersweet moment for the Miller family and the end of an era for Hartford, which has lost its last remaining working dairy farm. The hillside farm off Jericho Road has been in his family for more than a century, and George Miller has milked cows on it for the past 48 years.

“I will cry. Sooner than later, probably,” Miller, 65, said in an interview.

With the sale of the Millers’ herd, Windsor County is down to just 17 dairy operations, from 84 in 1997.

Until this week, Jericho Hill Farm produced about 150 gallons of milk per day in addition to hay and maple syrup. The family works the land first purchased by Miller’s great-grandfather fresh off a train from Canada in 1907, with money his wife had sewn into his jacket pocket.

Miller previously milked 60 Holsteins — in addition to the Jerseys — but sold them in 2015. The outlook on milk prices was dim, and it was a challenge to manage both herds, so he scaled back.

For the past decade, the Millers have sold the Jerseys’ milk to Spring Brook Farm, an artisan, raw-milk creamery in Reading, Vt. The relationship has been mutually beneficial.

“They’ve been a great market for us,” George Miller said. “They paid us what the milk was worth.”

Even taking into account Spring Brook's more stringent, and expensive, requirements for feed, the specialty milk fetched a significantly higher price than it would

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George Miller comforts his wife, Linda, as their Jersey cows are loaded onto a trailer to be shipped to Canton, N.Y., on Wednesday in Harford. The Miller family has farmed the land since 1907, when it was founded by George Miller's great-grandfather. The couple graduated from high school in June 1976 and by August were milking their own herd. They will continue to grow hay and sugar at the farm.

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Alex Miller, of Westerly, R.I., puts a little pressure on one of the Jersey milking cows being loaded onto a trailer at Jericho Hill Farm in Hartford. Miller grew up on the

farm and he came back to help his parents sell the herd. George's brother, Chet Miller, of Norwich, right, helps with the loading. Gordy Cook of Hadley, Mass., helped facilitate the sale of the herd.

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have on the commercial market, where prices are set by a formula created by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and co-op dues, trucking fees and other factors such as market adjustments cut into any profit. But Spring Brook is reducing its cheese production in response to staffing challenges, cheesemaker Lisa Griffin said Thursday. Finding workers "has been one of the biggest challenges we've faced" over the past four years, she said. Because Spring Brook has its own herd of 42 milking cows, they no longer need the Millers' milk.

**Dairy in decline**

High up in the hills overlooking Hartford from the north, the 700 or so acres of the Jericho Rural Historic District provide wide views of the Upper Valley and "just enough flat space to park a truck," George Miller said. Once a thriving agricultural hamlet, Jericho maintains its rural character so strongly that it's hard to believe it rises over Vermont's fifth most populous town.

"At one time there were nine farms in this neighborhood," Chet Miller, his brother, said. "Every acre of land was used."

But the numbers tell a story of rapid decline in the number of dairy farms statewide and the consolidation of livestock into bigger herds to take advantage of economies of scale. In 2002, there were 1,508 dairy farms in Vermont. Last year there were fewer than 500.

"When we started, the average farm was 50 cows. The average now is 250," George Miller said.

Dairy farms like the Miller's have shaped the landscape of Vermont, and their disappearance will shape it as well.

Rolling hills with open meadows and pastures interspersed among the forests and dotted with red barns are the familiar, iconic face of Vermont, the open areas breaking up the monotony of a fully forested landscape.

But if there's enough of a decline in grazing, the visual landscape could see a slow and steady return to bushes and young trees, and then mature forest, Oliver Pier-son, director of forests within the Vermont Forest Division of Parks and Recreation, said in a recent interview.

"That's what happens when we stumble across a stone wall in the woods. The meadows and pasture that wall enclosed have undergone succession and returned to a mature forest," he said.

**'A continuing rhythm'**

Taylor was a dairy farmer for more than 40 years and sold his herd in 2018.

"I've been through it myself and I know exactly how they feel," Taylor said. "The day that big trailer truck left, that was all I could take."

Taylor missed the daily routine that had become deeply-rooted after four decades. "Five-fifteen, get out there, get the cows confined, run them through the parlor, get them fed. It's just a continuing rhythm, and your body gets used to it," he said.

That rhythm leaves precious little time for vacation.

"The commitment is 365," Linda Miller said.

Linda Miller, 65, retired in 2018 after 40 years at Dart-mouth Hitchock Medical Center, managing the outpatient and scheduling system. She credits the income and

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Top left above: With just one day to go before his Jersey cow herd leaves Jericho Hill Farm, George Miller does his morning milking in Hartford. The farm was founded by Miller's great-grandfather in 1907. Top left below: Miller spreads manure at the hill top farm. Top right: Every morning after doing their morning milking, George and Linda Miller ate tea and biscuits and played a card game called 3 to 13. Above top: Hannah King, of Cape Cod, Mass., walks with her father George Miller at the family farm. Above: Charlotte King, 5, of Cape Cod, Mass., and her sister Caroline, 8, help with chores at their grandparents' farm in Hartford. The girls were visiting with their mother, Hannah King, who grew up on Jericho Hill Farm. They had come to see the Jersey dairy cows for the last time before the herd was sold.

health insurance provided by her job as crucial to the sustainability of the farm.

“I don’t know that a young couple could make it without off-farm income,” she said in an interview Tuesday.

She recalled with a laugh how much she looked forward to an annual agricultural conference on artificial insemination because it was the only three days all year that George had off from farm work.

“We’ve been very fortunate in finding help,” Linda said. Still, milking is a specialized skill, and asking someone to step in to do it twice a day for days at a time is no small request.

Plus, “things can happen when you go away, and none of it is good,” George Miller said.

**‘Sad to see them go’**

While many people expect to retire with hardly a glance backward, for Miller the prospect is more complicated.

“It’s different when you take care of animals. They depend on us and we depend on them,” he said.

George’s brother, Chet Miller, a Norwich hay broker, stood inside the empty barn Wednesday afternoon as a light rain fell on the roof.

“It’s kind of sad to see them go,” he said of the cows.

But he’s also noticed the way his brother walks, which is stiff and a bit bent over at the waist: “a little bit like my grandpa,” who was also a dairy farmer.

George’s gait betrays the toll that nearly 50 years of difficult physical labor has taken on his knees and back.

“It’s a very hard way to make a living,” Miller’s sister Norma Young, of White River Junction, said.

The Millers’ daughter Hannah, who lives in Truro, Mass., brought her two daughters up to the farm the previous week to say goodbye to the herd and generate some happy memories. Caroline, 8, and Charlotte, 5, love to spend time in the barn feeding the animals and doing chores.

“The sad part for me in selling is that the new babies won’t have the memories of the farm,” George Miller said.

George and Linda’s son Alex and his wife Vanessa live in Westerly, R.I. and are expecting their third child next month. While they are glad that the freedom from milking responsibilities means they can spend more time visiting grandchildren, George and Linda feel a sadness that when the children visit Jericho Hill, they will not fully experience life on a working dairy farm.

**‘We’re going to party’**

For George Miller, “retirement” is relative, and he and Linda have no intention of selling the farm. He’ll still be haying, making maple syrup, raising beef cows, milking the four cows the Canton buyer didn’t want and making butter.

“I’ve never had hobbies. Never had time for them,” he said. “Maybe I’ll take up fishing,” he said, but he didn’t seem convinced.

Selling the herd “doesn’t mean it’s over,” the Miller’s son Alex, 38, said. “My kids could come up in 20 years and want to be dairy farmers.”

And Alex Miller is happy that his father can make this transition on his own terms.

“Not a lot of Vermont farmers get to retire. They’re forced to sell because they’re not making any money,” he said Wednesday.

He sees Wednesday’s sale as a cause for celebration. “So we’re going to party. We’re going to have some cake. Because not every farmer gets to win like this.”

George and Linda will celebrate their 45th wedding anniversary in October. Linda wants to plan a big trip.

“I said, where in this world are we going, George Miller?”

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Getting her own compartment, Dolly is the last cow to be loaded onto a trailer headed for Canton, N.Y. Dolly was due to calve any day so was given more space. Linda and Georger Miller, left, sold their dairy herd. Helping them is Gordon Huntington, of Newbury, Vt. On the right is Gordy Cook, of Hadley, Mass.

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