

Preserving a Way of Life: Foote Barn, Charlotte

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Heading west toward Charlotte on Hinesburg Road, the trees thin to open pasture. At the crest of a hill, Lake Champlain glints flatly in the distance and two blue silos stand out against the sky. Next to them, a fabric barn bulges like a taught balloon beside older wooden barns and a large 19th century brick farmhouse – home to Murray and Geneva Foote. The farm is a landmark in Chittenden County, a monument to the town’s agricultural past, which has since been largely replaced by wealthy, non-farming families.

“I’ve seen what’s happened to all those farms,” says Murray, as he sits by the woodstove in his living room. “Developers come in and buy land...but then sell the *house* for more than they paid for it as a *farm*.” Such has been the trend since Murray was a young man. After his father died, he returned home from college to find the farm in bad shape. “I figured I either had to fish or cut bait...so I bought some calves, had a dairy of 15 cows, and we milked them.” It was a difficult choice for a young man with multiple degrees and talents. “I was brought up to help my father. It was just kind of natural to keep on doing it.”

Murray points to a picture of his great-grandfather on the wall. “He bought the farm in 1878, and then my grandfather, Wilbur, had this place. So that’s...let’s see, one, two, three, four...” He counts the generations on his fingers. “And I have a son, Jonathan, but he’s got two daughters, so I suspect that’s the end of the line.” Though Murray seems disappointed that his son might be the last Foote to farm here, he understands his granddaughters’ desire to pursue their own interests. He himself lived in Shelburne while serving as a Professor of Biochemistry at the University of Vermont.

In 1990, when Murray and his wife Geneva decided to place a conservation easement on their property, there were only 15 dairy farms left in Charlotte. Instead of selling development rights, the Footes opted to donate theirs. “It has always been in our interest to preserve land,” Murray claims. It has also always been in their interest to preserve a way of life. However, the maintenance of their land and barns had become

prohibitively expensive. In order to keep the farm operative, the Footes approached the Vermont Land Trust for help. At that time, VLT and the Preservation Trust were working together on barn restoration projects around the state. The “Old Black Barn,” as Murray calls it, was a perfect candidate. The Freeman Foundation soon took an interest in the restoration initiatives and agreed to donate 75 percent of the costs. For the Footes, this immense financial support made a virtually obsolete barn entirely functional once again and gave them hope for the future.

Standing by the road in front of the Old Black Barn, Murray explains how it was first built on flat ground as a 30- by 40-foot English-style barn in the early 1800s. When moved to this site, a foundation was added, as was an extension on the south side of the building and a lean-to shed along the east side, bringing the barn to its current size: 45 x 58 feet. “You can tell on the inside it was built at different times,” Murray explains. “The old beams were axed out and newer ones are sawed.”

As we walk down the steep, snow-covered embankment to the barn’s side door, Murray, who is a spry 87 years old, uses the rough boards of its outside wall as a makeshift railing. Across the open valley, a startling panorama of Mt. Mansfield, Camel’s Hump and the Worcester Range stands in bold contrast against the sky. Inside, the young calves bellow noisily. Two hired hands, both immigrants from Mexico, feed the animals while Murray remembers using a wheelbarrow to load out the manure when he was a boy. “We’d run it along this track here and dump it out this opening into a holding pit below. And you got so that you could tip the wheelbarrow and not fall off yourself.”

Back inside the farmhouse, Murray flips through the barn’s structural assessment report prepared by the Preservation Trust. In addition to frame reinforcements, roof, alley and external wall repairs, the report promises “to lengthen the life of this barn.” By helping to preserve the physical and economic integrity of the local family farm, the work of land conservation and barn preservation are also lengthening the life of Vermont’s farming culture.