



**Supporting the Land-Based Economy:** Ryan Farm, Fairfield

Excerpted from *Changed Lives, Strengthened Communities Ten Years of Partnership with the Freeman Foundation* published by the Vermont Land Trust and the Preservation Trust of Vermont in June 2004. Reprinted with permission from the Vermont Land Trust.

Fred and Betty Ryan have spent their lives farming in Fairfield. Betty grew up within earshot of their current home on South Road, and Fred moved here from Fletcher, five miles away, when he was eighteen. “Been here a long time,” says Fred. “Wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

From the four-way stop at Fairfield Center, you head south, keeping the general-store-turned-antique-and-flower-shop on your left, driving past an old church restored as a single-family home, and other homes dotting the west side of the road. From the top of a slight rise, the wide barns and brick homestead of Ryan’s Farm come into view. This is a working dairy farm, one of many that have been conserved in Fairfield and Franklin Counties in the past decade with the help of the Vermont Land Trust and the Freeman Foundation.

Fred and Betty first contacted VLT in 1994. They had heard from other farmers in Franklin County that selling development rights was a good way to invest in the future of a farm. For the Ryans, this investment had two advantages: Initially, the money made it possible for them to build a new free-stall barn and milking parlor, expanding their operation and increasing production; and in the longer term, it has given them the assurance that their land will not be forced into house lots. “We’ve worked this farm most of our life,” says Betty, indicating their home with a sweep of her hand, “and we’d like to see it kept as a farm.”

The Ryan’s daughter Vikki and her husband Keith now live with their two daughters in the brick farmhouse built in 1830, while the Ryans live in a newer house next door. When Fred first purchased the 360-acre farm in 1982, he had 52 cows. Twenty-three years later, the Ryans now keep 250 milkers and 175 heifers on approximately 450 acres of land, most of it prime cropland. The original farmhouse and much of the property is visible from the windows of Fred and Betty’s living room.

“I named it the Funny Farm,” says Betty with a laugh. “They ask me how come I named it that, and I say, ‘Come and spend one day!’” But there is a certain ironic humor to her comment as well. The single greatest challenge to dairy farmers in Vermont is the unpredictable, and sometimes unbelievably low, price of milk.

“It’s been a killer for the last two years,” says Fred, who sits with his worn hands resting on the table. “Been working for nothing. Really, milk should never go below fifteen dollars per hundred-weight. And, cripes, it went down to ten or eleven dollars there one time. Trouble is with farming, you’ve got to have enough overhead to make things go. Like haying, you’ve got to have all that equipment, no matter what, or things don’t go well... Sure, we’ve made money, but you’ve got to put it right back into the farm.”

The Ryan’s story is not only a story about developmental pressures, low milk prices and the increasing costs of farm upkeep; it is also a story about a family determined to maintain the way of life they love. Since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century their land has been farmed, and the Ryans intend to keep farming it long into the 21<sup>st</sup>. The work itself breeds a singular kind of consistency, commitment and devotion to place that has largely been lost in our modern consumer-culture. A cornerstone of Vermont’s economy, grossing \$550 million a year, farming represents one of the state’s most lucrative industries. Its decline jeopardizes entire communities as well as the farm landscapes and families that are shaped by it.

The Vermont Land Trust and the Freeman Foundation recognized this trend ten years ago, forming a partnership to combat the loss of Vermont’s farming culture. The best way to do this: give the farmer options. By purchasing the development rights of a farm, VLT secures the land from future development and enables the farmer to improve his existing operation. Though farm conservation easements are fairly popular in Franklin County, Fred and Betty hope that more people will become educated about the significance of a local farm economy.

Betty puts it this way: “The general public doesn’t realize how many people the farmers themselves employ. We don’t have to pay everybody directly, but it’s coming out of our pocket: All your vendors, we deal with those; we deal with veterinarians; we deal with breeders; we deal with testers; we deal with machinery guys. Well, the list just keeps going on. And if we belly-up, look at the people who are going to be out of work.”

The story of the Ryan's farm also tells a story of community—a farming community—in which neighbors rely heavily on each other for support. Fred tells about building his milking parlor in seven short weeks. They started construction on November 10. “All the neighbors came and helped, and we put it up fast. December 30 we were milking in it.” These are the relationships that sustain rural communities. Caring for one another and caring for the land go hand in hand.

“You’ve got to have it in your blood to do it,” Betty explains. And she does. In 1918 her grandparents moved south from Canada in a horse and buggy. Betty’s father, who is now almost ninety, was four years old when his father bought 76 acres of the land they still own. Though the property has changed hands a few times, it has worked its way back to the descendants of the family who first farmed here. For the Ryan’s part, they’d like to keep it this way. “Even with the low milk prices,” Betty assured me, “it’s going to take a lot to get rid of us.”