

Hay

Reminder of the Past: Symbol of the Future

By Jean Luddy

In the years following World War II, farmland in many American towns, including Vernon, was converted into housing developments, roads and stores. A few signs of our town's rural past remain. One of these, the cultivation and harvesting of hay, can still be seen on several tracts of open space during the summer months.

An important crop, hay can be grown on a field of any size and provides nutrition for livestock during the winter months. However, establishing, maintaining, and harvesting hay requires more planning and investment than sowing and mowing grass for a lawn. Land suitable for a crop of hay must be clear of stones and stumps and fairly even to permit planting and harvesting.

Once the land has been prepared, the farmer has to choose the type of fodder to plant. Several factors influence the decision: the food preferences of their livestock, the quality of the soil, the length of the growing season, and the nutritional values of the different types of hay. Common varieties of grasses include alfalfa "(Arabic for best fodder)", clover hay, birdsfoot, trefoil, grass hays (Timothy, orchard grass and brome grass), oats and millet. Hay fields were seeded by hand in the past. Rollers and other broadcasting tools are now used to spread the seeds. The growing hay can be fortified with manure or prepared fertilizers. (Florence)



Brome grass



Birdsfoot Trefoil

As the time approaches to harvest the hay, a farmer has to consider a number of conditions. The farmer needs "to time haymaking to coincide with the right stage of plant growth and weather conditions. The old-timers used to talk about cutting hay around the Fourth of July, when they said, 'It was stout and had some bottom to it.' Although maximum growth of the plant and peak yields occur around that time, the nutritional value is greatest earlier in the season when the plants put most of their energy into vegetative growth and contain high concentrations of starches, proteins, and minerals." (Porter)

Timing was also crucial in planning for the yield of the first, second and subsequent cuttings of the hay. "Although cutting hay early will result in lower yields, the increase in nutritive value will compensate for reduced yields. The second, third and fourth cuttings that grow back are leafy and high in quality and often harvested when the weather is hotter, making the hay easier to cure." (Porter)

In the era before mechanization, hay was harvested using such tools as a scythe, and a hand forage rake which had wooden pegs for teeth. A pitch fork was used to move the hay onto a wagon or cart. Now tractors pull mowers through the fields. (Florence) Ideally the mowing should be done during a stretch of good weather. "In many parts of the country, weather systems provide windows- a period of 3-5 days of dry, crisp weather between two fronts. The beginning of a dry window is the time to cut your hay." (Florence)



Forage rake from the Strong Family Farm

Once the hay has been cut, it must be dried and cured before being stored. Wet hay can rot making it unsafe to feed to livestock. “Tedding, the next step in haymaking, fluffs up the cut hay and allows the air and sun to contact the undersurfaces to promote drying. Some people ted immediately after mowing to spread out the swath” (Porter).

After the tedding is done and the hay is nearly dry, the crop has to be raked. “Raking turns the hay one more time to dry the bottom and forms it into a windrow ready to be baled.” (Porter)



Farmers use specialized machines that will gather the hay for baling. Bales can be prepared in different sizes and can be square or round. “Before balers, hay was routinely gathered loose, pitched onto a wagon or an elevator (conveyor), and stored loose in the mow (loft) of a barn. The loose hay would continue to dry in the mow, and was fed out by pitching it down to the animals below. Loose hay is a labor-intensive process and takes up a lot of space in the mow. (Florence) Whether baled or loose, the harvested hay is moved into a barn or storage structure where it is stacked until needed.

Norman Strong and a worker bring baled hay from the field

For farm families in Vernon during the early 20th century, growing and harvesting hay was part of the yearly cycle of labor.

Norman Strong of the Strong Farm on West Street remembered that at a young age, he was expected to help his father with the haying.

“Prince [a work horse] was very trustworthy, therefore I, being 5 years old, could ride him to pull up the hay in the barn to the mow. Father put me on old Prince and everything went well until I turned him across the rope. It formed a half hitch around the hind legs causing him to fall almost on top of me if my father hadn’t jumped off the hay wagon and grab me. He gave me a stern lecture about crossing the rope with the horse.”



Hay wagon with horses- Strong Farm c.1905

Dorothy Gunther Dimmock grew up on the Gunther Farm near the Tolland town line on Route 30. She recalled the work and the challenges that her father faced when bringing in the hay.

“During the summer he made hay; in a good year he was able to get in two crops of it. It was cut and dried in the field. Then a hayloader was used to load it onto the wagon. It was stored in the barn, a separate one from the cow barn. The hay had to be dry before it was put into the barn. If it was wet, it might start a fire due to spontaneous combustion. We needed to watch the weather because if a storm was coming, we had to get the hay in before it hit.”

Even as farms disappeared in Vernon during the 20th century, some traces of the farming tradition remained. The Vernon chapter of the Grange, a national organization dedicated to farmers’ concerns and the promotion of agriculture, has continued to meet at their building on Route 30.

Rockville High School hosts one of the Regional Agricultural Technology Centers in the State of Connecticut which introduce students to agricultural studies. At the RHS Ag Ed Center, students from Vernon and nearby towns can take courses in Animal Sciences, Plant Science, Agriculture Mechanics, Aquaculture and Natural Resources. A Supervised Agricultural Experience Program gives students hands-on work opportunities. Students raise and care for farm animals at the Ag Ed Center. Rockville High School has the distinction of having a live mascot (the Ram) appear at athletic events instead of someone in a mascot costume.



<http://rockvilleag.info/>

Two non-profit facilities dedicated to preserving farm lands and buildings have emerged in Vernon. The Friends of Valley Falls, founded in 1972, describe their mission as the preservation and promotion of Valley Falls Park and Valley Falls Farm. The Valley Falls Farm, adjoining the Valley Falls Park, consists of 7 acres and includes an historic 1850s farmhouse and 6 farm buildings. The Friends have a collection of farming tools. Plans are underway to establish a Heritage Center in one of the buildings on the site.



<http://www.friendsofvalleyfalls.org/>



The Strong Family Farm, located at the Strong homestead on West Street in Vernon, was established “to provide a historic agricultural education center where children, individuals, families and community groups can experience an authentic family farm environment.” Since the SFF was established, improvements have been made to the yellow barn, workshops focused on agriculture for children and families have been presented, and popular events such as the Harvest Festival and Scarecrow Contest have occurred. The Strong Farm Stand, the latest development, will open in July of 2016.

<http://www.strongfamilyfarm.org/>

The recent acquisition of “Meetinghouse Hill” in Vernon combines an appreciation of colonial Vernon’s history with the need to save open agricultural space. This property, along Route 30 across from the Vernon Center Middle School, has been farmed by the Strong Family for many years. The property contains part of the pathway once taken by early Vernon residents as they walked to the first meeting house or church that was constructed on a nearby hill.

http://www.tankerhoosen.info/history/meetinghouse_hill.htm

To keep the property from being sold for development, a group of concerned citizens “formed Meetinghouse Hill, LLC, and cobbled together sufficient loaned funds, some from their own retirement funds, to make the purchase. Working with CT Farmland Trust, Inc., grant applications were made to Connecticut's Department of Energy & Environmental Protection, and to the US Department of Agriculture. Because of the high quality of the farm soils on the pastures, and the dwindling arable farmland in Connecticut, the grants received high scoring and awards totaling \$900,000! Connecticut Farmland Trust will hold the development rights to the farmland, and the property will be preserved forever as agricultural land.” To fulfill the requirements for keeping the grant, \$150,000 has to be raised by Friends VF/CT Farmland Trust. To learn more, visit the website: <http://www.meetinghousehill.org/preservation.htm>

The revival of interest in Vernon’s rural heritage reflects the awareness that farming was vital to our local history and the concern that the preservation of farmland is essential. Vernon offers residents and visitors many opportunities to learn about farm life in the past, participate in farm based activities, and possibly consider a career in agriculture.

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