

KEEPING THE FARM

GENERATIONS AT BEAVER BROOK

by Mary Blair Petiet



The land at Beaver Brook Farm in East Bridgewater has been under the plow for a very long time. The history of the land's use to the present proves its ability to constantly meet the changing needs of the people who have farmed it. Beaver Brook is the story of 300 years of land symbiotically linked to the farmer. It is a story about the importance of farm survival and continuity in a modern age that is just now beginning to rediscover and celebrate its agricultural roots. Today Katie Cavanagh, who has deep roots on the land, and her husband, Brian, farm pumpkins at Beaver Brook. Although they both work day jobs, they are both completely committed to their farm. Katie's situation is especially interesting, since in her professional life she is the coordinator of the SEMAP (Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership) Farms Forever Program. This year-old non-profit seeks to preserve farmland as farmland. Katie's job clearly overlaps her home life — during the day her office works to ensure continuity in farmland, while in the evening she returns to her own continuously working acreage.

Katie Cavanagh and her mother, Norma Callahan, who also lives at Beaver Brook, think that the old New England family Thatcher may have owned the land for a period in the 1800s. She knows that her grandfather, Burns Walton from Whitman, bought the parcel, approximately 120 acres, in the 1920s. The land was shy a house, but it sported a magnificent barn that dates to the 1890s

and remains a standing sentinel. Burns Walton was a second-generation American of English and Scots extraction and established the Double Bridges Dairy Farm, named for the two bridges that still cross the property's river. The dairy farm was a success until Burns Walton developed an allergy against either his cows or his hay, which led to him contracting pneumonia and to the end of his dairy business.

Norma's mother, Beverly Walton Beach, who grew up in the new farmhouse built by her father, Burns Walton, had moved next door to a 50-acre farm. She returned home to Double Bridges with her family when the dairy closed. Through the Depression and the Second World War they grew their own produce, and now, instead of producing dairy, they grew corn under the new name Beaver Brook Farm.

At Beaver Brook, Norma sold corn from the old farm stand that remains out back to this day. Her father was a plumber, and he farmed at night and between jobs. He developed a way to plant corn from the back of his tractor by rigging it with headlights so he could work in the dark. When the demand for corn fell, the family changed strategy again and concentrated on strawberries with a pick-your-own emphasis through the 1970s into the early 1980s. This seasonal crop was convenient for the older generation, who were thinking of retirement, as well as for the younger generation, who thought they wanted to leave the land.

When Norma's parents moved to Florida, the property went to her younger brother, who farmed it briefly. Later, Norma returned to Beaver Brook with her husband, Fred Callahan. They worked the land together until Fred's death in 2002. The farming stopped with his death, and they let other people hay it for several years.

Katie and Brian Cavanagh represent the newest generation to run Beaver Brook Farm. Both in their early thirties, Brian is a mutual fund investor who loves farming, and Katie is a former advocate against domestic violence. Their lives were changed when they got involved with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources Explorer Program, which helps potential farmers assess the real possibilities of farming. While participating in the program, the Cavanaghs realized that their position was unique in that they actually had significant land to farm — Beaver Brook.

The biggest challenge facing today's potential farmers is the space needed to produce crops. Katie's involvement led to her new position as coordinator of the SEMAP (Southeastern Massachusetts Agricultural Partnership) Farms Forever program, which seeks to preserve farmland as working farmland. While new farmers have trouble finding the acres they need, working farmers often lack a succeeding generation interested in acquiring their land. The situation in which farmers find themselves when they finally want to retire or actually need to sell and are unable to establish an heir or find another farmer to purchase their holding can lead to the loss of considerable farmland through last-solution sales. The Farms Forever non-profit program hopes to connect established farmers to nascent farmers who cannot afford their own land. Each farm and each aspiring farmer represent different situations involving both land and families. Farms Forever attempts to assist farmers who often have little time for such complications as navigating the choppy waters of transfer tenure issues, tax issues and family/land inheritance issues.

Katie and Brian neatly straddle the past, present and future of farming. The historic acreage at Beaver Brook is mostly intact, and while one is constantly reminded of the past by the stone walls and historic tractors that dot the landscape, the future is also completely evident in this fall's blazing orange pumpkin crop. Norma still lives in the house her grandfather built in 1921, and Katie and Brian live right next door. When they completed the Explorer program they knew that while they had land to work, they also lacked other essential necessities. They had little time for farming because, as is often the case with farmers, they had to work day jobs. Their farm stand was vacant, and they had no working equipment. Their first investment was a John Deere

tractor. Pumpkins were their choice of crop because it left them free to be in their offices for most of the year except for the month of October, when pumpkin pickers besiege the farm.

This fall marks their second pumpkin crop. They have eight acres planted and should produce 800 to 900 pumpkins. Brian followed family tradition by planting the seedlings from the back of the new tractor. The pumpkins are grown without pesticides, and weeds are controlled by roto-tilling between rows. Usually that is enough, but if not, they hand roto-till closer to the plants. Cover crops provide nutrients, and Katie describes the whole experience as a learning process.

Bees are actually the Cavanaghs' greatest allies. Their crop hums each morning with wild bees from nearby hives, and they rent an additional four hives from a beekeeper to help pollinate. To create fruit, a bee must pollinate at least 20 times. The bees are essential, and the Cavanaghs hope to have honey made from the pumpkin crop.

Last year their largest pumpkin was a Howden, weighing in at 40 pounds. This year they have planted 10 varieties, including white pumpkins, Atlantic Giants and Howden Biggys. The Howdens are definitely the roadside favorite. This year Beaver Brook is also experimenting with Indian corn in addition to winter and butternut squash.

Katie, Brian and Norma plan to keep their farm in the family. They all feel the same pull to the land and are equally rooted to their home. Where else could they the wander acres of beautiful landscape that offers them a living and

bears the marks of their ancestors? Where else could they share their home with the deer, coyote, hawks and woodchuck who somehow don't eat their plantings as the farm is bountiful enough for them all? The value of the land is evident. It has sustained successive generations, which points to the possibilities of continuity.

In her job with Farms Forever and at Beaver Brook Katie has noted a huge positive public response to farming. She sees her neighbors' enthusiasm about the shift back to farms. She is herself a product of an unbroken line of farmers, and she has firsthand knowledge of the real work involved in farming. Sometimes her professional and private lives intersect in her family's ongoing effort to maintain their property through the generations. Today they want to keep the farm. Today they are taking the farm into the future with their pumpkin crop.

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Brian and Katie Cavanagh