

Excerpted from a June 10, 2015 interview with Cynthia Larson, Wells, VT conducted by Gregory L. Sharrow (AU2015-2026) for the AFC Archie Green Fellowship Project (VFC2014-0005).

Cynthia Larson: *Beginnings*

We've lived a very interesting life from a dairy farmers' perspective. We started out milking 150 in a free stall here, which was what Rich grew up with, with a double six parlor, a herringbone parlor. And we rented land all over, because this farm doesn't have a big land base. We started out with corn silage and buying grain just like we were taught in school. And I guess I ruefully say now that what I learned ag school was how to pour more cement and grow silage corn and use chemicals. And I think we came with a head-start interest in conservation. And I, in saying conservation, I include both conservation easements and soil conservation because we saw agriculture in Connecticut die an agonizing death for lack of planning ahead. You know, people in the towns would become alarmed and zone farmers out of the value of their land. And far as I could figure, farmers never have any money but they have the equity of their land and it's important that they are able to retain that. So when we heard about the Vermont Land Trust doing conservation easements in such an equitable way, we were, like, first in line. And they did do a bargain sale with us in 1990. And that, like so many farmers that did this, we took the money and as soon as we had reduced our debt enough, we sank it right back in and did a giant renovation on the barn. We were raising our eight children here that we homeschooled and the free stall was in really difficult, really bad conditions. So we gutted it and we put in a comfort stall for several reasons. Family was very important to us and having our children involved with our business was really important. And the free stall didn't lend itself to little kids. And when we almost lost one and because of the ways free stalls were set up and for many other reasons, we had decided we'd rather change our scale to more closely meet our land base here. We also, just by nature, would prefer to do a better job with fewer cows. We put in a 62 cow comfort stall. It was a very beautiful barn. And we did that for several years.

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The economics had gone downhill big time. And we were really, we were either going to have to...we were letting our equipment go down. We're using, kind of living on that equity. We're going to have to borrow money to upgrade our equipment or have no hired help at all. And we did make the decision in the late nineties, and we got out for 15 years. We sold the cows. It's not a happy day. So that, meanwhile, Rich had started another business as a farm real estate appraiser, which has been very, very interesting over the years. Our favorite work is conservation because we hold it closely and that has provided a lot of

supplemental income. However, I still had young children and I couldn't bring myself to buy pasteurized milk when I believe so strongly in the nutritional superiority of raw milk. So I bought myself a Jersey cow and in those days there were no fences around here because in our earlier days as dairy farmers, we didn't pasture our animals. Our cows never got outside. Oh, maybe as dry cows they would, or as heifers, but nothing was fenced. So I tied my jersey cow to my old Saab [laughter] and my first rotational pasture experience was just moving the Saab every day. I kept some of my equipment in the trunk. It actually worked pretty well. Well, one cow mysteriously turned into two and three and four, and we upgraded to a milking machine installs in the barn. And soon we're selling a little raw milk to our neighbors. We have a passion for small dairies, and we would like to think that there is still an economic place for small, hilly dairies in Vermont where a family can make a living. It certainly does not seem to be true in our day right now. And it, I believe it's not true unless you somehow can retail your milk or somehow do value-added. So we started by retailing as much raw milk as was legal and convenient. We then were asked to produce milk for a neighboring high quality cheesemaker. So we upgraded to 40 cows over the next two or three years. First 20 and sold milk, put it in milk cans after it was chilled and transported it over to Consider Bardwell Farm, which is seven miles from here. That went well. It was still a financial struggle because, as you know, you lose the economies of scale. And financially, even though we're getting a pretty good milk price, it was still tough. They asked us to double the size of our herd, which is why we went to 40. And then they almost immediately after that, within a couple of months dropped us, which was a financial disaster for us. We sold half the herd again and then realized that we just had to have another model. So we really upped our promotion of raw milk, did a little advertising. We've been working with advocacy groups such as Rural Vermont to make it, to change the laws, to make it more reasonable to sell raw milk. As you might know, there's a great scare in the country about raw milk. In this day of sanitation, we feel it's totally unfounded. Less people get sick from raw milk than almost any other food you can see it right on the CDC records. People don't die of raw milk. It's very, very rare. More, you know, 12 people a year die of raw oysters, but nobody's making them illegal. And that's way more than have issues with raw milk. You know, we also have great sanitation now and we test our milk regularly. We love testing. We love inspections, because I think that's really appropriate for what we're doing. However, the agency of AG and the legislature through the years has found it...what they wanted to do was limit sales in many other ways, which we consider obstructions to trade. So we've been working with Rural Vermont and little by little, inch by inch, education by education, trying to bring the law up to date with the quality of raw milk that we're able to make and test. So as of right now, we sell raw milk right here out of our home, seven days a week, all day, late hours. It's a self-serve. There's a yogurt container in

which one may put the money. Worked very well so far. We became legal for us to deliver milk at farmers markets in Vermont last July, and we began to do so. It's a struggle. We go to the Rutland Farmers Market and the Dorset Farmers Market, which turned out to be really actually a lot of fun. Growth is slow and also irregular. We want to sell raw milk when it's very fresh. So Saturdays and Sundays, we're selling about 30 gallons a day at the farmer's markets. But what does one do with Monday and Tuesday milk? You're not going to sell it the next weekend. So over the last few years, we've worked to develop a business plan for a small creamery.