

BILLINGS FARM

Where Modern Lives Meet Mother Earth

By RHIANNON HUTCHINSON

Photography by JUSTIN CASH



Daily programs such as "How to Keep a Sheep" and "Introduction to Milking" provide interaction with the animals.

On Vermont's Route 12, half a mile north of the Woodstock village green, there's a 250-acre working dairy farm that began operation in 1871. The farm's owner at the time, Frederick Billings, was a dedicated conservationist who would be the first to applaud what his farm does in 2008 — educate the world about farm life as it was in 1890, and still is today.

"Billings Farm & Museum shows people where food comes from," says public relations coordinator Susan Plump.

"Where else can you take your family and see oxen and horses plowing fields?"

Most children who visit us don't know the connection between a cow and milk. They think milk comes from a grocery store shelf, so they're amazed to watch milk and cream being produced, chickens laying eggs, and corn growing."

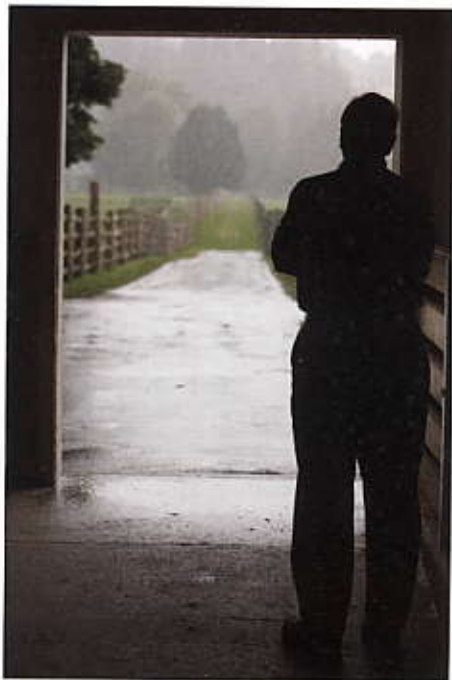
Did You Know?

One of the Southdown Sheep at the farm had triplets in the spring of 2008.

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TIME TO EXPLORE

There are two ways to experience the farm and the connection to nature and the past that it offers. The first is to simply explore. Over the course of a two-hour ramble, you can watch world-class Jersey cows being milked, pet shy young calves in the nursery, handle gaily feathered chickens, talk to massive gray Percheron



Waiting out the rain

horses, and watch fragile Southdown lambs resting cheek to cheek. You can also tour the gorgeously restored and furnished 1890 farmhouse (complete with ice house) that was the former residence of farm manager George Aitken, watch an Academy Award nominated movie, and see museum exhibits depicting farm life in 1890 Vermont — including maple sugaring, haying, butter making, the general store, and much more.

The second way to enjoy Billings Farm & Museum is through the many
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Did You Know?

In 2007, more than 5,000 students, grades kindergarten through high school, explored Billings Farm & Museum.

Comfort and Beauty

By SONJA HAKALA

Until Sept. 21, Billings Farm & Museum swings open its doors for its 22nd annual Quilt Exhibit. This show, which features work by quilters who live in Windsor County, Vt., is one of the most popular events sponsored by this busy museum every year.

Last year's show featured 44 quilts made by women from every corner of this far flung county, from Springfield to Quechee, Windsor to Barnard, Reading to White River Junction. And for every human being who enjoys the interplay of color, artistry and skill, it's worth the trip.

For the uninitiated, the word "quilt" might conjure up an image of a blanket made of small pieces of fabric, something stored in an old chest in an attic somewhere. But contemporary quilting is a vibrant and varied art form, arguably the most popular craft practiced in the United States today. For example, there are nearly 50 quilt guilds in Vermont and New Hampshire, a statewide quilting organization in each of the two states, and about 50 stores devoted just to quilting. A quilt can be as simple

as two pieces of fabric sewn together with a layer of insulating material in between, or a complex assemblage of fabric prized by the top art museums in the world.

Many of the pieces in the 2007 Billings Farm exhibit captured the "old-is-new-again" delight that runs throughout the contemporary quilting universe. For example, there was the quiet traditionalism of Marguerite Auger's "A Log Cabin for Ray, Built by his Wife!" Auger, a resident of Springfield, used one of the most versatile patterns in all of quilting, the Log Cabin, displaying her skill in muted tones of gray, brown and cream. This lovely backdrop highlighted the red fabrics she used in the center of each square, the traditional way to begin a Log Cabin block.

Then there was the whimsy of six pairs of woolen mittens carefully stitched to background fabrics by Edith Artz, Charlotte Croft, Mary Croft and Marian Levasseur in a piece they called "Baby It's Cold Outside." One viewer remarked that it made her



In the current 2008 exhibit, "Our Joys Outshine the Stars" by Janet Aronson from Bridgewater Corners, Vt. can be seen.



"A Log Cabin for Ray, Built by his Wife!"



"Baby It's Cold Outside"

think of a school's lost and found pile in February.

Back in the 19th century, frontier settlers often carried cherished quilts with them. Many of these quilts were parting gifts fashioned by communities of women and treasured by their recipients for the memories preserved in their fabrics. June Stacey's quilt carried that tradition forward in her assemblage called "Sweet Memories." In it, one can trace the interests of a lifetime in its memorabilia from Hartford High School sports, Rees's Pieces candy, not-for-profit volunteer efforts, Vermont basketball camp to a childhood interest in the Little Mermaid.

FUN FOR ALL AGES

As visitors enter the exhibit, volunteers offer sheets of paper inviting everyone on a quilt scavenger hunt. Can you find the pumpkins, chickadee, sea horse and yellow rabbit tucked among the fabrics and patterns on display? It is a delightful game, especially for young children, a sort of a Where's Waldo? in cloth.

All Windsor County quilters are invited to submit work for the show at the Billings; last year, two quilt guilds participated: Delectable Mountain, which meets in quilters' homes around Windsor county, and Heart of the Land, which meets in Hartland. Taking turns, the members of these two guilds produce smaller dimension works around a common educational theme such as the use of a single color, a particular patchwork pattern with its many variations, a specialized technique or an interesting use of fabric. In 2008, it's Heart of the Land's turn.

Quilting was part and parcel of life in Vermont when the original Billings Farm was established. The origins of the craft are nearly as old as sewing itself. Quilted artifacts have been found in excavations of sites in ancient Egypt and among settlements on the legendary Silk Road trade route between Asia and the Middle East.

At its most fundamental, a quilt is a three-piece sandwich consisting of a decorative top layer of fabric, a plainer backing layer of fabric, and an in-between layer of insulating material such as wool or cotton. (Contemporary quilters also use synthetic batting.)

While most people think of the terms patchwork and quilt as nearly interchangeable, they really aren't the same thing. From the time that quilting originated through the Industrial Revolution in Western Europe and the United States, cloth was hand woven and precious. While clothes were mended by applying smaller pieces to cover a hole, the process of wedding lots of small pieces to one another to make something as large as a blanket was very unusual. Nearly every quilt made before the 19th century was of whole cloth.

But by the 1850s, cloth manufacturing had been taken out of the home and put into the factory. By the end of the

Civil War, dry goods (as fabric was called) had become ubiquitous on store shelves as were home sewing machines and patterns for clothing. Women stitched the shirts, under garments, pants and dresses for their families — and when you make clothes, you make scrap fabric. Ever frugal, women cut and sewed the scraps of cloth to one another in patterns with names like Log Cabin, Ohio Star, Bear Paw and Flying Geese. While American quilters can't take credit for the invention of quilting, they can for the invention of patchwork.

One of the great delights of quilting is its individuality, a fact underscored by exhibits such as the one at Billings Farm & Museum. As visitors stroll around the



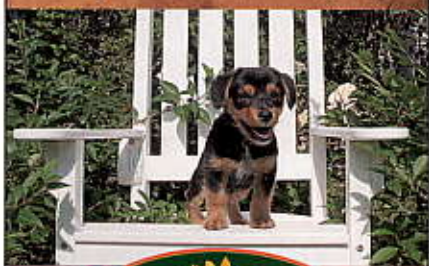
"Stars All Around" by Mary Guntz from White River Junction, Vt. is in the current 2008 exhibit.

show, every quilt tells a story about its maker, about her love for color, form and pattern. This individuality is emphasized by the names given to the quilts. Just listen to them and ask yourself what stories are hidden within: Blessings of a Mother-in-Law, A Bevy of Bovines, Chocolate Stars,

May Lilies for Cecelia, Giddy-Up Girl. What sort of images do they conjure up in your mind's eye? UVL

For More Information

The quilt exhibit at the Billings Farm & Museum opened on Friday, Aug. 1 and runs through Sunday, Sept. 21. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. The farm and museum is located a half mile north of the Woodstock green just off Route 4. For more information, call the museum at (802) 457-2355 or visit their Web site at www.billingsfarm.org



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educational programs offered year-round. One popular program, designed for children grades 4-12, is called "A Day in 1890."

"The children do barn chores and laundry, churn butter, and discuss current

events — what was happening in 1890 — as they eat lunch together," says Plump. "We also have programs about trees, weaving, sustainable living, heirloom gardening and historic photography. And of course there's 'Up Close with a Jersey

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Stewards of the Land

By DAVID DONATH

To truly know ourselves, we need to see where we fit, both in nature and in time. We have a human need to know where we belong, both geographically and in the succession of generations. Out of our sense of connection to places and to history, we find the commitment we need to care for the places we call home and build the communities that we need to sustain them.

Two centuries ago, George Perkins Marsh grew up on the Woodstock farm that we now call Billings Farm. He witnessed the destruction of Vermont's forests and the environmental problems that followed, as erosion washed out the hill country's thin topsoil and clogged its rivers and streams. This experience inspired him to write *Man and Nature* (1864), which became America's first ecological treatise and a founding study in our environmental movement.

A generation after Marsh, Frederick Billings bought the old Marsh farm and transformed it into a scientifically managed estate, with a first-class herd of Jersey dairy cows grazing the valley fields below his carefully reforested mountain.

Mary French Rockefeller was Frederick Billings' granddaughter. With her husband, Laurance, she saw the farm preserved and transformed into the educational Billings Farm & Museum — and the Billings mansion and reforested mountain given to the people of the United States to become Vermont's first national park. Together, the museum and the park fulfilled Laurance Rockefeller's vision of a place where conservation, historic preserva-



Frederick Billings



George Perkins Marsh

tion and natural beauty combined to lift the human spirits of those who visited, worked and lived there.

Billings Farm is about the relationships of people, the places where we live, and the places where we produce our food — today, in the past, and in the future. It is what we mean by stewardship — the responsibility that we have to the generations who cared for our world and passed it down to us, and the even greater responsibility that we bear to generations yet to come.

It is also the essence of the things we value about Vermont and about other rural places where people work the land to make food. Beyond the cows and the exhibits, these are our messages for all who visit, experience and learn from Billings Farm. Every day, the farm and museum engage all sorts of people in real experiences about the work of the farm and life in rural Vermont. Each year nearly 60,000 share in these real experiences, taking away deepened understanding of this place and its heritage, as well as heightened sensitivity to their own places, the sources of their food, and the relationships that build community and stewardship.

David A. Donath is president of The Woodstock Foundation and director of Billings Farm & Museum.

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Cow', which teaches about the cow as mother and food provider."

That last class is popular, because the cows at Billings Farm are deeply impres-

sive. According to Karen Weinstein, one of the farm's historical interpreters, "One of the questions I hear most often from children is how many cows we have. I tell them about 80 — and they're always

astonished to learn that a cow eats 80 pounds of food a day and drinks 40 gallons of water."

FUN FOR ALL AGES

Adults of any age can enjoy the farm and museum just as thoroughly as a child. "Elderly people like it here because they often grew up on a farm or their grandparents were farmers," says Plump. "They love the scenery and the peace, and our 1890 farmhouse often reminds them of grandpa's. Visitors who like to cook like our demonstration of cooking on a wood stove, and every Saturday in September we feature traditional crafts, like basket making, spinning, a quilting bee and a woodworker. We also have a special event day for all ages that includes building a split rail fence, ice cream making, and doing laundry with a washboard and wringer. In the fall, there's Harvest Weekend, which has a barn dance, husking bee, historic games, and homemade donuts and spiced cider. And during the holidays we have horse-drawn wagon and sleigh rides, ornament making, and sledding."

If you still need yet another reason to visit, consider this: Billings Farm can remind you that you are part of Mother Earth's living, breathing, amazing, amusing, completely unpredictable family. The farm refuses to let humans forget that we need trees, animals and land for our own health and well being. As David Donath, president of the Woodstock Foundation and director of Billings Farm & Museum, says, "Rural Vermont is at once comforting and surprising. It is one of the world's great unspoiled destinations — a place to nourish and renew the human spirit." UVL



(Top) The 1890 farmhouse was a showcase house for the time; it had all the latest innovations of the day including gas lights, running water and a flush toilet.

(Middle) All the farm's cows are Jerseys, which produce milk high in fat and protein. Most of the milk from the farm is used to make cheese in Grafton, Vt.

(Bottom) The Southdown Sheep, originally from Britian, graze next to corn which will be used to feed the farm animals in the winter.



Plan a Visit

Billings Farm & Museum is open daily, May 1 through Oct. 31, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is also open weekends in November through February from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Billings Farm & Museum is located on Route 12 and River Road in Woodstock. For more information, call (802) 457-2355 or go to www.billingsfarm.org