

# the farm institute

## A Teaching Farm for the Community

by Julia Rappaport

“We’re putting the culture back in agriculture,” Rob Goldfarb said this spring from the kitchen of the FARM Institute on Martha’s Vineyard. The rain poured down on the fields outside, recently sowed with seeds of all kinds. Inside, Mr. Goldfarb, development director of the community learning farm, was dry and well fed, having just polished off a salad of farm produce topped with hardboiled farm eggs and sausage made from farm pigs. It is a slogan Mr. Goldfarb has borrowed from the farmer and writer Wendell Berry and one which he repeats often, much to the exasperation of campers, employees and teen apprentices who keep the farm a busy place year round.

Together with his younger brother Matthew, Mr. Goldfarb runs the 162-acre farm in Katama. It is a teaching farm for the community, one especially dedicated to reconnecting island children—both summer visitors and members of the year-round community—to the land. In season, the farm runs a camp with programs catering to Wee Farmers (preschoolers), teenage Farmers-in-Training and all ages in between. Once fall hits, the farm provides transportation for island students between school and field for after-school programs and teachers bring their classes out for potato-planting and crop-harvesting field trips.

The farm is all about learning, but the property is home to more than just the institute. It is a piece of land with deep agricultural roots and a rich history of the island agrarian lifestyle.

Maps of the island, which date back to 1862, show fences bordering the property, presumably used to enclose animals. The maps are an indication of early agrarian activity on the land. During WW1, Edgartown families planted army and navy beans in the soil there. During the 1930s, a man by the name of Frederick A. Paris took over the farm, bringing with him nearly 600 sheep for grazing. He started building a large barn on the property, but stopped construction after the great hurricane of ’38.

In 1943, longtime Vineyard farmer Elisha Smith (who is now 85) bought the property along with a neighboring parcel. The transaction completed the tract of land which today comprises Katama Farm. Mr. Smith brought with him six dairy cows and sowed the fields for corn, potatoes, rye, oats and hay. Annual harvests of 3,000 bushels of corn or 40 tons of hay were not unusual. Mr. Smith also began a dairy collaborative from the

property, which at its peak boasted some 30 local dairy farmers. But by the 1960s, the number of farmers in the collaborative had dwindled to just a handful and in 1964, Mr. Smith sold the farm.

Eventually, the property landed in the hands of a private developer who intended to subdivide it into more than 700 buildable lots. When the developer went bankrupt in 1977, the property fell to a Boston bank and a local rabble raised opposition to the loss of key farmland. “It’s one of the finest pieces of farmland in Massachusetts, without a doubt,” said Robert Woodruff, former executive director of the Vineyard Conversation Society who spearheaded the movement to save the farm. The group adopted the name the Committee-to-Try-to-Do-Something and came to include town selectmen, summer residents, local businessmen and even a newspaper reporter. “It was a rather extraordinary, unusual putting together of people on this committee,” said Edo Potter, a former Edgartown selectman who owns Pimpneymouse Farm on Chappaquiddick. “There were conservationists and developers all there in the same room and what fascinated me was that they all wanted the same thing. They remembered it as a farm and I think that’s what made the difference. People had contact with it before. They had worked there and they didn’t want to see it turn into houses.”

After months of negotiations, exhaustive fund-raising and more than one offer to buy the property, town residents voted to purchase the farm for \$340,000 with the help of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs. It was a deal which involved the cooperation of the state, the town and three island organizations. The town conservation commission became the property landlord and ensured the farm would be leased to farmers and used to promote agriculture, conservation and passive recreation.

It would take another 26 years before the FARM Institute came to call the land home. Three farmers tried to work the property after the town came into the land and all three failed. In 2005, a young non-profit organization signed a ten-year lease on the property. Called the FARM Institute, the organization was founded in 2000 with a mission of engaging and educating children and adults in sustainable agriculture. They had been operating from a nearby seven-acre tract of land and the move allowed the group to increase their offerings and bring in new staff, including the Goldfarb

brothers who came to the Vineyard sight unseen.

“The buildings were in bad shape when we got here. The land had not been fertilized or taken care of for many years. The farm was really down on its heels,” FARM Institute founder Sam Feldman said this summer. So the staff began to restore the property, repairing buildings and nurturing the soil. They started new programs including one for preschoolers, an apprenticeship program for serious farmers-in-training and a program called the Work Income Sharing Project for teens to grow and sell their own produce. “The farm is set up so that kids can run it,” Rob Goldfarb said. “There are no doors, no tests. We connect them to the land, to the animals and to each other.” In addition, the farm connects area farmers. Last year, the institute exchanged the use of their fields for the use of the greenhouse of local farmer Andrew Woodruff.

In its first year, 140 kids enrolled in the FARM Institute summer camp. Last summer, more than 1100 did. In 2007, the farm turned a profit for the first time. That year, they also began a scholarship program to help island youth take part in Farm Institute programming. The program is need-blind, and scholarships of up to \$350 per child per family are awarded. Last summer, the farm gave out more than \$15,000 to assist 30 year-round island kids attend the summer camp. They will give out another couple thousand dollars this winter so that island students can enroll in their off-season



programming. “This is a community farm,” Mr. Goldfarb said. “It’s about sustainability and making a connection on a day-to-day basis. That’s who we serve first. We never shut our barn doors on any kids.”

This time of year, the fields lie fallow and the last of the produce has been harvested, but still the farm teems with activity. Thanks to a recent grant, the historic barn is being renovated and two unheated greenhouses are being built, which will allow the farm to grow four seasons of the year. In November, the farm hosted a conference of the national Farm-Based Education Association and soon after began offering its own pasture raised turkey, lamb, pork and veal for sale to the community. Student programs continued on through the fall with pre-school mornings, after-school sessions and Saturday chores. Throughout the winter, teachers will bring students on field trips to the farm for a hands-on experience they can then take back into the classroom, because, at the end of the day, bringing the farm home is what the organization is all about.

“We want to provide the kids with something they can take back to the classroom from the farm. It increases their sense of place and ownership,” enrichment director Melinda DeFeo said in an interview last fall. “We want to teach them about what’s in their own backyard. The sense of place is what connects kids to the environment. In turn, that makes them environmentalists, or conservationists, or just good eaters, or appreciative of the local.”



Julia Rappaport is the former calendar editor and features writer at the Vineyard Gazette where she wrote the Farm and Field column. She wears skirts and heels, but can hold her own on sea or land where she has been known to catch a fish or two, grow a good tomato and forage for fiddleheads. Originally from Martha’s Vineyard, she now lives in Boston where she works as a freelance writer.