

A Chosen Life

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By Karen Heller

It's clear cool and windy spring weather and the farms are beautiful. Rural North Country lands are flooding over the Pre-Cambrian shield that lies below, the wind is whipping over fields of beige winter grass and there are birds everywhere. When we arrive at Isis and Frank's place the oxen are out in the field cutting clean six-inch grooves in the soft, dark earth.

A man and woman from Syracuse, two campers, were having lunch nearby when they heard about the fine team of oxen at a farm in Rossie. They came out to Isis and Frank's because, the older man says, "we've never seen a team of oxen before." Frank happily obliges the couple, hitching up Andrew and Ivor for a demonstration with the standing plow.

The oxen are brown and white, Ayrshire half brothers, six years old, and according to Frank they are inseparable. They follow Frank around, watch him, listen to his voice. "Ges," they step right, "haw," left, "whos," "back up a little," they respond to light words and the sight of a light whip and they make it look easy. Norton, a neighbor, stands on the plow behind them, directing pliant earth as it flips over in waves, leaving a neat row.

Frank tells us that Ivor likes to fight with a neighbor's oxen. Andrew is a pacifist. The man from Syracuse asks questions about the yoke and their horns, and we learn that they use their powerful curved horns as brakes, by throwing their heads against the yoke on downhill slopes.

When the demonstration is over, the plow is unhitched and a long wooden board is attached. It is called a "stone boat" we are told as Frank, Norton, Lofly and myself climb aboard. The oxen head toward the barn, pulling us with an initial jerk that would falter even a seasoned subway rider, and as we are pulled over several inches of deep wet mud, we learn why the board is called a boat.

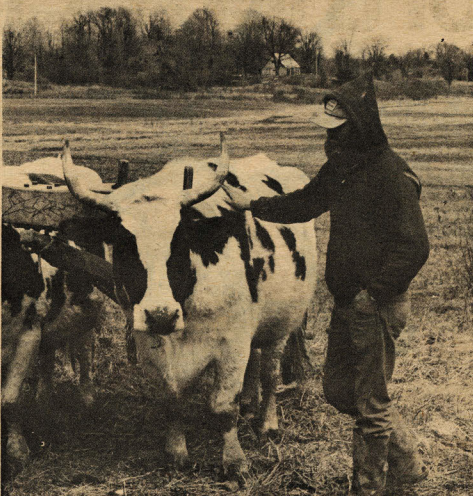
The oxen take us up to the barn with out guidance. Frank tells us of their versatility, versus a tractor, for doing work such as pulling logs out of the forest on icy winter days. We bid "adieu" to the animals and head inside to warm up so I can interview Frank and Isis on their chosen lifestyle as self-sufficient farmers.

"I don't know anyone who is self-sufficient, that whole expression is b.s., a phrase that has been used, but I think it is misleading," Isis says as we sit down at a big kitchen table. Isis begins to prepare food for everyone on the wood stove. A main part of being self-sufficient is depending on yourself for a lot of the constant maintenance work, Isis explains. She is wearing overalls and a blue turtle neck with her short greying hair and warm blue eyes. The rice, mung bean and mushroom dish she is preparing with just the right spices smells wonderful.

The couple grown their own hay and vegetables, have a spice garden and a prolific cow that averages 50 pounds of milk a day and five calves a year. The chickens give "beautiful eggs" Isis says. She weaves, spins, cans vegetables for the winter and Frank does a lot of woodwork. They belong to a community food group and buy grains and dried fruit, nuts and yeast from Cleareye twice a year.

The farm is small and doesn't generate enough revenue, so 2-3 months of the year Frank goes out and does logging. But he says his lifestyle is "a helluva lot nicer than a nine to five job. Longer too," Frank and Isis bought the farm six years ago.

Before that Frank sold Irish knit gear in California and Isis worked in a gallery in Bucks County, Penn., where



they met. Frank used to work on farms as a young person and says he loves cattle. Isis talks about, "the fascination with starting with nothing, the magic of watching a seed. It's corny but to see the whole process gives a greater sense of value to your life.

Isis and Frank's original idea when they bought the farm was to harvest wild rice as a cash crop. But they discovered that "ducks are a lot more efficient at it than us." Things got interesting then as they were trying to redo the house, get the hay in, train the oxen, and learn more skills like carpentry all at once. It's tough to have a cash income when there's so much else going on.

Inflation is making things tougher for them. Six years ago Frank bought his two oxen for two gallons of maple syrup! Their first heifer cost \$12.50, now they could sell her for \$125-150. The main problem as Frank sees it is, "we're not as dependent on things, but when we do buy things, they're being made by union people being paid 18-20 dollars an hour. We're in an entirely different economic bracket."

Now here's one thing I am dependent on, Frank says walking over to a hand made wooden counter, "bananas and beer. We tried to make it one year, it was dangerous. It exploded everywhere." When I asked about the alcoholic content, the answer was,

"just one was enough."

Part of Frank and Isis's self-sufficient life style, ironically, is interaction and semi-dependence on their close neighbors. They trade and barter things like honey, time and expertise. Once when a friend's house burned down "we built a house for a guy one weekend — about 30 of us — boom! During our conversation a neighbor, Liz Scarlet comes in with her two children. Later on Liz tells us that she traded honey for a vacuum cleaner.

Comparing his job selling Irish knit wear to his present life Frank compares the time he used to spend buying clothes and partying to now when, "all the action is here on the farm, it's fun, we're doing work that is exciting."

Before we leave we get a peek at a photograph of Andrew and Ivor — one month old — already yoked and practicing. We notice a painting on the wall done by a neighbor of the team hitched to a hay wagon with Frank standing high above them, beard and hat, clouds and field behind. Isis comments on the team, "we're having to earn a living to keep them."

Leaving the house I get the feeling that one hour is insufficient, two hours is ludicrous and after three hours of watching the oxen and talking with Frank and Isis I feel as if to truly understand this lifestyle I would need to spend at least a year here living the

days and seasons. But we follow Liz Scarlet down the road to see a bit of her home life and self-sufficient farm anyway and see the windmills she and her husband have.

"There's a lot of talent in Rossie, Liz says, "People tend to romanticize about this lifestyle, and you either get strong from the land or you leave. A lot of people leave. We all sit in the kitchen keeping our coats on as we sit and talk because neither of the two wood stoves are lit. Her two adopted sons Mark and Rob run around upstairs (without coats) playing.

Liz works outside of the farm as a school teacher. She is also the principal of the alternative Beaver Creek School. So her husband John works at home and does a lot of the housekeeping. Liz says their roles are always changing and they keep an open dialogue.

The wind generator has been John's project. Liz brings out the vacuum cleaner that runs on the 32 volt system. It's a big noisy upright Hoover. They also have a small TV that they allow the children to watch once a week on Friday evenings. Last Friday Mark and Rob forgot all about it.

From seeing a lot of children in her teaching job Liz thinks that "TV has ruined people's lives — they don't know how to entertain themselves, they become passive and don't learn how to see something through." She tells us about a book called "Four Arguments for the Elimination of TV", by Jerry Mander. "Without a television set" she says, "We're in a different culture."

"I do miss some cultural things," Liz says, "but do we read a lot!" Both the Scarlets, and Frank and Isis are great fans of W.S.L.U. as well and listen to it often.

There is no typical day at the Scarlets. Weekdays Liz goes to school and John will do any of several things that need to be done on the farm. They grow a mouth-watering list of foods including peanuts, broccoli, sunflowers and their main bartering crop: asparagus.

"We're a community within a community, we depend on each other more — we're closer emotionally and spiritually. We have common reasons we're here — we help each other a lot," says Liz of her Rossie neighbors and friends. The Scarlets have lived here for ten years.

To Liz there is something very personal about her lifestyle. "Living this lifestyle, you have to be more comfortable with yourself, you learn."

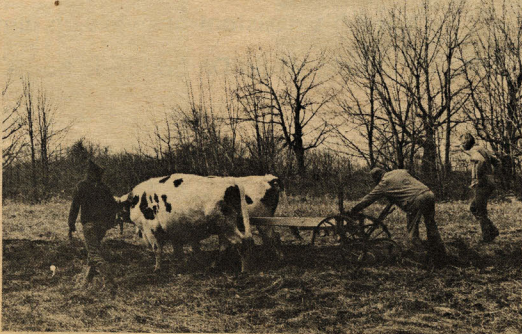
In the city she explains, that's harder to do. There are so many distractions. It is becoming clear that an important aspect of the self-sufficient lifestyle is the closeness between home and everyday life. There isn't that clear cut distinction between home life and professional life.

Describing reasons she has chosen to live the way she does, Liz says, "the quality — it feels good. It's hard to give specifics — like being close with family, friends, having a physically active life, being responsible more than most for thinking about what you do."

"If anything holds us together it's the food. It's satisfying to see the whole process," Liz says. It's very exciting living this way, it doesn't get dull." While we talk Mark comes downstairs and makes himself a piece of toast on a flat pan over the gas stove. Rob helps himself to some well water from a large plastic container next to the stove. Liz tells the kids there will be lentils for dinner. "Lentils?" Rob says, "Ugh! They give you farts for a year."

The next day I called John Scarlet on the phone (he wasn't at the farm that day) to talk about the windmill. Along

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in use at Clarkson College

By Nancy C. Kohart

Anyone who pays tuition to attend a North Country College or owns a North Country home feels the "pinch" in their pocket as the mercury drops. Energy conservation is part of everyone's winter vocabulary in this area.

An abundant source of alternative energy covers the northern part of New York — wood. And more and more people are turning to wood stoves to heat their homes.

North Country institutions are also very sensitive to rising fuel costs, since they use massive amounts of energy. Yet, none have exploited wood as a fuel until now. After employing the standard methods of energy conservation, delamping, individual radiator controls and a dual heating system that burns both natural gas and numbers 2, 4 and 6 oil, Clarkson College of Technology is turning to wood with an eye on the future.

Starting this fall, Clarkson will heat the downtown campus, nine buildings, primarily with wood waste. Woodwaste is simply the leftover sawdust and chips from area lumberyards. This "waste" amounts to substantial savings for Clarkson. The downtown campus uses about 300,000 gallons of oil per year which presently costs about \$300,000. It would take 4,200 tons of wood to do the same job or contracted at \$14 a ton, about \$58,000 a year. Therefore, if woodwaste could be measured as a liquid, comparable to fuel oil, it would sell at 20 to 21 cents a gallon.

This is such a savings that the \$600,000 construction project, almost half-funded by the New York State Department of Energy, would pay for itself in less than three years.

The project engineer for the Clarkson woodchip system is Gerry Gonyea. He feels the long-term savings through the use of wood are substantial. Gonyea projects the 3 year difference between using oil and wood will amount to approximately \$700,000, and between gas and wood \$4.5 million.

The new system will be extremely flexible burning three grades of oil, natural gas and almost any solid fuel, including coal. Solid fuel will be kept in a large storage bin 20 feet around and 36 feet high. As fuel is needed, it passes through a material classifier which only lets woodchips 1.5 inches get through. The fuel passes over a magnetic pulley removing any foreign material of metal, and then puts it in a bin that has a "full-empty" indicator. From there wood is injected into the furnace as needed.

There are some drawbacks to using wood as fuel. It is more polluting than natural gas, but since it is virtually all carbon it may be as little as 1-10 as polluting as coal. A lot of space is needed to house the boiler and equipment as well as store the bulk fuel. Since the machinery is more elaborate there is a higher maintenance cost, possibly an additional, \$5,000 a year for Clarkson Also, Gonyea feels that in the near future woodwaste from lumberyards will become increasingly scarce. Clarkson, however, has a five-year contract with a lumberyard.

Even with these disadvantages, A Federal Energy Department estimates 9-15 percent of the state's energy will be provided by bio-mass by the turn of the century.

Gonyea is confident about the success of the woodchip plant and would like to see the college purchase marginal and



unused farm land to harvest fast-growing hybrid poplar trees. Four hundred acres would supply Clarkson's present demands for woodwaste.

"Handling solid fuel is labor intensive," Gonyea said, and harvesting would generate employment for the community. These 400 acres would most likely be purchased from the county so it would not affect community taxes. Clarkson would be putting "marginal land back into production."

Gonyea added another way to get a mass supply of wood and still generate community employment. Franklin, Lewis, Jefferson and St. Lawrence Counties could produce 5,000 tons of wood each day, or 2,000,000 tons a year using the existing forests. This production would not deplete the stock

of wooded areas. It would, however, employ between 400 and 600 people and generate \$75,000,000 to the 4 counties in wages capital.

Clarkson will serve as a model for other New York State institutions interested in this type of energy program. Yet the woodchip success has not caused a lull in Clarkson's search for other effective and cost-efficient sources of energy.

Gonyea, with Clarkson since 1965, has worked with Clarkson's conservation programs since their beginning. He believes the ultimate goal is to be "fuel independent." He has enough studies and proposals going that if they were all approved by the university, Clarkson "could be (fuel) independent by 1984."

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with the term self-sufficient. I learn that windmill is also incorrect. The Scarlets have a wind generator and a wind pump.

"It's the beginning," John says. "I didn't like the notion of being dependent on a big utility — not having a say whether I used oil, coal or nuclear. I wanted to have some control."

He goes on to explain that he wants to take responsibility for the way he uses things, so he's not supporting nuclear power, or unwise uses of oil and coal that cause acid rain. He may not be saving that much money (and whenever he buys things he must consider that manufactured goods have used some form of electrical power) but even the psychological independence is "one of the reasons we moved here in the first place."

John built the wind generator and pump himself, collecting pieces from old blown over windmills over time. This is also the way Frank Peters built his standing plow. The wind generator is an aeromotor with a 63 foot tower up on a hill. The whole time we were there it was spinning.

Oxen, windmills, making choices, taking responsibility and eating well: first impressions of Frank and Isis, Liz, Joh, Rob and Mark's lives.

