



IMPRESSIONS  
of  
A CONFERENCE ON  
ALTERNATIVE  
AGRICULTURE  
by  
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We left on a rainy Thursday to go to New Hampshire for a conference on the essentials of a native agriculture put on by NOFA (Natural Organic Farmers' Association), a New England based organization. We--Doug, Alan, Christine (herself a NOFA apprentice at Birdsfoot), and myself--made our way over the Adirondacks, across the lower tip of Lake Champlain by cable ferry, through Vermont and finally to New Hampshire. There we spent the night at a back road commune that, among other things, sells four crates of parsley a week to the Holiday Inn. The next morning we drove further south to the conference.

There was a draft animal demonstration right after we registered, with a team of horses and a team of oxen. Despite a heavy rain, people stayed to watch the horses who were hitched to a mowing machine and later harrows. Everyone sort of stared at the oxen, who just stared back.

There were so many things packed into each day we were constantly changing plans. "Maybe I'll see this slide show, then go to the dairy workshop, then the blacksmithing, then...though the

dairy workshop 'is on again in the afternoon and if I go then I can see the movies in the morning, then draft animals, and what about soil fertility...hmmm?"

As it turned out Saturday's 7 a.m. workshop found me watching a slide show about composting with two tractors and a manure spreader. Maybe it was the time of day, but somehow it seemed like organic agribusiness to me.

My next scheduled workshop was on the other side of the campus. A quick stop for coffee seemed to help my cognitive responses at this one on dairy products. There were lectures on cheese, butter and yogurt making at home, and discussions about problems and methods we'd used ourselves. This one seemed a little more home-spun. Though these procedures can be found in most of the back-to-the-land manuals, the interchange was fun and informative and I definitely picked up a few tips and a better understanding of what is actually going on during the various processes.

During the yogurt section, for instance, I learned that 85% of the most beneficial bacteria in yogurt dies within 24 hours, so that the yogurt on the grocery



shelf is fairly useless. The main problem with this workshop, and with many of the others was how much they tried to pack into an hour and a half. The dairy workshop could not possibly hope to deal completely with every aspect of cheese, butter and yogurt, but at least you could get a general idea of the procedures, and people tried to answer specific questions about your own problems if they could.

By now it felt like lunch time, but I still had one more morning section to fill. I'd decided to go to The Care and Feeding of Draft Animals in the morning, as I'd heard there was going to be a horse shoeing demonstration. This turned out to be an excellent example of how well these workshops can work out for both novices and the more experienced.

People were there who were thinking about getting horses, people who'd had horses and some of us who had them and weren't quite sure what to do with them. I learned quite a bit in the hour and a half, not only from the discussions, but just by watching the horses handled and used. I was so enthused by it all that I decided to attend the same workshop during the afternoon slot instead of seeing the movies I'd originally planned on.



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The afternoon turned into a free-for-all as far as I was concerned. Instead of attending workshops I found myself wandering around the grounds, checking out books at one place, blacksmithing at another, talking to a new friend here, finding an old one there. Ended up back at the horses and had a look at some donkeys (which I found quaint, but not really practical if you had much heavy work to do). Finally dragged myself away and back to the dorm well after 7 p.m.

The conference wasn't all workshops, however. Friday evening we attended the John Todd speech. Todd, who is co-director and founder of the New Alchemy Institute of Woods Hole, Massachusetts, did some of the pioneering work with greenhouse bioshelters powered entirely by the wind and sun. He was great to listen to and enthusiastically received by the six hundred or so attending.



His ideas on heating with tanks of algae really struck me as both off-beat and practical.

Saturday night we were treated to a play by the Phoenix Nest Earth Arts Center. It was a fable with lots of music about a frog that switches places with a human. Great nature-crafted costumes and props, good ideas and lots of fun. At one point they had the whole audience turned into a series of power generating stations, humming and chugging with their arms. At the end, when the frog's pond had been dried up by the human, they transformed 600 people into a rainstorm that went from pit-pat to a thundering drench and back again.

After this was a step dance with long lines of couples and more good music. If you weren't into dancing and wanted to catch a film you'd missed, they were being shown, too.

All in all it was a great vacation. Had a good (though hectic) time and learned a great deal. Came back on Sunday with new enthusiasm about my horses, a book on blacksmithing and plans to try it, plus many other ideas I'd like to try but probably never will.

I was most impressed with the size and organization of NOFA. Why it's different there than here is hard to say. Part of it might be that New England seems like a more affluent area with more places to market produce and products. Also, their community is a little older than ours. Maybe a few more years will find us better organized, too.

If thoughts of moving there cross your mind, let me tell you one thing, first. I went to see a real estate agent while I was there, and fifty acre farms with old barns and no house run around \$75,000. So paradise ain't cheap. I think I'll settle for vacations there instead, and next year will probably find me at the conference once again. See you there.

