

A FARM GROWS IN CONCORD

CELEBRATING 100 YEARS OF VERRILL FARM



Verrill Farm kitchen favorites with a dash of history



Three generations of Verrill Farm, 2018: From left, Grace Faddoul and her father Tim; Jen Verrill and her mother Joan; Steve Verrill and his granddaughter Chloe Faddoul

Agriculture is the art of arts—without it man would be a savage, and the world a wilderness.

The History of Verrill Farm

The Noble Farmer

Farming in the mid 1800s, in this neck of the woods, was more than a job and a source of sustenance, beyond a way of life. Farming, at least in the minds of some, was elevated to an art, a philosophy even. Certainly a noble pursuit.

In 1853, American author and clergyman John Lauris Blake wrote what became the New England farmer's companion—The Farmer's Every-Day Book. A worn copy of this tome sits on Steve Verrill's bookshelf, its dark leather binding cracked from over a century of wear.

The elevation of the farmer should not surprise anyone familiar with Concord's history. The Transcendentalists—led by Concord natives Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau—worshipped the divinity in nature and espoused a connection to the land. Many may remember that Emerson immortalized “the embattled farmer” in his poem “Concord Hymn,” written in honor of the town's bicentennial in 1835.

•••••

“It is the design of the author to place agriculture in the lofty position it is designed to hold,” wrote Blake. “The yeomanry of a country are its vital energy—and should be its chief glory.”

•••••

Floyd and Jim built a state-of-the-art milk processing facility in Concord Center, at Thoreau Street and Sudbury Road—where Dunkin’ Donuts is now. They named it simply “The Dairy.” The plant had beautiful quarry tile floors, white glazed tile walls, glass brick windows in the processing area, and big stainless steel vat pasteurizers that could hold several hundred gallons of milk. Floyd and Jim also built a retail ice cream shop at the front of the building that was very successful. As a boy, Steve enjoyed sneaking over to buy ice cream during school.

In 1941 the Verrills sold the Carrigan Farm to Andy Boy Farm. Then in the late ’40s, they expanded again, buying land across Wheeler Road from Alden and Raymond Wheeler. The Wheeler brothers had a bad potato crop that year, so they sold one of their fields to the Verrills to help pay the taxes. For the Verrills, it was a great addition of about 13 acres—the first of several parcels that Floyd, and later his son Steve, bought from the Wheelers.

In 1943, gas shortages resulting from the war effort meant that DeNormandie & Verrill had to put a horse and wagon into service for deliveries around Concord Center. There was a stable in town, where the horse and wagon were kept. There was also a blacksmith shop across Sudbury Road with a coal elevator. The area around Belknap and Elsinore Streets featured Wilson Lumber and Worthmore Grain, a feed store.

Sneaking Out for Ice Cream

The Dairy made their ice cream with 18% butterfat, which is almost unheard of today. The real fancy ones might be 14% or 16%, but it’s usually less than that.

It was very, very good ice cream. I used to sneak over from school at lunch hour once in a while. I liked to get there when it was just coming out of the mixer. It was cold, but it hadn’t hardened yet—almost like soft serve. After that it would go into the hardening room and stay below zero for a number of days. You’d never get that soft, creamy texture to it again. You could buy a small cone for a nickel or a big one for a dime. A sundae was thirty-five cents.

They didn’t have near the flavors they have now, but there were probably a dozen: vanilla of course, and chocolate, coffee, strawberry. I think they also had peach, chocolate chip, and maple walnut. My favorite was a vanilla sundae with butterscotch and marshmallow.

Steve

The Verrills' Legacy

As this history illustrates, the Verrills are simply not deterred. Adversity has certainly shaped their path, but it has never meant an end to the road. Steve Verrill survived polio as a child, walking miles home from school on crutches without complaint. He lost parts of several fingers in various accidents, but his labors continued undiminished. You would never know he is blind in one eye. Both Steve and Joan are emblems of that New England hardiness from which they are descended, with a thriving farm the most visible sign of that legacy.

A significant though far less visible piece of the Verrills' legacy is the legal covenant that protects their farmland from development in perpetuity. Back in the '70s, Steve was county president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau, an organization that supports the interests of farmers in the Commonwealth. Its members were coming under increasing pressure, with the tax collector over their heads and real estate developers knocking at their doors. Escalating property values made it tough for many of them to pay their taxes, and the only option at the time was to sell their land.



Verrill Farm Timeline

1636

Leaders of the local Algonquin tribe—a female chief known as Squaw Sachem and a man named Tahattawan—grant land to Rev. Peter Bulkeley in the southwest part of Concord. The area, known as Musketaquid (Reedy River), comes to be called “Nine Acre Corner,” though it far exceeds nine acres.

1667

George Wheeler purchases the land from Bulkeley. Over time the land is subdivided into parcels, several of which come to be acquired by the Verrill family.

1892

Floyd Verrill is born April 8, in Newry, Maine.

1896

Amy Cole is born May 14, in Stoneham, Massachusetts.

1918

Floyd moves from Maine to Methuen. Floyd and Amy get married and start Verrill Farm with 200 hens and some cows.

1920

Ralph Foster Verrill, Steve’s brother, is born.

1922

Floyd and Amy move to Concord and purchase the Carrigan Farm (now part of Nashawtuc Country Club) on Sudbury Road. They buy a herd of cattle from Vermont that arrives by rail in a cattle car. Floyd and Amy walk the herd from Concord center out to their farm.



Floyd at his sugar house



Floyd and Steve building a fence

A Growing Palette

I often say when I'm plowing the fields in the spring that I'm clearing a canvas. And when we lay out the beds and plant the seeds, it's like putting down delayed paints. As things grow, the picture develops through the seasons. The beds show up in their symmetrical patterns, with a palette of colors that become more vibrant as the crops mature.

Growing a Good Tomato

We put in over 18,000 tomato plants each year, all started from seed, with a number of heirloom and hybrid varieties. People are interested in trying different ones and really enjoy the range of colors and flavors.

The secret to growing a good tomato is to start with the right seed. The first criteria in picking seeds is the flavor. After that we look at disease resistance, and third would be yield. We don't have to ship across the country, so we don't need durability. We want the best tasting tomato we can grow. We started growing one a few years ago that I really like called the Aussie. It's a nice big tomato, with a good blend of acidity and sweetness.

Steve





Creamy Asparagus Soup

We look forward to the first asparagus of the season and enjoy it especially in this soup.

Ingredients

3 cups leeks, thinly sliced, white part only
8 cups asparagus, sliced
½ cup olive oil
3 cups Russet potatoes, peeled and diced
1 teaspoon fresh thyme, chopped
8 cups chicken broth
1 teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons parsley, chopped

Instructions

Wash the leeks thoroughly by placing them in a bowl filled with water. Gently swish them around to remove any sand and lift out of the water to drain in a colander. Repeat with asparagus.

Heat oil in a 6-to-8-quart pan over medium heat. Sauté leeks until they are soft and translucent, add asparagus and thyme and cook for an additional 5 minutes. Add the chicken broth, potatoes, salt and pepper and cook until potatoes are tender when pierced with a fork. Remove from heat. When cool enough to handle, puree in a blender until smooth. Season to taste.

Makes 10 to 12 servings

Asparagus Capital

Back in the late 1800s, Concord was the asparagus capital of the country, with more than 100 acres of asparagus, maybe 200, growing in town. There was more asparagus grown in Concord than any other town in the U.S., and almost all of it was sold in the Boston area.

Asparagus likes a nice deep, sandy soil, and Concord used to have quite a lot of that. In those days kids would go out and harvest asparagus early before school. It's quite a laborious process. You have to bend over with an asparagus cutter and slice each stalk just under the surface of the soil. These days we pick about six acres every day during asparagus season, so it's a lot of walking.

A blight in the 1920s hit the crop hard, and by 1940 asparagus was pretty much gone. We began planting it again in 1992, and we started the asparagus festival in about 2005, which has been very popular. Most people haven't really seen asparagus growing and they're quite fascinated when they get out to the field.

Steve

Spinach and Chicken Mac & Cheese

Ingredients

- 1 pound penne pasta
- 4 tablespoons butter
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup all-purpose flour
- 5 cups whole milk
- 1 teaspoon dry mustard
- $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups shredded cheddar cheese
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 3 cups fresh spinach, packed, stemmed and chopped
- 2 cups grilled chicken, diced (about $1\frac{1}{2}$ pounds uncooked)
- 1 cup seasoned bread crumbs

Instructions

Preheat the oven to 350°F and set aside a 9x13" pan.

Cook pasta according to package directions and set aside.

Melt butter in a saucepot. Add the flour and cook over low heat for 1 minute. Add the milk in two stages, whisking until smooth. Add the chicken and spinach and stir until spinach begins to wilt.

Add the cheese and continue to stir until cheese has melted. Transfer to prepared pan and top with seasoned bread crumbs. Bake for 15 minutes until bread crumbs are golden and cheese is melted.

Makes 8 to 10 servings

Cows Are Like Children

For many years, Verrill Farm was strictly a dairy operation, no vegetables. We had a herd of 80 to over 150 cows that needed to be milked twice a day, seven days a week. Cows are like children—you don't get a day off.

Our schedule completely revolved around the milking schedule. The cows determined when we opened presents on Christmas, and when we sat down to Thanksgiving dinner. Steve went out for the first milking at 4:00 a.m., took a break for breakfast, and then went back to the barn and worked until about 11:00 a.m. cleaning up and feeding and bedding the cows.

After a three-hour break from 11:00 to 2:00, he would start the afternoon chores, finishing at about 6:00 p.m. Steve always went down to the barn again around 8:00 at night to make sure everything was all right, sweep the feed in, scrape the manure down, spread the bedding a little bit, and make sure the cows were comfortable. I'd tuck the kids in, he tucked the cows in.

Joan



The Verrill Farm Kitchen Begins

My interest in food emerged when I was at UMass Amherst, majoring in sociology without any real career direction. For fun I started reading food magazines. Then as a junior, I lived in a co-op dorm, where everyone took shifts cooking meals. I loved it! That's when I knew that I should pursue cooking professionally.

My first job out of college was working for a guy from Concord who had started a catering business with a Brazilian woman. That experience introduced me to some great Brazilian dishes and flavors.

A few years later, I moved to Rhode Island, where I worked for a restaurant and caterer. They did a huge breakfast business and made everything themselves, including lamb sausage. The pastry chef made the best croissants—delicious! Everything was fresh, all homemade from scratch. That became my standard for cooking.

I came back to the farm in the early 90s and was working as a pastry chef at Aigo Bistro, under Ana Sortun. At that time farmers markets were becoming very popular. We had converted our empty cow milking parlor into a commercial kitchen so that we could offer baked goods at the farmers markets and do catering on the side. Eventually I left the restaurant to focus full-time on our new catering and bakery business, which at one time included making desserts for Legal Seafoods. With our first farm stand in 1995, it made sense to include a kitchen and bakery. I started out with two full-time employees, and we did everything: baking, cooking (the first prepared meals in the area), washing dishes by hand, and cleaning. We now offer a wide selection of soups, entrées, salads, cakes, pastries and pies—up to 500 pies a week, depending on the season—all from scratch.

Jen



