



Vermont Natural Beef

Two Generations Raising Beef on Pasture

by Jessica Klick

The Stannards' farm was a whirlwind of focused activity in early June. The farm is owned by Bob and Pati Stannard; their four children Abigale, Luke, Sam, and Mac help run their beef business, Vermont Natural Beef, in Benson, Vermont. The family was working to ready the new home on the farm that Abigale and her husband, Rob Mackey, had just purchased, which borders the family's current farm and will greatly increase the amount of pasture to graze beef cattle. Everyone was busy installing appliances, replacing drywall and tiles, sanding floors, cleaning, and painting, so that Abigale and Rob could move in the following week.

The Stannards' thriving beef business is a family affair. Everyone is involved to some extent. Bob's wife, Pati, is a

Bob Stannard. Cattle grazing. This year the farm has 136 cattle. Daughter Abigale helps run the farm. The barn next to the Stannard home. A birdhouse at the new property. The refrigeration unit Bob and Pati will make deliveries with in the fall. The beef graze on pastures of fresh new growth grass, alfalfa, and clover and are rotated at regular intervals.

co-principal of the Shelburne Community School in Shelburne, and she said, "I love my job." Though her profession off the farm takes up most of her time, she participates in the business by accompanying Bob on his weekend beef deliveries in the fall. Their youngest child, Mac, is still in school at UVM, but is working on the farm this summer. Sam is the second youngest, and he works full time on the farm. He intends to make a career of working the family farm and concentrating on marketing the beef using the education he received as a business major at Castleton College. Abigale, like her mother, is in the teaching profession, but still helps run the farm and is particularly helpful in planning delivery routes, as she majored in geography as an undergraduate. Luke is a skilled carpenter, working full time at that profes-



sion off the farm, but also using his carpentry skills on the farm when needed.

The amount of work that this one family can manage is astonishing. They cut fence posts for their extensive fenced pasturage themselves. Bob showed off the locust and cedar posts they had stacked up, ready to use. They had peeled the locust posts themselves with a tool called a draw shave, and cut the cedar posts from their hedgerows. The family owns an excavator they are using to clear the overgrown hedgerows, dig ditches, and renovate the new farm. The family has wood boilers to heat the house, and they harvest the wood that they will need each year for heat from their 70 acre wood lot. This year they will be heating two houses from that wood lot. They have two gardens: a small one in back of Bob's and Pati's house, and a large one in the yard of Abigale's and Rob's new home. They are also dismantling some barns and using the materials from them to restore others. In addition to being self sufficient in heating fuel, they generate their electricity with a windmill that feeds electricity back into the grid. They estimate they will recoup their investment in the windmill in seven years.

Bob credits the family's continued interest in the farm with the switch from milk cows to beef cows. Sam concurs. He said, "I wouldn't have wanted anything to do with dairy farming."

Bob said, "I never expected that any of my kids would have anything to do with farming. I mean dairy farming was a real struggle for us. We couldn't make any money; we really struggled."

Bob grew up in Fair Haven, Vermont, and his family owned a bank which was started before the Civil War. When the Depression hit, his father left school and came home to work the lands his family owned to keep the bank open. Bob said, "He was very involved in all aspects of agriculture and really loved it. Well, when the Depression kind of started to wane and things picked up, he became involved in the bank. But he was just an outdoor



The Stannard family: Sam, Mac, Pati, Bob, Abigale and husband Rob Mackey and Luke kneeling.

guy—that was where all of his interests were. I worked on a farm as a teenager and got interested in it, and I went to UVM and I said, ‘I want to major in agriculture.’ So I did. And my father was excited about it.”

He continued, “And in 1980, the year that Pati and I got married, we bought this farm, and I came here and started milking cows.” He milked cows for nineteen years, sold them in 1999, and went to work at Blue Seal Feeds as a dairy nutrition consultant while renting out the farm. “And then,” said Bob, “in 2004 I got this harebrained idea that I ought to have a few beef cattle. And so I bought seventeen animals and I put them on a friend’s land up in town, because I didn’t have any land available because it was rented.

Bob has selected certain breeds because they grow very well on grass, and the feed conversion on grass is exceptionally good. They raise primarily Angus, Hereford, and a cross between a Hereford and Angus, which is called a Black Baldy. Sam works full time on the farm and intends to concentrate on marketing the beef.



And we butchered those, and I gave them to relatives, and friends, and they all said, ‘Wow this is terrific, you need to sell this meat.’ I’m thinking, no, I don’t really want to do that. I was working for Blue Seal. Things were going well; I liked my job. I enjoyed having a few cattle.

“Well, my college roommate from UVM runs an internet business and he’s very tech savvy. “He said, ‘I’m going to build you a website. All you have to do is give me some beef every year, and I’ll take care of your website.’ It so happened that year that my tenant wanted to move out of the farm, and this farm was going to be available for me to use, and that’s the year we fenced in 110 acres. So the second year we went from 17 to 41 animals. Once the website got up and rolling, I sold them out by August. It was unreal. I sold all the sides of beef. I went out and bought a freezer to deliver it, because I had no way to do that, and then from that point forward, it’s just grown ten or 15 animals every year. A few years ago I had 94 animals, last year I had 106, this year I have 136.” He also still works as a dairy nutrition consultant





To keep up with demand the family recently purchased over 200 acres of prime grazing land. The new farm is visible from the old one. For more info on Vermont Natural Beef visit www.vermontnaturalbeef.com.

off the farm, currently for Feed Commodities, a company in Vergennes.

This year's total of 136 cattle is grazing on the original farm, which is approximately 280 acres. About 170 of those are fenced for pasture, and the family also rents 50 additional acres from a friend. The new farm totals 215 acres. Of the 215 acres at least 200 of it is usable grazing land. Bob's planning to fence 75 acres of that this year, and they have been restoring old barbed wire fencing surrounding established pastures.

The beef is all pasture raised. The cattle are sleek and healthy looking, and are standing knee high in lush forage. The pastures are beautifully managed, with a careful rotation plan. Bob prefers a system in which each grazing unit has a central spot where water and mineral are located, and these are the cattle's only source of water and mineral. From this area, the pastures surround it in pie slices, so that the animals are always returning to the central area, and the pastures rotate around it.

The breeds they keep are primarily Angus, Hereford, and a cross between a Hereford and Angus, which is called a Black Baldy. Bob keeps those particular breeds for a few reasons. He said, "First of all they are the most common breeds that you can find and also they're Channel Island breeds. They grow very well on grass, and the feed conversion on grass

is exceptionally good. There are certain breeds that are designed more for feedlots. Now that's not to say that these animals aren't used in feedlots, but breeds like Charolais and Simmental are feedlot animals typically. They do better in that, that's the way the breeds were designed. And so I want ones that will convert grass to beef efficiently, and that's what these guys are."

He buys the animals he raises from local sources, including the Vermont Beef Producers certified beef sale, and individual local farmers with whom he has ongoing relationships. They have a unique delivery unit for their beef. They use a freezer mounted on a trailer and powered by a generator, pulled by a diesel truck. That way, said Bob, they don't have to have a truck that is solely relegated to deliveries which gives them more flexibility.

The Stannard family has been long time Vermont Farm Bureau members. Bob said, "I've been a member for years and years. It's a good organization."

The new farm is visible from the old farm, and Bob can look out of his bedroom window to see the roof of the farmhouse where his daughter and her family will be living. While standing in the pasture of the new farm, Bob said, "We have a lot of work to do here, but if you'd seen this place the day we took over you'd see we've made a lot of progress."