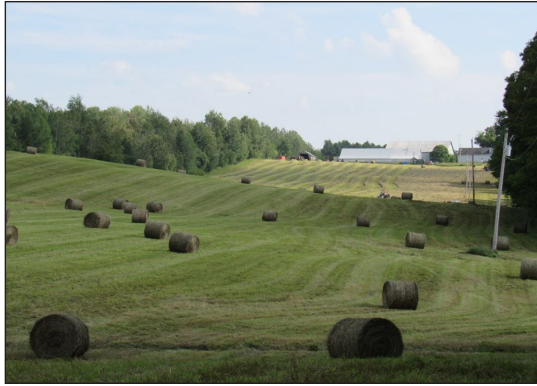


The Heart of a Farmer

by *The Townships Sun*

Do you remember the days when grandparents grew, processed and preserved their own food? This was a natural and organic lifestyle. Maybe this is a good basis to look at why some have chosen to remain on the farms: the feel of the earth, fresh air and sumptuous heritage food.

The life of a farmer is challenging. A dairy or beef farmer is up before the crack of dawn, when most people are still in bed enjoying their sleep.



The farmer is milking, cleaning and feeding before the sun has even given a hint of rising. Other

chores required are checking of tools and material. A day's schedule may include plowing, or bailing hay for winter feed. The day is not over until about 8:00 p.m., if all goes well. Chores must be done, rain or shine. Weekends do not offer much of a change in schedule. Summer is, of course busier, with haying and weather determining when is the time to 'make hay while the sun shines.' Weather is one of the biggest challenges for work and life on the farm. On occasion there is the opportunity for a little social life on a Saturday evening, but it is pretty much a 24-7 job.

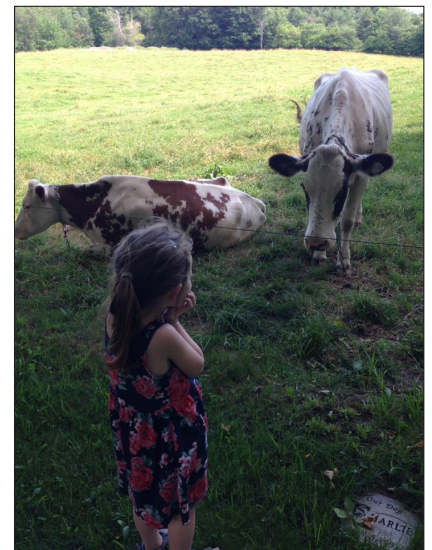
On the upside, you work with beautiful animals and spend time in a natural setting, with none of the noise of a big city. Being a farmer requires many talents, but there is a certain satisfaction in seeing the products that come from your hands: fresh milk, dairy products, freshly mowed hay, that old tractor you fixed up, and rising in time to see the sunrise everyday. The quiet of the morning offers an array of possibilities.

We went in search of farmers from the Townships to discover what exactly was in "The Heart of a Farmer." As we discovered, it was many things: appreciation for the land and animals, love of family, community spirit, neighbourliness, willingness to work hard, dedication and the purity of a good soul. These were all qualities possessed by our small farm operators.

Art Laberee and Brian Curtis from Stanstead are good examples of the farming spirit. Both men own farms: Art is an active beef farmer and Brian hays the property that has been in his family for 5 generations. If his son decides to move to a property on the farm, he will be the 6th generation of the Curtis family to remain on the farm, and the two granddaughters would then be 7th generation. The Curtis family farm has 200 acres, and until a couple of years ago, still had milking cows. Brian's dad William worked the farm for many years. For 10 years he stopped actively farming, during the time that Autoroute 55 was being constructed. William owned and operated Bill's Super Test Garage in Rock Island located across the street from the Butterfield's plant. Brian was about 12 or 13 years old when his dad operated the garage. Following the closure of the garage, William returned to the farm and rebuilt the barn. After his father's passing, Brian took over the farm. He had grown up on the farm and it was natural to continue living there and farming. He loves the outdoors, the animals, and the freedom to make decisions and use his abilities to see progress.

Both Art and Brian are school bus drivers entrusted with precious cargo, our children. The school bus driver has a special bond with the children they see from the moment they start school until the day they graduate from high school. An inspirational speaker, upon hearing that the school board had their own fleet of drivers, was so excited he jumped on the opportunity to speak to the bus drivers of the Eastern Townships School Board. He made the statement that these employees are the first people students see in the morning and the last people they see at night. Other school employees change from year to year, but the bus driver often remains in the driver's seat throughout a student's school career. The bond becomes special.

After 22 years, Art Laberee is retiring from his position as a driver. He remains on the spare list to be called in an emergency. One of his students said to him, "You cannot stop, I have two more years."



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That is how many of the students feel about their drivers. The bus driving fits within the schedule of a farmer, except for planting and haying time.

For an operator of a small farm, bus driving is an important income supplement. Small farms do not usually generate enough income for the farmer to earn a living, and the bus driver position offers other attractive benefits.



For the past couple of years, Brian has not had the responsibility of typical farm chores. Feeding and cleaning of the cows is no longer part of his daily routine, but he does not rule out the possibility of returning to active farming in the future. If his son were to

join him in the farm operation, Brian would welcome working side by side with him. Brian's granddaughters are also very much at home on the farm and they love the animals. It is a good, healthy life for them with good values. Farming is in the Curtis blood.

Brian cuts wood and owns a sawmill for milling the lumber- many hours are spent in the wood business. Since 1998 Brian has been Roads Inspector for the Stanstead East sector and he may get an emergency call at any time. Sometimes this can cause a conflict with his bus run but thank goodness for reliable replacement drivers!

Brian and Art both serve on the Crystal Lake Cemetery Association. Graves, burials, mowing and the overall management of 14 cemeteries, is demanding and takes a fair amount of time since it includes the overseeing of staff and the general needs of the cemeteries.

Art Laberee has been farming for 36 years. How he became a farmer is an interesting story: he found out that a friend's property was being foreclosed the next morning if there was no buyer, so Art made an offer, and had to be in Sherbrooke with papers in hand early that day. He made it, and the property was his, all 325 acres.

Art spoke about the challenges of technology, which is not as readily available in rural areas, since so much is now on-line. Government on-line information is not always

user-friendly, and the record keeping is demanding. Big farmers who have the funds to dedicate to buildings and machinery (like a local farmer who built a barn costing 2.5 million dollars) are making it difficult for small operations. Payments for milking cows are received every 2 weeks, whereas beef farmers receive payments once a year, in the fall. There are many elements that contribute to the challenges farmers face, and having access to government documents in the English language would most certainly be welcomed. The payoff only comes upon sale of the property. Land sells well if people are interested in large parcels of land, or want to continue to farm the land.

Regarding the aspects of challenges faced by family farmers with their small operations, Brian and Art agree. You no longer are able to earn a living on the small farm. The love of what you do must outweigh the challenges but it is still necessary to hold at least one other job.

Brian is quite well known for the band he plays in, "Slightly Haggard." He has done many a fundraiser to help organizations and people who are facing adversity of some kind. In 2018 a neighbour's barn went up in flames. The Curtis family welcomed the farmer and opened their barn to his cows. The barn had not been used to house cattle for some time so it needed to be outfitted with milking equipment, and the cattle moved in. Brian recalls many other farmers on site the day of the fire to transporting cattle and doing whatever they could to help a fellow farmer.

A short time later, the band played at Burrough's Falls to raise funds to help this local farmer. It was a huge success, and due to possible overcrowding, some people had to be turned away. This is one farmer helping another, and a good neighbour offering a helping hand. Someone cared.

Art loves his dogs. He takes them on frequent long walks through his property, looking for tracks of other animals. A few years ago he decided it was time to spend more time with the dogs and a little less time working. Art and his dogs walk into the horizon looking back over life on the farm. When I think of Art this is how I see him- close to nature and the quiet and beauty his land offers him. Life is still busy, building fences, spreading manure, haying, but his moments with the dogs offer him a respite, a time for contemplation and reflection, and a time to enjoy the animals he cares for.

These are two humble, fun-loving and dependable men, who bring many solid values to their communities. They are most deserving of a "Thank you" for all they give. To Art Laberee we say, "Congratulations on your retirement as a school bus driver; may retirement (or partial retirement) fulfill all your wishes." Our communities are better in so many ways because of the presence of "The Heart of a Farmer" within them.