

Rosina Wallace

Sharing the Farm Experience with Others

by Noreen Cargill

In a photo from last year's Stowe Street Arts Festival in Waterbury, a little girl in a summer dress, sun hat, and sandals stands near a calf curled up on a bed of clean wood shavings. Not the black and white Holstein often associated with Vermont, the Jersey is honey brown with big ears and almond shaped eyes. The calf looks more like a fawn, like Bambi, than a calf. But it isn't a character



from a cartoon movie; it's a baby cow from the Wallace Farm nearby. Before leaving that day the girl will spend time with the calf and then head home with a picture of the animal in a frame she decorated herself. Farmer Rosina Wallace lives for creating connections like this between kids and cows. Along with her regular milking and farming schedule, she fits in local off-site events like these and also hosts close to one hundred children and their families at her farm each year.

"When I was a kid," Rosina said, "either you were a farm kid or your grandparents had a farm, or you lived near a farm." That isn't true today, she pointed out, and children are missing out. "Ever since I can remember, I wanted to have a summer program for kids so they could experience life on a farm," she said. "I just loved it," remembered Rosina. She wants children today to understand the importance of keeping agriculture and farming vital in this state, so Vermonters can know where their milk and yogurt and cheese come from and that it's safe to eat.

Rosina's desire to teach children about life on the farm isn't a surprise when looking at her background both on the farm and in the classroom. Raised on a farm that's been in the family since 1866, Rosina, her brother, and sister all helped with chores while growing up, but it was always expected that the three would go to college. Rosina got a degree in teaching and a job right out of college. She spent 12 years working with children in the school and classroom environment before deciding that she wanted to make a change.

Rosina didn't know what she wanted

to do next, but making a career change wasn't the scary thing for her: it was sharing that news with her parents. They likely gave up a lot to make sure their children had the opportunity to go to college, Rosina remembered thinking. She didn't want to disappoint them. When she finally talked to her dad, he was in the barn milking. "He was down on one knee beside the cow putting the machine on when I finally told him," she said. "He was definitely at a disadvantage." She laughed. She remembered his response: "He simply looked up at me and said, 'Do you want to farm?'"

There was going to be an open seat in the legislature, and he wanted to run for it. In his 70s at the time, he had served in the legislature years before and knew he couldn't keep the farm going and serve at the same time. He knew he needed some help. "He offered it as an option," Rosina said, "and I said, yeah." That was back in 1980. At the time, Rosina needed just three more courses to get her master's degree in teaching. She finished that summer and started working on the farm on Labor Day weekend that year.

Rosina had fifteen solid years of working with her dad on the farm and learning from him before he passed away in 1995. Today her brother, Wally, assists by doing all of the haying and moving fence in the warmer months and helping with the afternoon chores during the colder months, especially when Rosina works a shift at the Cabot Annex Store nearby, where she enjoys working part-time as they need her.

Things were going fine at the Wallace Farm until about four years ago, Rosina said. That's when she made a switch



A poster to encourage children to get their photo taken with Artemis, a four month old calf. Another activity was to create a flag with an imprint of Artemis's hoof. After visiting the calf in the pen, the little girl in the summer dress and sun hat visited the craft table at the Stowe Street Arts Festival. There was a choice to decorate bookmarks or picture frames that had calf photos. Lisa Scagliotti took this photo. At left: Rosina exercising a jersey calf.



From left to right: Preschool Field Trip visit to the farm this past May. About 100 preschoolers and their parents and teachers visited the farm. This is their eighth year hosting the visit. Rosina's neighbor Lisa Scagliotti photographed the event and helped plan activities. Jerseys basking in the December sun. Rosina with younger brother Wally who helps her on the farm. Two doe eyed jerseys.

Lisa took this photo of Rosina and two calves under a tent at Stowe Street Arts Festival in July of 2011. Around fifty children visited.

to organic. The cost of organic feed has been high, and her cows are producing less milk than in the past. She's also had a problem with sick cows recently, so her number of milking cows is down. Rosina would never consider getting out of farming, though. "The farmers who have gone out of business looked at the economics of things and have just moved on. Economics isn't an emotional thing; it's cut and dry, but I just can't seem to see it that way," Rosina said. She can't imagine selling her cows. And there is another driving force behind her desire to keep the farm going—the ability to share the farming experience with others.

Enabling others to experience what she did as a girl growing up on the farm is important to Rosina. In the summer

of 1995, Rosina brought two girls to the farm through the Fresh Air Fund for the first time. A photo at her house shows the gathering of Fresh Air Fund kids who stayed throughout Vermont that summer, as well as their host families, friends of Rosina's who volunteered to help put on the BBQ at her farm that day, and even then-Governor Jim Douglas sitting in Rosina's tractor parked at the edge of the huge group of children, adults, and even a few calves. Rosina continued to host children from the Fresh Air Fund every summer for over ten years after that, before she regrettably had to stop due to financial reasons.

Outside of the Fresh Air Fund program, the longest running program now is the preschool field trip to the farm. "My



biggest group that comes is the pre-kindergarten kids in Waterbury,” Rosina said. She first hosted this event about eight years ago, and since then it’s become an annual thing. “It’s sort of a tradition. The kids look forward to it.” A staff member at the Children’s Room in Waterbury plans it, and Rosina hires a school bus and driver for the field trip. The bus driver makes the rounds in Waterbury and picks up children from about five different daycares; other parents and children join the outing, too, by following along in their own cars.

They can watch the cows being milked and see how the milk goes from the cow to the machine to the milk tank. And with help from some of her neighbors, including Lisa Scagliotti, Rosina plans activities for the young visitors. A scavenger hunt encourages children to look for a variety of things featured in a series of photos taken at the farm, including honeybees, tractors, milk machines, and of course Bodhi (“Border Collie and assistant farmer”).

The children enjoy the activities, and the little calves really impress the small visitors, Rosina said. Now, in addition to the calves and cows on the farm, Rosina has been training two oxen. Just over a year old at this point, the two are already doing pretty well walking in the small yoke she has for them.

Older children enjoy visiting the farm, too. For example, a fourth grade class voted to include Rosina’s farm on a

“Seven Wonders of the Waterbury/Duxbury Area” list that a teacher asked them to create. Each child in the class chose a place to include on the list and then lobbied classmates to have it selected as one of the seven. Lisa Scagliotti’s daughter, Nina, now 13 years old, grew up spending time on Rosina’s farm and nominated it for the list that year. She supported her nomination with information and photos, and it won. The children visited later that fall to see the farm for themselves and to meet Rosina in person.

More recently, Nina and some of her friends have helped out at the farm as part of a “Change the World” school project that requires the students to spend some hours of community service each month. The volunteer group helped with miscellaneous projects like painting and cleaning and taking the calves out to walk them. Rosina encouraged the group to find a way to use the farm to make some positive change elsewhere in the world. The teens accepted the challenge and came up with an idea that Rosina loved—they hosted a snow sliding party to raise money for mosquito nets for countries in Africa to help with malaria prevention there. “It was like a block party,” Rosina remembered. All of the neighbors came out, and the teens raised \$530.

Rosina brings the farm experience to other teens as well by serving as a pen pal for NOFA. This year she’s corresponding with a seventh grade class from U32. They



The barn sits on a stone foundation.

communicate through letters—not e-mail letters, but hard copies of letters sent through the post office. Sometimes the kids will collectively write one letter or sometimes each writes a letter and all the letters arrive in one envelope. “This group was particularly interested in a dairy farm and wanting to understand something about where milk comes from,” Rosina said. At the time of this interview she had a letter written and ready to go. “I have my word processor down there—I just have to get it typed and in the mail,” she said. Though it isn’t planned yet, she’s hoping the class will be able to come out to the farm to visit later, maybe in the spring.

Off-site events include the Stowe Street Arts Festival, the Independence Day parade in Waterbury (held on the Saturday before the 4th of July), and the Waterbury Kids Fest. Rosina will show up with at least one calf and maybe two, and now sometimes it’s her oxen that go out with her to bring the farm to the people and children of Waterbury.

“The kids just love it,” said Lisa Scagliotti. “You can talk to many children in town, and they can put a face on the farm. Rosina accomplishes what she sets out to do—all of these kids and their parents, hopefully, remember the experience when they eat yogurt again or drink milk. They start making that connection, which is important.”

Of all the farm events, it’s the preschool farm visit that is probably the biggest one. Often there are 60 to 80 children and parents who attend on that day. During Rosina’s father’s time, the biggest events were likely connected with the Vermont Farm Bureau. Her father, Keith Wallace, was the president of the Farm Bureau for 21 years, from 1953 to 1974—all through Rosina’s elementary, junior high, high school, and college years.

She has fond memories of that time. She remembers her parents hosting a Farm Bureau board meeting at the house when she was a girl. The farmers would often travel to a meeting with their families, and there must have been 70 to

80 people there that day, she said. Rosina wonders now how her parents managed to have so many there in their family’s farmhouse for the meeting and buffet meal, but they somehow made it work.

Rosina has served on the board of the Vermont Farm Bureau, too, but it’s those earlier days she misses. Though just a kid during her father’s time on the board, she remembers going with her father to meetings all over the state and seeing the farmers gathered around a kitchen table or in a parlor helping each other sort out problems over endless cups of coffee. It seemed that back then farmers somehow had more time to work on things together.

There isn’t a way to turn back the clock to the farming days of her father, when agriculture was the leading industry in Vermont and nearly every child in the state had some kind of experience on a farm, but it seems that Rosina hasn’t given up hope for creating something like that today. She will keep her cows and continue to share her farm with the Waterbury community. It might not seem possible to change the world of Vermont agriculture today, but then again maybe it is possible to change things—one child at a time.



Rosina and her sheep dog Bodhi