

# Ragged View Farm Embraces Traditional Methods

By Larry Chase  
For the Beacon

Ten years after he and his wife bought the old farm house and 18 largely wooded acres up on Bradley Lake Road, Andover's Mark Cowdrey is still working toward his goal: a life largely supported by the land he lives on, the crops he grows, the animals in his care – and doing so, mostly, in the ways of a traditional New Hampshire hill farmer.

The long odds of fully achieving that goal are reflected in the name Mark has given to the property: Ragged View Farm, so-called both because of the visible mountain to the north and because, as he says, "Sometimes things look pretty ragged around here."

The goal may not be within his reach, he acknowledges, for a number of reasons: He may not have the requisite acreage, skills, patience, and stamina for the long haul. (He's 55 now.) And when the going gets tough, it can be tempting to



switch to modern, mechanized farming methods. (He owns a diesel-powered tractor, but prefers to use the considerable power of his two draft horses.)

"But it's good to have a goal you can measure progress against," he says. And by a number of measures, he's making progress. Some major milestones:

1999: After moving into the small 1840 house, undertakes major renovations, adding a chimney, mudroom, and woodshed, bumping out exterior walls, and re-arranging interior ones.

1999: Puts in first family vegetable garden. Purchases and raises first hog for family meat.

2000: Raises two hogs for butchering.

2001: Builds shed, acquires first horse (a weanling Suffolk gelding named Woodrow) and a heifer. Raises three hogs for butchering.

2002: Raises four hogs for butchering.

2002: Plants first garlic crop; yield is 400 heads (soon to approach 1,000; most to be sold to seed-garlic market).

2003: Borrows a well-broke horse to work two-year-old Woodrow with.

2004: Purchases a Suffolk mare named Misty to pair with Woodrow; finally owns a team.

2005: Enters first maple-sugaring venture with Eric Johnson and Tucker Mountain Maple Co-op: 100 taps, 100 quarts of syrup.

2005: With the generous help of friends and neighbors, builds 34' by 40' barn to house stock, hay, and equipment.

2005: In June, Misty has a foal, Virgil. Buys first sow, who farrows (has a litter of piglets) in the fall. Raises litter over the winter.

2006: Sells pork "by the piece" for the first time.

2006: In July, Misty has second foal, Dante; buys first boar.

2006: Begins an ongoing process of clearing trails through woods on property to permit sleigh rides in winter.

2006: Builds sleigh body for bobsled. Gives his family a Christmas ride to inaugurate sleigh rides at Ragged View Farm.

2007: Creates Web site at [RaggedViewFarm.com](http://RaggedViewFarm.com).

Mark's journey hasn't been without its potholes, however, he admits. There was the disappointment of the barren heifer, for example (she ended up in the meat freezer); the loss of a horse from an injury; a crop failure here and there; the difficulties of garlic marketing; and more.

On the whole, though, he says he's fairly satisfied with the path he's been traveling for the past decade: the progress he's made, the mistakes he's learned from, the new skills he's continually acquiring, the network of local expertise and support he's tapped into.

## Why Knock Yourself Out?

Why farming – especially since both Mark and his wife have professional skills? (He's trained in computer science and architectural drafting; his wife, Lea Ayers LaFave, is a public health planner.)

He's thought a lot about that question, and his reasons are many and varied.

At the top of the list is the sentimental reason: the fond memories of childhood visits to his grandparents' dairy farm in West Swanzey and a teenage stint as a hired hand on another dairy farm in Gilford.

Then there are a couple of economic factors: first, the immediate opportunity to put food on the table and help pay off the mortgage; and second, the longer-range opportunity to demonstrate the practicality of growing food locally, should the need arise because of rising transportation costs or disruptions to food-supply lines.

Then there's the conservation value he sees in keeping the land in agriculture – saving it from over-development, maintaining New Hampshire's rural look and feel, and farming in ways that minimize environmental impact.

There's conservation of another kind involved as well: the conservation of a disappearing way of life, that of the self-reliant New Hampshire hill-farmer, living free and making do on a piece of family-owned land.



One of the traditional methods Mark Cowdrey uses at Ragged View Farm is Suffolk horsepower.

Photos: Larry Chase

Then there are a couple of health-related reasons. First: "If you grow it yourself, you know where your food came from, and you can trust its wholesomeness." Also: The physical requirements of farming are bound to keep a person in better shape than a desk job.

Finally, and perhaps underlying all his other reasons for farming, there's the mental engagement involved. Look at a farmer out in his field, Mark says, and it may appear that he's just sitting on a tractor driving around in circles.

"Unless you've done it, though," he continues, "you don't realize the amount of constant reading, learning, planning,

prioritizing, scheduling, bookkeeping, calculating, marketing, on and on, that that guy had to go through before he climbed on his tractor. If you want to farm smart instead of hard, this business is every bit as much an intellectual challenge as a physical one."

## Looking Ahead

Besides putting food on the table and wood in the stove, Mark says, some of his ventures are providing positive cash flow. In addition to the sleigh rides, the garlic crop, and the maple syrup, Ragged View's product lines now include bacon and other pork products

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