

Corse Farm Dairy

By Lauren Harkawik

WHITINGHAM - On a sunny morning a little over a week before their dairy farm's upcoming 150th anniversary celebration, two generations of Corses — Leon and Linda and their daughter Abbie — are in the family's farmhouse, surrounded by old photos.

Abbie, who is in her mid-30s, is scanning the photos with her iPhone. Leon says they'll be assembled in a slideshow for the celebration, which is scheduled for July 21. The true anniversary of the deed being handed over to Charles and Julia Corse, Leon's great-great-grandparents, was May 11. But Leon says the weather can be unpredictable in May, so they went with July for the big bash instead.

May 11 is a significant date in the family. In addition to being the day the farm became the Corses' in 1868, it's also the date the farm received its organic certification in 2008. And in the 1970s, Leon and Linda's first date was sometime around May 11, too. It was Mother's Day.

"Anyone who heard that he had taken me out to lunch on Mother's Day instead of visiting his mother said, 'Whoa, this must be serious,'" says Linda.

"Well, anyone who knew my relationship with my mother," says Leon. The grin on his face, which is so wide that it pushes the apples of his cheeks upward, causing his eyes to nearly close with crow's feet, says it all. He wouldn't have missed Mother's Day unless he'd had a good reason.

Leon and Linda were engaged less than a year after their first date. In time, the couple were part of a family trust for the farm, alongside Leon's parents and brothers. At one point, the family trust controlled both the Corses' maple and dairy businesses,

but ultimately, one of Leon's brothers took over the maple side of the business, and Leon and Linda took over the dairy side.

"Eventually, in order for Linda and me to have full claim to (the dairy farm), we bought out the rest of the family," says Leon. That was in 2013, which is also when the farm was conserved, meaning it will always be used as farmland.

For the foreseeable future, it will also remain in the family. Abbie is preparing to take it over from her parents. Which hadn't always been the plan.

"We have three children, and when they were growing up, Abbie was the one that said she would never, ever be a farmer," says Leon.

"I said 'never' with flourish," says Abbie.

Leon notes that he and Linda didn't want any of their kids to feel pressured to carry on the legacy of the family farm if it wasn't what they wanted.

"As each of our kids got to be 14 or 15, we had a talk with them," says Leon. "We said we know that because this farm has been in the family so long, you're going to feel an obligation, and we don't want you to. The statistic is that half of Americans dread going to work in the morning. I have never been in that half, and I didn't want any of my children to be in that half. So we told them that when they were in their middle 30s, we wanted each of them to be able to tell us that they loved what they did."

Abbie has a degree in journalism, and was working in arts marketing when she felt called to return home. Asked what motivated her, her answer is quick. "The fire," she says.

As the universe would have it, that was in May, too. In 2007, there was a fire in the barn that houses the cows at Corse Farm. The fire, say Leon and Linda, forced them to take a step back and plan their next move, threatening to halt the family tradition of handing the farm down generation after generation.

"When the barn burned, we called all of our children and said this is a pretty major situation," says Leon.

“We had to figure out where to go from there. We needed to know whether any of them had any interest or not. We didn’t tell them we have to know that you’re coming now, but we needed to know that at least one of you has some idea that you might want to come here.”

“I realized that I couldn’t live with myself if it went out of the family because I never tried,” says Abbie. Leon notes that Abbie also realized she didn’t want to spend her life in a cubicle. Abbie nods.

“My office was a closet,” she says. “I could handle it in the winter, but once May came, I needed to be outside. I love the land. I’m here for the land. I couldn’t imagine driving on this road without having some sense of stewardship over it. That the houses could be occupied by somebody else was a heart-breaking notion to me.”

In a place that’s rooted by recurrent schedules — the cows are milked at 4 am and 3 pm daily, always — it’s hard to ignore the circular nature of family, and generations, and tradition. And the common themes in the family go deeper than generations of farming, and even beyond a seeming family connection to mid-May. In reminiscing about the Corse men who once sat where he’s sitting now, Leon highlights what he sees as each one’s legacy. At each turn, he says, someone was willing to take a leap of faith and embrace change.

“Everyone was willing to do something that allowed the next generation to carry on,” Leon says. Reflecting on what his own legacy may be, Leon says he sees it as transitioning the farm to an organic dairy.

Abbie interjects. “I would argue that dad’s other contribution is that he’s a feminist,” she says. When Abbie takes over the farm, she’ll be the first female in the Corse blood line to own the farm.

“Abbie’s younger siblings are both boys,” says Leon. “When the kids were younger people would always say to me, wow, you’ve got two sons, now someone can take over the farm. And my flip answer was always, ‘I’m betting on the daughter,’ and it would startle people.”

“People still say that,” says Abbie. “I have two sons, and people look at Dad and say, ‘Aren’t you so glad you have two grandsons to take over the farm?’ and Dad says, ‘Why? My daughter’s right here!’”

“I like battling stereotypes,” says Leon. Linda says that’s a tradition that started with her father-in-law Lewis, who when it came time to hand the farm over to his children, insisted that his daughters-in-law be equal partners.

“Against the advice of his lawyer,” she says. “The lawyer said you do not want to put your daughters-in-law in that partnership legally. And Lewis said, ‘Yes I do. They’re working here, they need to be part of this.’”

Abbie says she hopes her legacy will be integrating more permaculture practices into the farm’s pasturing. She says in many ways, the family is slowly moving back to the practices their ancestors used on the farm generations ago.

“But with modern technology,” she says. “We’re slowly planting in shade trees, which also helps with the ecosystem of the grass. It plays into conservation, too. That’s what I’m hoping will be my legacy.”

Speaking of legacies, Abbie says she thinks her dad may have another one, too. She recalls the children’s book “Miss Rumphius.” It’s a tale of a girl who tells her grandfather all about the great places she’ll see someday.

“And he says that’s great, but the thing you always need to keep in mind, is ...” she trails off, and Leon finishes her sentence.

“How are you going to leave the world a more beautiful place?” he says.

In the book, Miss Rumphius decides her legacy will be planting lupins. She buys seeds and tosses them wherever she goes. Abbie says Leon, who read the book to her when she was a child, is the same, but with lilies. “He plants them everywhere he goes,” she says.

Leon laughs in agreement, his signature grin taking over his face again. Later, walking from the barn to the farmhouse, Linda notices a shade of lily she hasn't seen before. "Where'd that come from?" she asks.

"Who knows," says Leon with that smile. "Maybe the lily man planted it."

The 150th anniversary celebration at Corse farm, which the Corses are calling an "On-Farm Social," will happen on July 21 from 11 am to 4 pm. There will be the aforementioned slideshow featuring photos of the farm throughout the years, NOFA-VT pizza, ice cream, and, weather permitting, hayrides.

The celebration will overlap with milking time, too, in case visitors would like to see the dairy farm's work in action. And of course, there are the lilies. Which are easy to spot — they're everywhere — and worth admiring.