

## **CELEBRATING PLACE: 30th Anniversary Notes from Blue Hill Heritage Trust**

### **Farmland Forever: Local Farms, Local Food**

By Jim Dow, Executive Director, Blue Hill Heritage Trust

We on the Blue Hill Peninsula are blessed to have easy access to high quality, locally grown food. It is good for our health as well as our economy. But this is a relatively recent development, and one in which Blue Hill Heritage Trust has played a key role.

The Peninsula once had an array of family farms. Farming, fishing and forestry were mainstays of the local economy. But by the mid-1900's, farming here was in a steep decline. When Paul and Molly Birdsall of Horsepower Farm and brothers Dennis and Ron King of King Hill Farm arrived here in the 1970's they purchased old family farms that were no longer operating. In fact much of the soil on their farms was worn-out, depleted of nutrients as a result of poor management and neglect. Through hard work and astute farming practices, they created highly productive farms that began providing our community with organic food. In doing so they helped foster the renaissance of a local farming community.

Paul went one step further. Having witnessed the conversion of good farmland to residential and commercial uses in other places, he saw the importance of long-term protection for our best agricultural soils. He helped develop a conservation plan for the high quality agricultural soils along the Route 15 corridor from Orland to north Blue Hill. When Blue Hill Heritage Trust was formed in 1985, Paul saw this new organization as a potential vehicle for giving life to this plan and he became a founding member of its Board of Directors.

Paul's vision has become reality, but it was not immediate or easy. Under his leadership, our Trust began working with farmland owners to protect their farmland through the use of conservation easements. The concept was very simple: keep the agricultural soils available for producing food by eliminating the option of using the land for residential or commercial purposes. A conservation easement was the right legal tool to accomplish that. The easement deed would transfer the development rights to our Trust, yet leaving the land in private ownership and available for agricultural purposes. This had been done in other states but was relatively new to Maine.

The Trust's first farmland conservation easement projects came to us as gifts. These included Horsepower Farm as well as farmland owned by Lorenzo Mitchell, who had joined our Board of Directors. In the late 1990's, when Lorenzo became President of the Trust's Board, our Trust experimented with purchasing development rights on a few key farms. Despite some initial donor resistance ("Farming is not viable here. You should focus on protecting scenic shorefront land"), our "Farmland Forever" program was born. Money was raised from individuals, foundations and the Land for Maine's Future Program to purchase conservation easements on several parcels of farmland where donations were not possible.

Our Trust's involvement in farmland conservation was very much a forward-thinking proposition. It was a bet on the future, that there would come a time when it made economic sense for food to be once again produced locally and thus we should protect the soil resource that would provide that opportunity. To our surprise the future came sooner than expected.

Apprenticeship programs at King Hill Farm and Horsepower Farm helped create a pool of young people interested in becoming farmers. Opportunities for these new farmers to acquire productive land were created by the conservation easement process (making several parcels of farmland more affordable by removing the value associated with the development rights of the property). Meanwhile interest in small scale farming, especially among young people, was growing regionally, and food security and health issues were fueling consumer demand for local food. New working farms soon began appearing on the protected agricultural lands as well as elsewhere on our Peninsula. Farming as a part of our social and economic fabric had returned.

Our Trust has now protected nearly 2000 acres of local farmland through donated or purchased conservation easements, all of which remains privately owned. This includes many of the farms that provide us food through farm stands, local farmers markets, local stores, and the various Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) programs, including Horsepower, King Hill, Blue Zee, Quills End, Old Ackley, and Homewood. You will see our "Farmland Forever" signs on most of them. Our Trust's responsibility is to ensure that the restrictions in the conservation easements are upheld by current and future owners, thereby ensuring that the land remains available for agricultural uses.

In partnership with the Blue Hill Coop, we offer tours of various farms during the summer months. Of the many events we host during the year, these are some of the most heavily attended events, attesting to the value people are placing on having local farms and local food sources. We are happy to be a part of this local food renaissance.



Caption for Photo #1: Paul Schultz, who owns and operates King Hill Farm with Amanda Provencher, explains his crop rotation methods during an August farm tour organized jointly by Blue Hill Heritage Trust and the Blue Hill Co-op.



Caption for photo #2: Paul Schultz, who now owns and operates King Hill Farm with Amanda Provender, explains the farm's carrot washing process during an August farm tour organized jointly by Blue Hill Heritage Trust and the Blue Hill Co-op