

## 350-Year-Old Farm Survives the Odds

By KIRK JOHNSON, Special to the New York Times  
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Thomas Hine staked his claim here for God and king 350 years ago, scratching out a farm on an isolated hilltop in the middle of a wilderness. Twelve generations later, Mr. Hine's descendants once again find themselves in isolation.

Their farm, the oldest in the state still owned by one family and one of the oldest in the nation, Federal figures show, is hedged in by a Caldor shopping center on one side and more than 400 luxury condominiums on another.

The old Derby Turnpike to New Haven has become Route 34, roaring with traffic, and the drivers have little patience for slow tractors or farm trucks. And as the dairy culture withered, feed suppliers and equipment companies fled to more hospitable country in New York State or Vermont, leaving the Hines dependent on United Parcel Service.

"We're completely surrounded," said Walter S. Hine, 54 years old, the current owner of the farm.

Like their counterparts in the Middle West and throughout the country, Connecticut farmers have faced hard times in recent years and many have gone out of business because of falling agricultural prices and rising costs. High Price of Land

But with some of the highest land prices in the nation - \$200,000 or more for less than an acre of vacant land just down the road from the Hine farm - farms in southern Connecticut are not simply closing down and standing idle but are being swallowed whole, state officials say.

On the other hand, agricultural experts say the sprawl of suburban affluence in this part of the state and the increasing demand for locally grown farm products, encouraged by the state through a produce-identification system, have created new opportunities for farmers like the Hines who do survive.

"There's great disposable income down there and many farmers have discovered the miracles you can perform through marketing," said Kenneth B. Andersen, the state's Commissioner of Agriculture. "Some of the most profitable farms in the state are in Fairfield County."

But the odds of survival have not been good for dairy farms like the Hine operation, which for centuries occupied a successful agricultural niche in a state that has mostly poor and rocky soil. In the last seven years, 43 percent of Connecticut's dairy farms have gone out of business, leaving only 350, Connecticut Agriculture Department figures show. In 1965, the state had 1,600 dairy farms.

Those that do remain are mostly concentrated in Litchfield County in northwestern Connecticut and Windham and New London Counties in the eastern part of the state. The Hines believe, and state officials do not dispute, that their 170-acre farm in New Haven County, known since the 1950's as the Fieldview Dairy Farm, is the southernmost full-time dairy operation in Connecticut and the last one between New Haven and New York City. Why Fieldview has endured over the centuries is a story of determination and, more recently, diversification, Mr. Hine said.

In the late 1950's, Mr. Hine began using his pickup truck for freelance hauling jobs to earn extra money. Now Fieldview Transportation has become a major part of the Hine operation, using 42 tractor trucks and 146 trailers to carry beer and other products throughout the Northeast. Keep the Farm Going

Mr. Hine spends most of his time running the transportation business, while his oldest son, Frederick, 31, heads the 69-cow dairy operation. From the beginning, Mr. Hine said, the goal was simply to keep the farm going and plow whatever money could be made elsewhere back into the land.

The Hines are now considering whether to process and pasteurize their own milk. That could cost \$100,000 or more in the beginning but it would remove the farm from the Federal price-control system that sets wholesale milk prices nationwide.

With such an operation, Mr. Hine said, consumers could drive to the farm and buy fresh milk at a retail store operated by the family. "People want to do that now," he said. "The sense of going right to farm - you can't get that."

In Hartford, lawmakers are considering several bills to help preserve farms, including one that would give towns the right to make an offer on a farm, perhaps preserving it for farm use, if a farmer decided to sell.

But the problem in southern Connecticut, as Commissioner Andersen pointed out in testifying last month about the proposal, is the high price of land. Without some way to help a town pay tens or even hundreds of millions of dollars for a farm, he said, the bill would not succeed. Prices Too High for State

An existing farm-aid program - similar to those in New Jersey and in Suffolk County, New York - has run aground in southern Connecticut and around Hartford as land prices have outpaced the state's ability to pay. Under that program, the state buys the development rights from farmers, so that even if the farm is sold it cannot be used for any purpose other than farming.

In some areas of the state, farmers have been paid up to \$23,000 an acre for their development rights. But a spokesman for the Agriculture Department, Gabe Moquin, said some areas of the state are now far beyond that price.

Environmental experts and legislators say that the shortage of affordable housing in the state is also increasing the pressure on open farmland, as communities and developers look for solutions.

"Connecticut is destined to become an urban state and so the pressure on land throughout this generation is going to be very intense," said Les Corey, executive director of the state chapter of the Nature Conservancy, an international group that has been working with Connecticut officials to preserve farmland and other open space. "It's not going to get any easier with time."