

Charlie and Theresa Taplin, Floating Bridge Family Farm

When you stop off for a visit at Floating Bridge Family Farm in Brookfield, be prepared for a friendly welcome and, if you're lucky and have the time, you can enjoy some of Charlie's great stories. Charlie and his wife, Theresa, operate a diversified organic farm, just the latest agricultural configuration for this place, and they are in the process of restructuring the enterprise even now.



This farm was originally started by the Clark family, who owned and operated the farm from 1781 until 1914, when it was purchased by Theresa's family. It has been in Theresa's family since 1914 and farmed in some form all these years. Theresa is the 4th generation on the farm, and Charlie and Theresa live in the original farmhouse. The farm is historically known as the "Brown Farm" in the area; Charlie and Theresa registered the name Floating Bridge Family Farm when they took over. But history alone won't make a business survive, and Charlie and Theresa work hard to keep all the pieces of their farm enterprise going.

Charlie is the 9th generation Taplin in Vermont and his family was in the car business, but that didn't hold any appeal for Charlie. Farming and agriculture always fascinated him, and that was the path he chose from a young age. Charlie worked as a substitute ag teacher in the local career center in the 80's, and had his own business as a breeder with a particular interest in studying dairy genetics.

Charlie was especially interested in an organic approach to farming and animal care before these methods were common in the industry. He operated Brookfield Agricultural Services in the 1990's, working with organic farmers and providing homeopathic remedies, organic fertilizers like fish, and seaweed. He knew he was on the right track, noting that many farmers who started out as his customers as they began adopting organic methods were purchasing declining amounts of product from him as the overall health of their herds improved.

On the farm, Theresa's family started with potatoes, selling via local markets and contracting with Norwich University. They eventually converted to dairy which they continued until 1997.

The farm is currently 134 acres, after construction of the Interstate took 40 acres. They produce organic beef, free-range chicken, eggs, and of course potatoes. Charlie quips, "We're the meat and potatoes farm!" In addition, they also have a variety of vegetables such as tomatoes, peppers, pumpkins, squash, and beautiful cut flowers.

They maintain a beef herd of 14 animals and raise 100% grass-fed beef, occasionally supplementing with alfalfa pellets. They are clearly doing something right – Charlie related that one of his recent beef animals that he sold weighed 1250# at 18 months and another just under 2 years old dressed out at 1100#.





Theresa milks their 3 Jersey cows and they have a regular market for their raw organic milk. The matriarch of this small dairy herd is Gertie, whom they purchased as a cull from a nearby farm that had an excellent Jersey herd. Charlie used to sell organic products to that operation and he knew Gertie had good genetics.



She had a number of calves at her previous home, and since moving to Charlie's and Theresa's farm she's had 8 more calves. The other two milkers are one of Gertie's daughters and one of Gertie's granddaughters.



Due to the severe wet conditions this spring, Charlie and Theresa didn't get their potatoes planted until the third week in June. The flowers, planted in a field near the house, were also late getting started.



The Taplins sell some of their products right at the farm, but most of what they produce is marketed year-round through summer and winter markets in Northfield and Randolph. The farm enterprise continues to evolve as Charlie and Theresa implement a number of changes. Charlie has Farmer's Lung, but this doesn't seem to slow his efforts. They had to do some major work to refurbish the old barn and they will now be adding a pole barn where they will be able to house cattle on a bedded pack. They are also putting up a greenhouse to enhance and expand their cut flower business. Both of these additions to the farm's infrastructure are costly, but they feel necessary, in large part to respond to the climate shift toward more severe weather events.

They sold 27 acres to a neighboring organic vegetable producer who has impressed them with hard work and good farming practices. They are also expanding their meat chicken business and have worked out an arrangement to cooperatively buy organic feed for the chickens and thereby benefit from a lower production cost through bulk purchasing. Once they shift the birds to 100% organic feed they will also get their meat chickens certified organic.



When asked about the risks to their farm operation, Charlie noted that the shift in weather patterns that now feature more dramatic extremes in weather events is one of the greatest threats to their farm business. There are many different pieces to this diversified enterprise, and Charlie indicated

that they really need all parts of the farm business to remain viable. Charlie has never had crop insurance. The USDA's Whole Farm Revenue Protection (WFRP) insurance is designed to help protect against revenue losses that may occur and it includes specific provisions for diversified farms. However, most farms such as the Taplins' that market their commodities via direct retail sales such as on-farm sales and Farmer's Markets typically do not qualify for enrollment due to the recordkeeping requirements to verify the farm income.

The Taplins' Floating Bridge Family Farm has a long agricultural history, and Charlie and Theresa are doing all they can to make sure it has a strong future as well.



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