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## ***Change Down on the Farm***

***T. M. Bradshaw***

The same geologic forces that formed the rocky, fossil-packed landscape of Gilboa left the Schoharie Valley with topsoil ten feet deep and an underlying network of aquifers. It's a perfect combination for farming, supporting the deep roots of farm families as well as vegetables. The Barber family is an example of a deep-rooted farm family—fifth generation Barbers will celebrate the farm's 150th anniversary on May 22, the same day as Jim Barber's 50th birthday.

Jim Barber attributes the farm's success through five generations to "always changing and adapting to the market situation of the time." Adapting to the economic environment has proven to be as important as adapting to the weather. Stephen and Emiline Barber used the three parcels of land they bought in 1857 as a subsistence farm, with cash crops of hops and broom corn. Their son, Joel, along with his wife, Mina, purchased 3 more farms, increasing the holding to 85 acres. Mina took advantage of the area's popularity as a summer destination and took in boarders in addition to doing farm chores, making quilts, and working at her loom.

Even though third-generation Emmet Barber's first love was teaching, he kept the farm in operation, keeping a herd of registered Holsteins, while his wife Mary took in summer boarders as her mother-in-law had. Their son Roger was very interested in farming and began his changes while still in his teens. He helped his father renovate the dairy barn and planted a field of vegetables as a high school 4-H project. Roger's report on that project illustrates the scope of his youthful ambition: "In general, potatoes all over upstate New York are a failure. Mine are no exception. . . . This soil is not too highly adapted to potatoes in the first place, and I would like to decrease the size of the plot. But I need at least 100 bushel each fall to meet the demands of regular customers!"



Cindy and Jim Barber in one of their greenhouses.  
Photo by T. M. Bradshaw.

That project grew into a roadside stand and a business delivering vegetables—he supplied sweet corn to stores within a 50-mile radius of the farm. But Roger also loved dairy farming. Over the years that he and his wife, Grace, were managing the farm he increased the herd to around 300 head, with 180 milking cows. They also acquired additional acreage, bringing as the children of neighbors grew up and chose to pursue careers other than farming.

Now, in their turn, Jim and Cindy Barber have changed directions and farm practices with the economic climate too. They've gotten out of dairy to focus on the vegetable operation. They've set up greenhouses to produce their own vegetable seedlings, giving them greater control over varieties and scheduling.

The greenhouses also provided a new retail opportunity—although the number of area farms has gone down, the number of people gardening for pleasure has gone up, creating a market for flower and vegetable seedlings, as well as Cindy's hanging baskets. Winter-weary customers are welcomed to the greenhouses to browse the plant material in early May, weeks before the roadside stand opens for the season.

While corn, melons, peppers, and potatoes are still big at Barber's, over the past two years lettuce sales have jumped from 15 heads a day to 200. This year Jim and Cindy are putting in an ice table at the stand for lettuce display. They are also exercising more control over the vegetable operation.

Jim: "We delivered sweet corn for years for 50 miles around. It used to be all Mom and Pop stores, and then it was chain stores, and then all of a sudden the chain stores wanted to buy from distributors and cut out local purchasing."

Cindy: "They buy everything in huge amounts and from that distribution point it gets sent around to all the stores. We're more interested in direct marketing—farm to folks, farm to table. Last year we made a conscious decision that we were not going to wholesale to large warehouses or distributors anymore. So in addition to the Route 30 farm stand, we send out several produce trucks on a regular schedule to different area locations."

When making plans for the future Jim and Cindy try to consider what will make it possible for the next generation of Barbers to continue.

Cindy: "We try and allow for flexibility so that if any one of the 17 grandchildren [Roger's grandchildren] has a desire to be here, we can figure out some way, or a new program, that allows

them to do what they really want to do, whether their interest is in floral or computers. That's the beauty of this family farm—we're constantly reinventing ourselves to be what people want, what health and lifestyles demand, and for the talents that come our way."

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