

Still growing strong

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Besides the asphalt on Route 30 and a few irrigation pipes stacked near a raspberry patch, the view from atop a hill at Nourse Farm in Westborough seems little changed since the place was founded in 1722. The vista, featuring a farmhouse, red barn, and rolling fields, resembles a Colonial-era painting out of an American history textbook.

But ask Jon Nourse, 62, about how the years have passed, and he'll rattle off different crops, livestock, and sales ventures that have helped his family live off the land for eight generations. The legacy allows him to plausibly boast that the operation is one of the longest continuously run family farms in the United States.

"They tried to do what made sense at the time," said Nourse recently as he and his dog, Lucy, led a tour of the 140-acre farm that his brother, David, 74, owns but he manages. "My father was a dairy farmer. My grandfather had a bed-and-breakfast. My great-grandfather grew apples."

Now, after all those changes, Nourse and other farmers in area communities are surviving in a way that might be recognizable to the farm's founders, two brothers who fled Salem after their grandmother, Rebecca Nurse, was hung for witchcraft — a story depicted by playwright Arthur Miller in "The Crucible." The brothers added an "o" to their name to avoid being connected to the family scandal, the farm's website says.

For while the farm turned a profit by harvesting apples bound for England in the 19th century, or by raising cows and providing milk for the dairies that dotted the region through the 1970s, Nourse grows food that almost exclusively goes straight to people's tables. Most of his revenues come from sales in the farm's store, including a line of products labeled Olde Nourse Farm, and a Community Supported Agriculture program that has members



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Jon Nourse, walking along a boundary at the Westborough farm that his family has run since 1722, says one key to its survival as an agricultural operation has been adapting to change. PHOTOS BY ROSE LINCOLN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

prepaying for a share of the season's harvest of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Nourse's approach to business might appear mundane compared with one of his ancestors, Joel, who invented a horse-drawn plow that made enough of an impact on American agriculture in the 1840s that the Smithsonian Institution has a model in its collection. But he and other farmers like him are also making their mark on the national stage.

Direct sales from farms to customers — that is, bypassing grocery stores and other middlemen — generated \$17.4 million in Worcester and Middlesex counties in 2007, the latest US Department of Agriculture figures available.

Worcester and Middlesex rank seventh and 14th, respectively, in terms of direct sales nationwide. Five counties in California and a single county in Oregon make up the top six.

That economic clout is a sign farming is likely to remain a fixture in the area despite challenges like fitful New England weather, pressure to sell land for development, and children who are often reluctant to follow in their parents' footsteps tilling the soil when lucrative office jobs beckon, said Richard Bonanno, president of the Massachusetts Farm Bureau Federation. Bonanno owns Pleasant Valley Gardens in Methuen, a farm that has been in his family for 101 years.

Those pressures claim old family farms every year, he said. The most recent high-profile loss oc-

curred in New Hampshire last summer, when the owners of Tuttle's Red Barn operation announced they would sell their 378-year-old homestead, considered the oldest continuously run family farm in the United States. Their heirs don't want to continue the family tradition.

"I was disappointed," Nourse said of the Tuttle's news. "They dwarfed our farm in terms of longevity."

Nourse and others are surviving, said Bonanno, because they don't even try to compete with the massive industrial agricultural operations across the country and in Canada that receive government subsidies.

Instead, local farmers view themselves as small businesses catering almost exclusively to their neighbors, Bonanno said. He added that Massachusetts suburban farmers are especially capitalizing on the so-called locavore movement, whose adherents seek to eat locally grown food. Easy access to the urban communities ringing Boston, where educated and affluent residents abound, is a great asset, he said.

"We can grow anything, but selling it is the key, and selling it for a price where we can actually make some money, and pay the mortgage, and afford to send the kids to college is the hard part," said Bonanno. "The closer you are to the retail end, the better."

Community Supported Agriculture groups are crucial to that marketing, said Bonanno. Members pay farmers in advance for a share of the crop, and then collect fruits and vegetables as they are harvested. The system gives farmers security in the volatile agricultural market, and their customers receive fresh produce. More than 125 CSAs have sprouted up throughout the state, said a spokeswoman for the state Department of Agricultural Resources, Catherine Williams.

His farm's CSA has been a success, Nourse said. The group began in 2008 and now has around 125 members. "All of a sudden over the last couple of years, revenue has gone up by around 20 percent," he said.

Because he uses pesticides and herbicides, even sparingly, Nourse said, his products aren't officially organic. But members of his CSA said they were more interested in good food and supporting a local business than opting out of the often-criticized American food industry.

"I've been introduced to vegetables that I didn't know existed," said Lauren Randall, a Westborough resident. "Different types of tomatoes, baby bok choy," she said. "Different types of squash. I'm trying to remember the name of the squash. It was yellow and it had green stripes and the seeds were nutty tasting. It was absolutely scrumptious."

(It was probably a buttercup, Nourse said.)

Randall's husband, Glenn, said he enjoys chatting with Nourse because it seems like stepping back through time. "He knows about dirt. He knows about weather, pests," said Glenn. "He has a lot of knowledge that those of us who don't farm don't have."

Farming is all about meteorology, said Nourse. While he has control over what he plants and whether he invests in, say, making jams or pies to gain a bigger markup on his produce, he has no control over rain and sunshine. Therefore, he said, he needs to constantly monitor the elements. "I'm a weather nut," he said. "What's the first thing I do in the morning? Listen to the weather. What do I do at night? Listen to the weather."

Nourse's nephew, 39-year-old Timothy, the son of David, the farm's legal owner, cited the same closeness to nature when he discussed his intentions to someday work his family's fields.

"Seeing how food is produced is something Americans don't see that often," he said, speaking via Skype from Ramallah in the West Bank, where he works for a nonprofit that promotes economic development. "To be able to be a part of that process is special."

Someday, said Timothy, he and his wife will end their globe-trotting. Living on a farm wouldn't be a bad next step, he said. Earning a living there wouldn't be easy, of course, but already he has ideas.

“You could look at doing a distillery,” he said.
“There’s always options.”