

# A RENAISSANCE FARMHAND

Dan Hart, director of Drumlin Farm for the past ten years, is not your typical city boy turned *nouveau* farmer. The son of a hardworking Yankee dairyman, he grew up on a 135-acre farm in northwestern Connecticut that had been tilled by his family since 1745.

The youngest of eight children, Dan spread manure in the spring, harvested the gardens, explored nearby streams and mountains, and learned both the hardships and the joys of a small-farm way of life. Now he works to offer the experience of a New England farm to the thousands of visitors of all ages that participate in Drumlin Farm's programs every year.

A blue-eyed, trim man with abundant energy and a penchant for running, Dan Hart has been known to sprint to the top of the drumlin for a view of Mt. Wachusett on frosty winter mornings.

"I suppose that everyone who grew up on a farm has two feelings—I want to get off this damn place,' and 'there's something here that's really worthwhile,'" Dan says. He got off at first by earning a college degree in psychology, but he retained his early fascination with natural processes, especially geology. After a few teaching jobs he took a position as an intern in environmental interpretation with the National Audubon Society.

His first assignment did not begin auspiciously—he was sent to what he terms "some very rough terrain" in a Spanish-speaking section of the Bronx to lead a natural history program. As Dan and his students walked past burned-out cars to a beat-up park, he was struck by the incongruity—and impossibility—of his task. "But the amazing thing was that these kids were



Dan Hart, director of Drumlin Farm Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary

happy in spite of their environment." That made it worthwhile. He was hooked.

Soon after this he became director of the brand-new Eliot Pratt Environmental Education Center in New Milford, Connecticut. "There was nothing, just a 140-acre piece of property. I had to hire staff, set up a program, find a building, develop a relationship with the local schools—and work seven days a week." But he loved "the spontaneity of it, the sense of trying new things and reaching kids and teachers in a new way."

Drumlin Farm, in contrast, was well-established when he took over the directorship in 1975. When he arrived, says Dan, he was impressed by the quality of the educational programs and the enthusiasm of the staff, and a trifle appalled at the "bubble gum and string" budget that kept it all going. But it had all of the elements he was looking for: a working farm, a wildlife sanctuary, and a strong educational program.

Even before Massachusetts Audubon acquired the 220-acre property in 1955, Mrs. Louise Hatheway, who willed the farm to the Society, had arranged for small groups of schoolchildren to visit Drumlin Farm, and the educational programs have expanded from there.

"The farm really operates on three levels," Dan says. "For the younger kids, it's simply a matter of coming and *feeling* the farm. As they get older, they learn not just about animals but how they interrelate—the farm as an ecosystem. For the older kids and the adults, there's also the question of use: how do we take this information and use it to vote wisely on issues that relate to farmland, such as water resources or land preservation?"

Because Drumlin Farm is the only public educational farm of its kind in the Boston area, it has never had trouble attracting visitors and the demand for its programs is always high—sometimes too high. "People

could easily love this place to death," Dan says. "How do you make sure all the people who want to visit the farm *can* visit the farm but still maintain the 'small is beautiful' atmosphere?"

The master plan Dan and his staff have nearly completed emphasizes quality rather than quantity for visitors. There is a danger, he says, that Drumlin Farm could become merely an "agricultural attraction where we push people through a turnstile. Instead, we want it to be a place where people feel they are special guests on a farm."

To do this Dan intends to increase the level of contact between the visitor and the staff. "We want to give people a chance to participate more in the actual life of the farm." His preference is for a "soft" interpretation strategy, relying more on person-to-person contact than signs and displays, and on longer, more in-depth children's programs.

Another emerging role for the farm will be that of "demonstrating the marriage of agriculture and conservation" by displaying practical, ecologically sound techniques such as raised-bed gardening, cover cropping, and integrated pest management. "We bridge different periods in history in the way we farm. We use methods that may be applied in the future; we use current practices; and we employ practices common in the past. The key word is *appropriate*."

An accomplished writer and photographer who has contributed to books and magazines on subjects as diverse as Indian basketry, draft horses, weaving, and natural history, Dan Hart hopes to intensify his writing activities as he helps steer Drumlin Farm toward the goals envisioned in the master plan. △

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