

Back To The Future, Episode One: Pasture, Local Wheat and Water Power
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A Series from Sea Change Radio

Massachusetts has a deep agricultural history stretching back before the days of chemical-based industrial agribusiness. How are farmers using older methods to make the transition to more sustainable agriculture? Sea Change Co-Host Francesca Rheannon goes to the Colrain Dairy to talk with Larry Shearer about his low-impact, pasture-based method of organic dairying. She then talks with Cheryl Maffei of The Hungry Ghost Bakery's Little Red Hen local wheat-growing project. Finally, she interviews historian Dan Bennett about the use of water to power grist and sawmills in the smaller communities of the Connecticut River Valley.

Today, we begin a six-part series called Back to the Future. It explores what older ways of living and producing can teach us about adapting to a future where we will have to get by with less — much less — use of fossil fuels. We're not talking about going back to the stone age or getting rid of innovation. But rather, what can we learn from the old to create new ways of responding to the challenges of climate change and peak oil? Both crises are driving the need to find low-carbon ways of growing our food, getting around, building our homes, and producing other goods and services. So the stakes are high, but so are the benefits: not just saving our planet for ourselves and our kids, but also more resilient local economies, more satisfying connections with our neighbors, and a higher quality of life.

In this series, we'll look at food, transportation, housing, energy, and manufacturing — what we can learn from the past to guide our future. Back to the Future will air monthly on Sea Change Radio. This program series is funded in part by Mass Humanities. We start out with the first of two episodes about food. We'll hear from a farmer, a baker, and a historian helping to restore old mills in Leverett, MA — mills that in their time ground grain and sawed logs for, among other things, barns and farmhouses.

Larry Shearer is a small-scale dairy farmer in Colrain, MA. His farm spreads over a rocky hill with enough pasture to keep about fifty cows. Although he's past retirement age (he's in his late seventies), Shearer is still actively involved in running the farm with his two sons. The Colrain Dairy has been certified organic since 2007, but long before that Larry Shearer decided to do dairying in the old style: by pasturing his cows instead of feeding them grain, like most modern dairy farmers do. He hasn't regretted the decision, finding that his cows are healthier, his costs and energy use are down, and he has more leisure time to spend with his family. And he makes a decent living. He says it's all about "quality of life" — for his family and his cows.

The CT River Valley used to be the breadbasket of the nation, back in colonial times. Hardy wheat varieties that could withstand the winters, and the wet of the northeast, were grown around here. Cheryl Maffei is co-owner of Hungry Ghost Bakery in Northampton, Massachusetts. She runs an innovative project that's enlisting local residents in growing New England-friendly wheat varieties in their backyard gardens. It's called Little Red Hen.

Dr. Daniel Bennet is a former academic, food coop founder and local historian in North Leverett, MA. He's been working to help restore the old sawmill on the Saw Mill River in his home town and preserve the knowledge of older residents who remember how to run it.