

# DOWN ON THE FARM

Visiting a bygone era 9/3/10  
at the old Dudley homestead

By **Lisa Reisman**  
Special to the Times

**S**heep grazed. Chickens squawked. Calves mooed in their pens and kicked up their heels.

Two women sat serenely on the front porch of the farmhouse, their white-haired heads bent over their handiwork. With the melody of voices carrying across the meadow from the community garden, it might as well have been a setting from a bygone era.

"People are always telling me how privileged they feel when they're out here, whether they're helping out or picnicking or hiking around the grounds or watching their kids discover the farm animals," said Janet Dudley, president of the Dudley Foundation, on a recent sun-dappled day at the Dudley Farm in North Guilford. "It's almost as if time stands still."

Except on Saturday mornings, that is, when growers of organic vegetables back their pickups into the field below the main farmhouse from 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. They join peddlers of warm scones fleck-

ed with bits of peach, fresh-cut flower bouquets, handmade jewelry, and other homemade products like soaps, jams, and honey, vending their wares to the lively beat of local country fiddlers.

"It's a throwback to a time when you knew where your food was directly coming from," said Gisela Johnston, 70, of Killingworth, a regular at the farmers market for years, as she swooned over the organically grown peas, squash, and jars of bread and butter pickles at a table set up by Phyllis Naples-Valenti of Durham's Naples Farm. "And it all just tastes so much better than the bland produce you find at the supermarket."

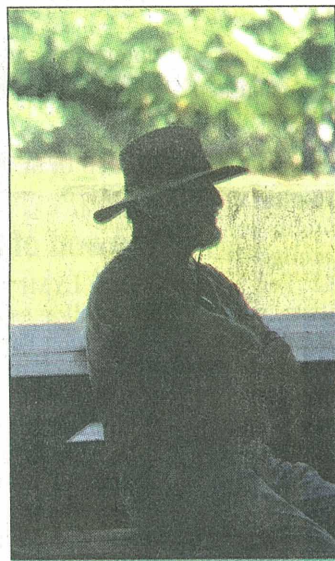
The farmers market is one of the ways the public has been gradually rediscovering the Dudley Farm, once a focal point of North Guilford. It all started with the 1991 death of David Dudley and, shortly thereafter, a wholly unexpected revelation that would prove to be of historic consequence.

Dudley was a 10th gener-

See FARM, Page 4



El,El, O - The Dudley Farm String Band plays blue grass every Saturday at the Dudley Farm Farmers Market. BELOW: Tara Bowers of Guilford and her daughter Molly Bowers, 1, look chickens at the farmers market. Photos Peter Hvizdak



Photos this page Peter Hvizdak. Peter Naumann of Wallingford sits in the shade and listens to the Dudley String Band at the Dudley Farm Farmers Market.



# Farm: Dudley farmer's market, throwback to bygone era

From page 1

ation descendant of William Dudley who in 1639 settled Guilford with the Rev. Henry Whitfield. In 1844, his grandfather Erastus Dudley built a farmhouse where Route 77 meets Route 80. David was born in 1909. Besides a stint in the military during which he was miraculously saved when a bullet hit a spoon in his shirt pocket, he lived there his entire life. A bachelor with no heirs, he willed the estate, including a barn, the farmhouse, and 10 acres of picturesque open fields, to the North Guilford Volunteer Fire Company. To this day no one knows why.

What occurred next also could not have been foreseen. Instead of selling the land to developers who would carve up the 150-year-old farm into house lots—David Dudley reportedly had been offered millions for the property—the fire company members, many of them with deep roots in the area, decided to go in a different direction. Viewing the land as a public treasure, they resolved to reincarnate the barn, the farmhouse, and the grounds into a vibrant place where the works and crafts that kept a farm going would be instilled with a new spirit, thereby at once celebrating and perpetuating Guilford's almost-vanished agricultural past.

Soon after, a hardy group of North Guilford residents formed the Dudley Foundation, a nonprofit member supported organization with a clear mission: to enable visitors—in particular, children—to experience farm life as it was in the late 1800s.

That David Dudley's interests decidedly did not lie in home improvement or interior decorating did little to deter them. After all, as Janet Dudley, an 11th-generation descendant of William Dudley, put it, "the farmhouse was virtually unchanged since its original construction. It was



Photo Peter Hvizdak

Romi Eldah of Avon, 11, enjoys a tree swing at the Dudley Farm Farmers Market.

just a matter of figuring out how to restore it."

Volunteers painted the farmhouse's exterior for the first time since the 1940s. They rebuilt the early 20th-century front porch. The woodwork was restored. Using a sample of the original wallpaper, board member Jerri Guadagno of Guilford pored over books of traditional wallpaper patterns available in the early 1900s. Someone donated a Victorian courting couch, with the seat divided just enough for the couple to sit together without touching each other. Another offered a vintage Singer sewing machine now displayed centrally in the farmhouse living room, a turn-of-the-century status symbol tantamount to a Porsche parked in a driveway, said docent Shirley Gonzalez of North Guilford, who leads daily tours of the "living museum" from May through October.

Just outside the farmhouse

kitchen, a group planted an herb garden, which the Dudley women had once used for their medicinal and culinary properties. Using a list of some of the vegetables varieties that would have been grown around 1900 and a catalog of old varieties of seeds, they developed what came to be known as the heritage garden. Another collection of gardeners that dubbed themselves the Country Planters studied black-and-white pictures of a garden outside the house to identify the flowers, and selected Victorian-era plant material, while preserving remnants of the original garden, including peonies and Dutch iris planted by "the original flower child," Mable Dudley Rossiter, David's aunt.

In 2002, more than 40 able-bodied souls raised a barn. This wasn't just any barn. It was the largest barn on the site of the Munger Lumber Company in Madison, and the sole barn saved from demolition with the 1995 closing of a

company that had been in the same family for generations. More than that, there was a historic logic to its relocation to the Dudley Farm. Within a mere four years, both the Dudley Farm and the Munger Lumber Company ended centuries of continuous ownership. And not only do the two families go back to the original settlement of Guilford. David Dudley's grandmother was a Munger.

Even the physical transfer of the barn hearkened back to an early New England practice. Moving barns and buildings was not an uncommon occurrence in those days, Gonzalez said—except in this case trucks and not oxen transported the dismantled barn down the road to the Dudley Farm. Not to mention the old-time community spirit involved in the barn-raising, a process that consumed six years and entailed raising funds through the sale of hand-crafted wooden pegs that would ultimately hold the



Photo Peter Hvizdak

Bernie Harrison of Killingworth sells his produce at the Dudley Farm Farmers Market.

structure together.

Since its reconstruction, the circa-1890 Munger barn, a light and airy space with beams crafted of cherry and pine, butternut and other woods, and an aroma of fresh cedar, has been the site of, among other events, weddings, receptions, workshops, community meetings, and beer tastings.

That the barn has also been occasion for numerous poetry

readings should come as no surprise—particularly given a pastoral setting so lovely and peaceful as to inspire verse. In the end, whatever the reason for David Dudley's bequest, it's clear that the years of labor and initiative have paid off—with interest.

Dudley Farm, 2351 Durham Road, Guilford, CT 06437; 203-457-0770; www.dudleyfarm.com. The farmer's market runs through October.