

# HISTORIC ROOTS

## HISTORIC ROOTS

Ann E. Cooper, *Editor*  
Deborah P. Clifford, *Associate Editor*

## ADVISORY BOARD

Sally Anderson	Nancy Chard
Marianne Doe	Mary Leahy
Robert Lucenti	Caroline L. Morse
Meg Ostrum	Michael Sherman
Marshall True	Catherine Wood

Publication of *Historic Roots* is made  
possible in part by grants from the  
A.D. Henderson Foundation and Vermont-NEA.

**A Magazine of Vermont History**

Vol. 4

December 1999

No. 3

# SHELBURNE FARMS: A DREAM COME TRUE

By ERICA DONNIS

Lila Webb grew up on a farm on Staten Island in New York City. She was the daughter of William Henry Vanderbilt, the richest man in the United States. When her father died in 1885, Lila and her husband, Seward Webb, decided to use her inheritance to create a grand country estate in beautiful surroundings in Vermont. The Webbs wanted the family to spend the summer and fall there. And they wanted to develop a farm where they could experiment with the latest farming technology and techniques. In 1886, the Webbs started building their country estate in Shelburne, Vermont. They called it Shelburne Farms.

Seward and Lila Webb bought over 30 farms along the shore of Lake Champlain to make their estate. It spread over 3,800 acres. There were separate sections for forests, pastures, and open parkland. They replanted many of the old farm fields, sometimes planting as many as 40,000 trees per year! They built winding roads to connect the huge barns and other buildings. They also built a large home at the edge of Lake



*Shelburne House, around 1900.*

Shelburne Farms Collections, Shelburne, Vermont



Shelburne Farms Collections, Shelburne, Vermont

*The Webb family on the south porch of their home at Shelburne Farms, around 1900.*

Champlain. Shelburne Farms was one of the biggest country estates in the United States.

Seward and Lila Webb and their four children came up from New York City every year. Their home had 25 bedrooms to hold them and the many relatives and friends who came to visit. There was lots to do. The family and their guests enjoyed reading books in the house's library. They played golf on the Webbs' private golf



Shelburne Farms Collections, Shelburne, Vermont

*Haying at Shelburne Farms, around 1900.*

course. They went swimming and sailing on Lake Champlain. They drove horsedrawn carriages around the estate.

There was a lot of work going on at the Farms too. Cows grazed in its pastures. Hay filled the fields; flowers and vegetables filled the gardens. Enormous barns were scattered over the property. The Breeding Barn held 200 horses and two indoor rings for riding and training. The Coach Barn had an elevator to take carriages to and from storage areas. The Farm Barn is five stories high and looks like a castle.

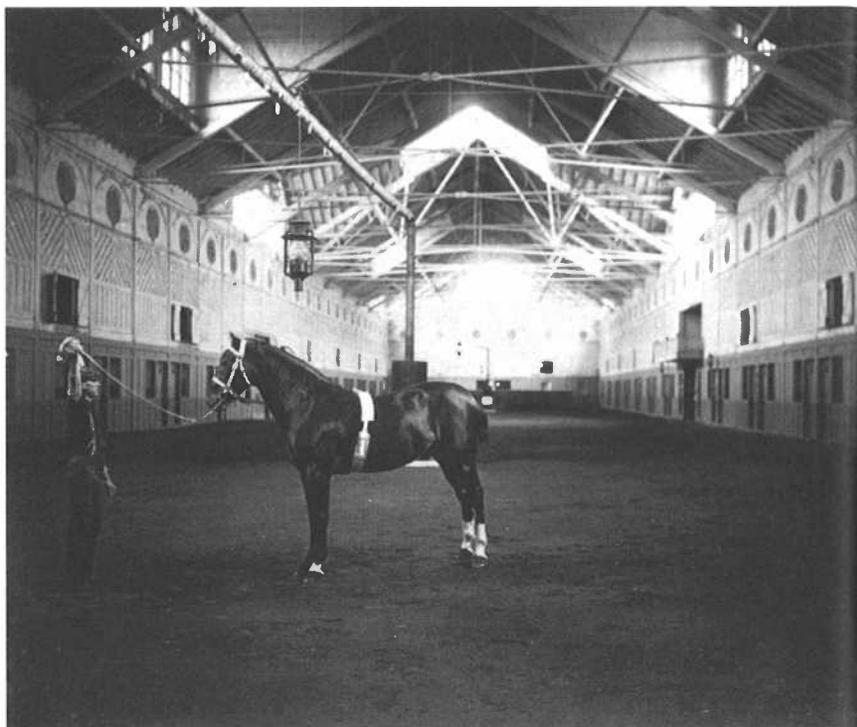
Three hundred people worked for the Webbs. They farmed the land and took care of the farm animals. They tended the plants and trees in the gardens and greenhouses. They mowed the lawns and golf course and kept up the roads. Others cooked, cleaned, and cared for the family. With their help, Shelburne Farms produced enough milk, butter, cream, hay, corn, oats, apples, vegetables, beef, mutton, pork, and poultry for everyone at the farm. And there was enough left over to sell outside the estate.

The Webbs wanted Shelburne Farms to be a model farm. They wanted to experiment with new kinds of crops and farming equipment and to use what they learned to help smaller farms in Vermont.

It was a hard time for farmers in Vermont. Many people were moving to the cities, so there were fewer left to work the farms. Prices for farm products were low. The Webbs did not depend on their farm income to survive, as did most Vermont farmers. They hoped that their ideas and experiments would help show Vermont farmers how to make a better living.

The Webbs also experimented with animals. They thought that Hackney horses, from England, would be stronger than the Morgan horses then used and would help the farmers plant more crops and make more money.

The Webbs built the Breeding Barn to house



*A groom holding a Hackney horse inside the Breeding Barn, around 1900.*

the Hackneys. The Webbs housed and trained the horses there and held horse shows. They offered their Hackneys for sale to Vermont farmers at very low prices and gave them free breeding services. Few Vermont farmers were interested in the Webbs' Hackney horses, though. They liked their Morgan horses.

While Seward and Lila Webb's estate at Shelburne Farms was grand and beautiful, their

model farm was not very successful. In the end, they had to cut back their operations because they were too expensive.

Seward Webb died in 1926. Lila Webb died ten years later. Their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren continued to live at Shelburne Farms. In 1972, five of their great-grandchildren turned the Farms into a non-profit organization, whose purpose is to educate people about farming and the environment.

Shelburne Farms is still a working farm in beautiful surroundings. But now it is open to the public. People come from all over the world to tour the property. Some even stay at the Webbs' house, which is now an inn. And they come to take part in many programs and activities.

The farm is also a success. Workers make cheese with the milk from the Shelburne Farms herd of Brown Swiss cows. There is a Children's Farmyard where children learn about farm animals and do farm chores. Educators teach children and adults about maple sugaring, animal life, trees, bugs, and plants. They show why farming is important to all of us. Shelburne Farms today is the Webbs' dream come true.