

What I Learned From the Land

For this refugee from a white-collar job, the physical hardship of working on a potato farm inspired in her a sense of discovery, about the people she worked with and about herself.

By Mary Ellen Rooney
Photo by Philippe Montant

After the chic have left the Hamptons, the deception of summer ends. As the days of golden sunshine shorten and lengthening nights begin to claim their share of time, we who stay behind face realities. Insurance bills, automobile repairs, LILCO, and no job in sight for most of us year-rounders.

The hauseiners set nets on empty beaches, solitary clam diggers tong the bays, and farmers begin to harvest the potato crop from fields that created a picturesque view for the summer population. Field, bay and beach. This is the natural environment and it continues to provide for those who work with it—the farmer and the seafarer.

But what of the rest of us who have worked within the artificial environment created by a summer resort? Last year I was among the many who were jobless at the end of summer. An eight-week sailing instructorship did not qualify me to collect unemployment insurance. The financial resources I'd brought with me when I moved out east four years ago had dried up in the sun of those deceptive summers and now the simple economic truth of my situation closed in. I needed a job, but where did the possibilities lie?

Housecleaning? Waitressing? Carpentry? Many ex-urban, college-trained, white-collar immigrants to the Hamptons cope successfully with blue-collar jobs like these. I knew I wouldn't last a day at any one of them. Instead, I heeded my own taste for adventure and love of the out-of-doors. I elected to work on a farm during the autumn harvest. A far-fetched act for a woman of 39, a former editor.

But I have always carried in my mind's eye a romantic picture of what life is like for the farmer and seafarer. Man of the land! Man of the sea! Man as one with the elements! With these pictures in

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Mary Ellen Rooney at the wheel: "How does the farmer take this day after day?"

mind, I strode forth to wrest my living from the earth.

From the Diary of Those Days
Day One: My spirit soars at the beauty of the view. A dewy, brown field that meets the sea. Patches of green rye grass. Pheasants and gulls freely crossing the open field in search of food. Dramatically lit weather clouds fill the sky and promise excitement.

It is Gurden Ludlow who has employed me. His family has grown potatoes in Bridgehampton for 300 years. He is tall, this farmer, in his mid-50s, a still-handsome carving of what we Irish used to refer to as Yankee stock.

I am on the open field this morning, dressed in jeans, faded blue workshirt, red paisley scarf and deck shoes, because Gurden's son, Harry, recommended me. (We both teach sailing during the summer, and have become comrades.) Now, Gurden steps down from the potato harvester, studies me briefly, then gestures at the 1946 Stude-

baker potato truck parked in the furrows alongside. "Better take the truck, it's a good deal cleaner," he says.

Three enormous blue herons descend upon the vista. "Where do they come from?" I ask, thrilled by the discovery of new wildlife.

"They live in the swamps and the marshes. It's part of the ecology we're tryin' to preserve," Gurden answers, swinging up to his place on the harvester.

We are ready to dig potatoes. I summon the attention I will need to drive this huge, old truck with two transmissions, floor clutch and starter, the sides built high to hold an 11-ton load.

"Just drive real slow in first gear. Watch me for signals. You'll get used to 'em after awhile. Main thing is, keep in the rows and don't lose any potatoes."

The ancient engine clangs and grinds. Slowly we begin to move in tandem. The great shovel teeth of the harvester dig into the earth and

potatoes move by conveyor belts onto the truck. The truck strains in low gear, and with careful coordination of clutch and gas, I move it forward without a lurch or stall. I marvel at my ability to recall an experience of my youth, when I learned to drive an old La Salle on the back roads of Bridgehampton.

I look at the dust-covered farmer as he reaps his harvest and I think with wonder and immense satisfaction. *The farm, Earth. The element. Truth. Reality.*

The farmer signals me to drop back so that he can fill the front of the truck. I ease off the accelerator gently, and soon we are in a proper relationship. I take a bearing on the harvester to hold position. "Perfect." He gestures OK with thumb and middle finger. There it is again. Imagination, rich and unbridled. *Wilderness woman. Lady explorer, fearlessly treading terrain beyond the reach of ordinary folk.* Gurden Ludlow will get his crops in this year with me at the wheel.

'I try not to feel sorry for myself. The dust-covered farmer has been sitting on that tractor since 5 AM.'

In a state of near ecstasy I chug along. Life seems a giant Breugel pastoral until a bellowing male voice from behind interrupts my reverie.

"Where the hell do you think you're going? I thought I told you not to take your eyes from me." The voice is Gurden's. He is no longer beside me on the harvester. I stop, with a few noisy trys find neutral gear and jump out. A look to the north reveals that I have traveled 50 feet beyond where the digger seems to have broken down.

My new boss glowers darkly as he moves toward me. "Now move over and let me back this thing up."

I do not dare to tell him where I have been. He would not appreciate my fantasies. We line up with the digger. "Now pay attention. This is hard work," he says as he gets out.

Chagrined, I try again. Fantasies slip away. I want this man's respect and want to be helpful.

While we work I begin to understand the needs of this new-found occupation. It is challenging to operate the heavy machinery but agonizing to concentrate for such long periods while the truck fills. The rows are long and when the weeds are thick, it can take an hour to dig a single row. My neck and shoulders ache from straining to the left. I try not to feel sorry for myself. The dust-covered farmer has been sitting on that tractor since 5 AM, four hours longer than I.

During the endless trip down each row, there is nothing much to think of except to concentrate on holding position, and so I fantasize some more. The pictures have changed. *Gray prison yards. A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. Israeli kibbutz.* There is a grimness to my situation. I try to force thought away and gear myself to the interminable moment. At last, relief from the tedium. The truck is filled, ready to roll to the potato house. Here, Ludlow's two sons, Harry and Arthur, will unload and grade the potatoes.

I feel refreshed as we begin the row, northbound this time. The wind is against us. I feel lightheaded from the fine dust that is accumulating in my lungs. How does the farmer take this day after day? He is stoic as he withstands the hardship.

Dust-covered, he looks as though he has been sitting on the tractor for 300 years.

The red paisley scarf comes off my head and I wrap it around my nose, bandit style. It is an improvement.

By noon I am so weak that I feel faint. I'm given a few minutes to race home and grab some cold chicken and tomato. But Gurden wants to start digging again, "just as soon as you can git back here."

On the way home, I consider eating out. But knowing how hard I must now work to earn my \$3 an hour deters me. While gulping lunch, I phone a cleaning lady and hire her to come in the next day. Her rates are \$3.50 an hour. Does it make sense? This week it does. I need a clean house to luxuriate in after a day in the fields.

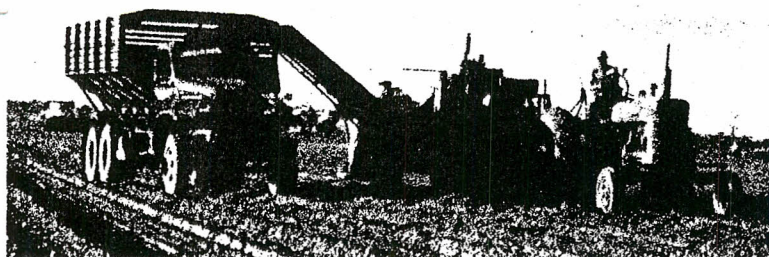
My thought process is becoming more scattered. I observe myself bemusedly. To outward appearances, my behavior is preposterous. Yet some part of me knows that what I am doing makes sense.

I flash back four years: married to a physician, living on the 26th floor of a building that overlooks almost all of New York City, even my work-situation is opulent as a publicist at Lincoln Center. Talk about change in life-style. I jump into my jeep and speed back to the potato truck.

The afternoon wears on. Tame pheasants and seagulls walk about the field. My driving improves. I am beginning to like the farmer. I see a lively sense of humor behind the seriousness of his workday demeanor. He is amused by his lady truck driver, and a rapport begins to develop between us. He is curious about my life, as though I'm a foreigner. Yet he knows who I am. Whose daughter I am. Remembers me, before my city days, when I was growing up here in Bridgehampton. Carried by this liking and communication, I ignore the pain in my neck and back.

After work, I return home covered with brown dust. My children, Peter and Lucas, are amused and curious. I peel off my clothes, drop them on the deck and streak to the shower. "It's only dirt," I think silently. "It washes off." I remember my

Turn to page 22



mother, a farmer's daughter, noting that there is "clean dirt and dirty dirt."

I am interested to note that although exhausted on one plane of being, a new source of energy is being tapped. I shop. I cook. There are ideas. For early dinner I dress up in velveteen slacks, good shoes, a silk blouse and we sit at the dining room table. Odd. We usually eat at the counter and I wear jeans. I am in bed by 7:30, asleep by 8 PM.

Day Two: I race across the open fields. A few minutes of friendly talk with the older man on the harvester—about a local flock of Canada geese, their origin and habits—and the work begins. It goes a little faster because there are fewer weeds and I am more at home with the machinery.

But the bloom is wearing off. Today it is taking about 45 minutes per load. I am weary. The dust begins to bother me early in the day.

At the end of the second day, my cleaning lady thrusts a green viyella robe through the sliding doors to the deck where I am dumping my clothes. On no other condition will she let me cross the newly cleaned kitchen floor. Wrapping myself in the floor-length garment, my eye catches the Abercrombie & Fitch label. Then the cover of a current women's magazine flashes across my mind. Feature article—"The Divorcee: Our New Poor." Label, magazine cover, Gurden on the harvester, me at the wheel of the truck, potato dust, city lights at night—the pictures are fragmented, absurd, funny.

Day Three: My car breaks down so I ride my son's 10-speed to work. It's a pleasant experience. There is a chill in the air. I meet the farmer in a new field at Bay Lane, on Mecox Bay. The pace has quickened. He is no-nonsense this morning.

Tells me not to take my eyes off him. We will be going at twice the pace today because there are no weeds in this lot. Why no weeds? Well, that's part mystery and part "because there were no weeds last year."

Trucks are filling quickly—taking about 20 minutes to a row. Gurden is getting nervous because the work must be done by Oct. 23, before the first frost.

I am doing my utmost. It is tiring. The steady driving, the constant fight to stay even with the harvester—I sure could use a coffee break. Pop! The truth of another fact of modern life is revealed. Of course. Now I see why the coffee break was instituted. I'd read about the effects of mesmerizing work. During my years as a white-collar worker I'd found the coffee break an irritating interruption to my train of thought.

During the afternoon, I am heady from the dust and chemicals. Apparitions begin to appear. They are the faces and heads of familiar politicians and environmentalists—wealthy urbanites who have settled here in recent years. Do any of them know about this dust? What the farmer must endure? Do they just see the view?

This evening I wear a skirt for dinner. Lots of perfume. We are still dining at the table. I am in bed by 7:30.

Day Four: There is a woman on the back of the harvester, pulling weeds. Song, "and the women in the meadow makin' hay" rings in my head all morning. My sinuses are killing me. I learn that she lives in Bridgehampton. Last fall, when she needed to recover from a long confinement with her terminally ill mother, Gurden suggested that outdoor work would help the healing. It had

been beneficial, but she prefers to be out on the digger, under the sky, and only works a limited number of hours. Maybe that's the secret. I'm glad she's there. She compliments me on my driving. She says the driver last fall lurched all over the field.

The end of the day, and the end of the row. My youngest son, Lucas, appears with his father, who has driven out from New York to spend the weekend with the boys. They come by like tourists to "see Mommie drive a truck."

I descend from the vehicle, my head reeling from the motion and fumes. We stand before each other in the late afternoon sun. I am aware that the power that drew us together will always remain. He's still good looking—tall, dark-Irish, basically gentle. At the moment that our eyes meet, I want him to destroy the thing which keeps us apart. I want him to . . . yes, I want him to take care of me. He senses this and is uncomfortable. His hand fidgets with the car keys. His fingers are more finely boned than I remember. I look back at the digger and see how far I've come. The newly dug expanse of field is impressive from where I now stand. I know I have to keep on digging.

His gaze shifts distances. His dark eyes scan the vista, the fields that roll down to the sea. He has always preferred the distant view. I smile, remembering our trip to the Middle East. He had taken the photographs, mainly because he was the one who could operate the camera. I was furious when I saw all of those slides taken from three miles away. What I had noticed as important throughout our traveling were the individual faces, the subtle lines of expression, the beautiful poi-

gnant human moments. Yet I can't blame him. It had been too much trouble for me to learn to operate a camera.

He mumbles something about the view and looks down at his feet. It is a familiar impasse, a familiar ending, one with which we are both comfortable.

That afternoon Gurden pays me \$78 for the week's work. Check in hand, he says, "You're far from perfect, but you're doin' so well, it's surprisin'." Saturday night I am asleep by 8 o'clock.

Day Five: It rains, so I have a reprieve from the harvest. Spend most of the day on the couch. I muse on the differences between people who work on the water and those who farm the land. Both are hard lives. I remember years ago, seeing some clam diggers who didn't even have boats. They used to dig clams and then wheel them to town in an old baby carriage to sell. Romantic? Slowly my head is changing.

Late in the afternoon I drive to Southampton to buy jeans. Instead, I spend my paycheck plus \$25 on silk pants, an elegant blouse and leather shoes that are as soft as butter.

Days Six, Seven, Eight, Nine, Ten: Working on the digger. Pulling weeds off the conveyor belt. The pace is constant, killing. Like an assembly line. Time has no meaning. There's just work time and time away from work—to sleep, hopefully to fill up the sources of strength and energy. There are no saving graces to brute toil. I'm working out-of-doors, but the work is so grueling there isn't time to look up, even for a minute.

On Friday night I take a break, see some friends. Amuse them with tales of my experience as a field hand. I am conscious of revving my motor. Others attend the dinner party in jeans. I prefer elegance. Is the denim craze a comment on the leisure of our lives? Does one's choice of clothing reflect a need to dress "other from" work? I work in the fields. Suddenly, I need to wear silk in the evening.

During the next two weeks the work continues. As my farming skills improve, I notice my interest

shifting from the open field to the typewriter in the corner of my bedroom. When the machine actually begins to look friendly, I know that I have turned a corner. And so, with deck shoes still tracking potato dust I cross the floor to begin the work I had always felt was right for me but had been afraid to try.

I hate to leave Gurden Ludlow or the harvest, but my rebellious spending of hard-earned money on luxuries to compensate for the grind is not exactly improving my financial predicament.

Now I have begun to earn money from work that springs out of my own awareness. I have produced a calendar of "Farmers and Seafarers," a photographic record of the independent way of life I remember from my childhood on eastern Long Island.

Who knows how we turn these corners in our lives? A friend who studies Zen Buddhism contends that the concentration on a single spot during the long hours of driving the truck acted as a meditation during which the inner consciousness was revealed to me. Or perhaps it was the sheer physical exhaustion of the farm work that ground me down to the nub of myself, where I realized that if I could drive a truck I could certainly handle the fearsome typewriter.

I think that in the fields that late afternoon with my former husband and son I grew a little—like the survivor at sea who begins to innovate ways to sail his little craft once he realizes that the last rescue ship has passed by and it's now up to him to find the shore.

I am discovering that like the life of the farmer or fisherman, working with words is neither romantic nor easy. There are many moments when I would prefer the physical misery of farming to grappling with the doubts and frustrations of writing. But when the words are down I know that they are my own, and that feeling sustains me.

And there are other words I remember, too—Gurden's. "You're far from perfect, but you're doin' so well, it's surprisin'." ◊