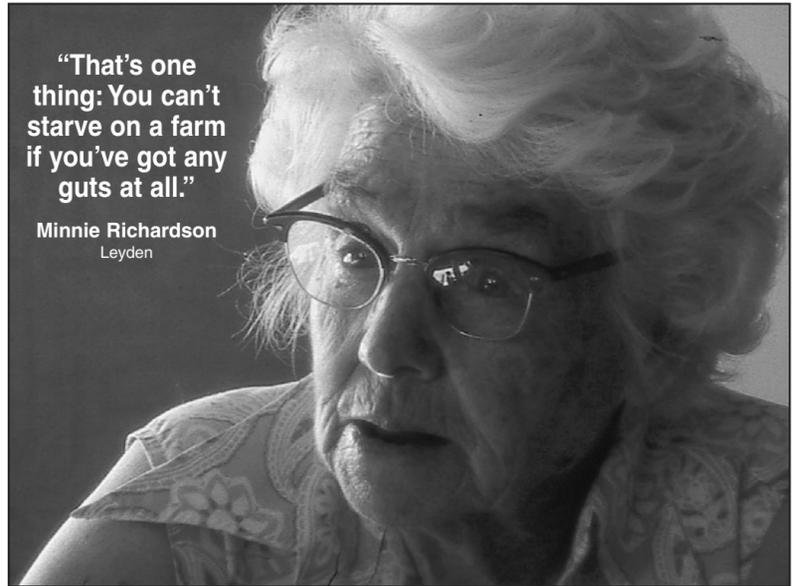


“Too small.
Too hilly.
Stony.
“Didn’t pay.”

Norman Field
Bernardston

Image courtesy of Rawn Fulton



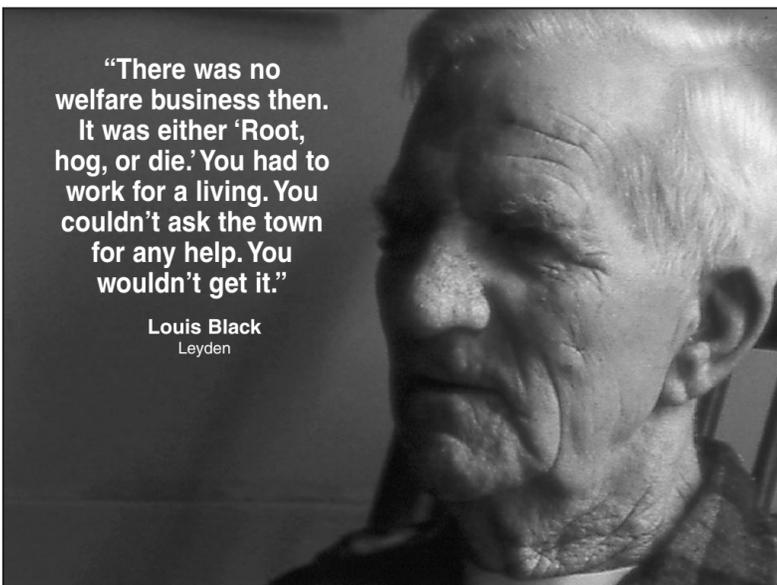
“That’s one
thing: You can’t
starve on a farm
if you’ve got any
guts at all.”

Minnie Richardson
Leyden

Image courtesy of Rawn Fulton

‘Root, hog, or die’

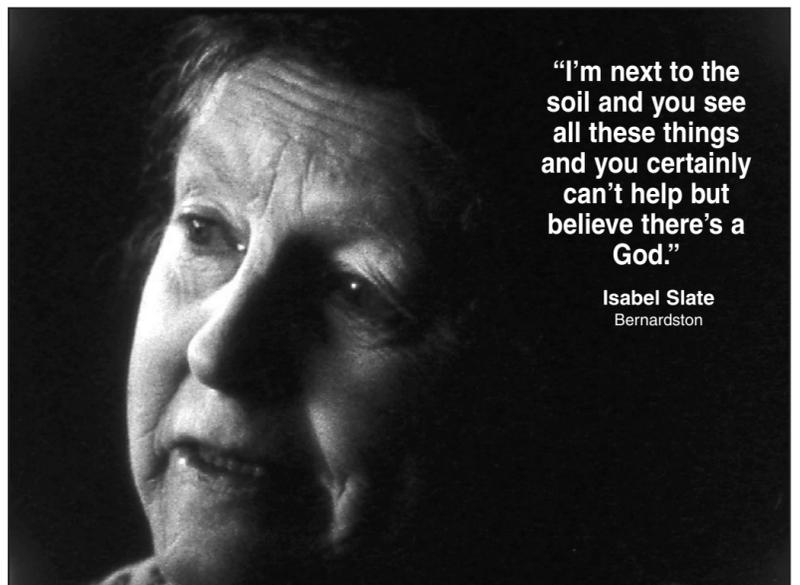
All but forgotten, Rawn Fulton’s award-winning documentary captures the hardscrabble life of area farmers in the 1970s



“There was no
welfare business then.
It was either ‘Root,
hog, or die.’ You had to
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Louis Black
Leyden

Image courtesy of Rawn Fulton



“I’m next to the
soil and you see
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and you certainly
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believe there’s a
God.”

Isabel Slate
Bernardston

Image courtesy of Rawn Fulton

Story by Richie Davis

“We’re a timeless people. We don’t try to do things by 8-to-5,” says the voice of farmer Charlie Culver of Ashfield, as his son drives a team of workhorses, plowing uphill for what seems like forever. “We do it as we go along. We pay no attention to the time, the clock. We just do what’s got to be done when it’s got to be done. And our work’s not that objectionable to us ... We don’t ever stop.”

To say there’s a timeless quality to the images, and the voices, in Rawn Fulton’s black-and-white, hour-long documentary “Root Hog or Die,” is to belabor the obvious. Yet so much has changed in Franklin County over the 40 years since the Bernardston filmmaker first made the film that it’s worth viewing with fresh eyes. Especially since there’s a keen reawakening of interest in protecting what remains of farming and rural values today.

“Locavores,” “sustainability” and “green living” were foreign words to old-timers like Herman Severance of Greenfield and Herman Streeter of Bernardston — two of the many farmers around Franklin County and neighboring Windham County, Vt., interviewed by Fulton in 1975. That was soon after Fulton and his wife arrived from Brooklyn after growing up in a southern



FULTON

Connecticut town comparable 20 years earlier in size and life rhythms to Bernardston.

The idea for a film about the Yankee farming lifestyle came, ironically, from a developer named David Berelson, who had built Bernardston’s Crumpin-Fox Golf Course and the restaurant called Bella Notte. He kept running into — and uprooting — farmers who seemed to be living much as their ancestors had.

“How’d you like to make a film about the farmers around here?” Berelson — the son of noted University of Chicago behavioral scientist Bernard Berelson — asked Fulton when he first met him at a cookout and learned he was a filmmaker.

Fulton was 26 and had already made the 25-minute film “Sun River,” which is about working with India’s Adivasi indigenous people, with his wife during their two years in the Peace Corps. Arriving in Bernardston in 1972, Fulton found a town that had as many people as Newtown, Conn., had in 1952. “There were still the farmers, still the dairies, still the connection to that way of life that I’d grown up with and really loved being around. Berelson could feel and taste the uniqueness of this, so he was very excited about capturing it (on film) before it all disappeared.”

Fulton — who looks more than a bit like actor Jeff Bridges — had been roommates with Knowlton “Terry” Noyes for three years at Columbia University. Noyes had been living on a Virginia farm when Fulton approached him about joining him on the project. Fulton turned to Bernardston auctioneer

Louis Pratt for ideas about the best people to include in this portrait of “an agrarian, dairy lifestyle.”

The focus was on the kind of small, traditional hill farms that had dotted towns like Ashfield, Colrain and Leyden for generations — not the “giant, industrialized flatland Connecticut River farms” in the valley.

“We were interested in capturing a sense of what these people were like and what they had to say,” says Fulton, whose Searchlight Films — based in his home overlooking Butch Grover’s hayfields — has more than 35 documentary productions to its credit.

But Pratt warned that these Yankee farmers weren’t apt to say much, especially to a couple of young urban types pointing camera equipment and microphones in their direction.

“They said, ‘These people are very laconic. They’re going to say two words and walk off and do their chores. And one of them will be ‘A-yup,’ and one of them will be, ‘Nope.’”

Without even calling ahead, Fulton and Noyes drove to see the farmers on Pratt’s list.

“I realized after the first two or three that the worst thing I could do was to leave the camera in the car,” says Fulton, because they would inevitably say something fantastic, which they’d never say again, at least not in the same way. So after the first three or four encounters, we just learned to get out with the camera rolling and say, ‘Hi.’”

The result of a year of so of these visits is a portrait of rural Americana as dramatic and evocative as anything by painters Thomas

Hart Benton or Grant Wood. But this black-and-white depiction of agrarian Franklin County, circa 1975, is punctuated by the sounds of down-to-earth Yankees describing, just as plain as horse droppings and ax chopping, the day-in, day-out realities of hardscrabble life in and around Franklin County.

“Far from being laconic, once the people we met realized we were seriously interested in listening, we couldn’t stop them,” recalls Fulton. “It’s like you opened a valve and this stuff kept pouring out, like they’d been waiting their whole lives to tell somebody.”

“Before I was 21,” a white-haired Linwood Lesure of Ashfield’s Watson section tells the camera, “I went to an auction with \$175 I had saved up and they sold a farm of about 140 acres with a house and barn. It sold for \$3,850 and I got it. I borrowed the money and paid for the farm.”

Minnie Richardson of Leyden, nearly 80, says, “That’s one thing: You can’t starve on a farm if you’ve got any guts at all. In the summer-time, we’d itemize the things on the table in front of us that we’d have to purchase from the store.”

And Fred Call, after filling a yacht-sized sedan with 41.9-cent gasoline at Call’s garage in Colrain, tells a customer how a nickel change isn’t still enough to buy a candy bar, which is smaller than it used to be and double the price. “I don’t know where it’s gonna end,” he says. Then he recalls old-timer Newton Carpenter telling him about when 40 active farms lined the road where only three remained ... “and now none are being used There’s just summer people.”

The film, shot using available

light in 16-millimeter reversal to maximize image quality, has long, extended shots of tending open landscape that convey the unhurried lifestyle and laborious days of tilling, plowing, harvesting, logging and sugaring. Its title, “Root Hog or Die,” is a pre-Civil War saying denoting independence and comes from a line spoken by Louis Black of Leyden near the film’s opening, which shows a still image of an old horse-drawn plow.

“We raised our own pork, beef, potatoes,” he says, in a close-up of his weathered face. “There was no welfare business then. It was either ‘Root, hog, or die.’ You had to work for a living. You couldn’t ask the town for any help. You wouldn’t get it.”

As a young filmmaker who’d cut his teeth on documenting communal life in rural India, Fulton says he wanted these conversations about family, community, work and neighborliness to reflect an entire way of life that almost seems rooted in the rocky soil.

From Francis Barnard in Shelburne and Stevens Dole in Shelburne to Louise Taylor in Bernardston and Fred Lincoln in Warwick, “Each of them has their own special personality and style, and accent and perspective,” says Fulton, who intentionally sought out those farmers who had never stopped using horse-drawn equipment. “We thought it would be more authentic looking, or more traditional.”

“We wanted things to be absolutely as natural, as uncomposed, as possible. We also shot it in black and white because we wanted it to feel old even when it was new.

See ROOT Page D3

■ Root: A timeless study of rural life

From Page D1

Now that it's 40 years old, it really is old."

Fulton calls the finished film "a portrait of a way of life as presented by people who were toward the end of their own lives, but was also toward the end of the entire movement."

Although they had survived in some cases for generations, these family businesses — dependent on every one pitching in for long days of hard labor that they not only took in stride but savored as part of the rhythm of life — were strained and gave way as rising costs and competing economic realities became unbearable. Gradually, many were forced to seek work off their small farms just to make ends meet, "but they always kept chickens, a couple hogs, four or five cows as part of their whole sense of what's real," Fulton said.

Sid Gaines of Guilford, Vt., recalls, "In 1910, even with town taxes and all, I could get by on \$200 or \$300 a year. I could go to the next door neighbor and say, 'Can you help me tomorrow?' and I'd be sure he'd be here ... without money changing hands."

But one farm with more than 100 cows now exists where eight families once lived with maybe 14 cows. Otherwise, the land has given way to people who have a house and commute to work in town.

"Now the folks just live there, and they don't got no use for the land."

In one memorable moment of the film, Dole tells about how his grandfather built his house and barn in 1858 and 1859, waking up at 2:30 a.m. each morning to drive his two yoked oxen all the way from Shelburne to Guilford and back to haul the slate needed for roofs.

Archetypal moments

The only music in the film, other than the unaccompanied farmer's singing that opens and closes it, comes from the fiddle music at a late summer square dance at Bernardston's Kiwanis Park.

Fulton's camera pulls back into the night darkness, the dancers still visible in the distance, and the scene dissolves into one of a field of harvested corn in Ashfield, set against the hills in the background, then focusing on a single milkweed pod, with the lone remaining sound a rush of wind as only the shadows of clouds move across the field.

"There was a lot of people in these hills," says the deep, folksy voice of Norman Field of Bernardston. "They all had pretty small farms. No big acreage. If you go up along the ridge, along the state line, you'll find cellar holes and stone walls, and now it's all woods. New England was pretty crowded before the Civil War. After the Civil War, they opened up the West. You could go and get a farm in 'Ioway' just for moving onto it. A lot of people here moved out there.

"Too small.

"Too hilly.

"Stony.

"Didn't pay."

Fulton, who imitates the slow, measured pacing of Field's voice with proud mastery, reflects back on that sequence.

"There are some moments in this film that are archetypal. I can't believe we did it.

"When we started out, we didn't have a script; we had a list of names on a piece of paper, and go see what you find out. And we started filming in the spring, in sugaring time, we filmed all summer into fall and early winter. And the film is cut in that sequence. It was like this is what they did, this is how they said it, this is what came out, following the form of the year, following the time of the agrarian progression. It was unintentional, and it was perfect because this is the way these people's lives are organized."



Curt Culver of Ashfield plows uphill with his team of workhorses.

Image courtesy of Rawan Fulton



The Don Herron family of Leyden cleans blueberries with factory-like efficiency.

Image courtesy of Rawan Fulton

■ **WANT TO SEE THE FILM?** DVDs of "Root Hog or Die" cost \$20 at the Greenfield Farmers Cooperative Exchange. Also, Ashfield library has copy in its collection. Finally, you can see a clip online: www.Searchlightfilms.com/media/?vid=ROOT_HOG_OR_DIE

Pachelbel

Just as "Root Hog or Die" tells the story of the people, there's a story as well behind the documentary, of course.

Berelson, who first conceived of the documentary, agreed to fund the filming, which was done on the cheap. But when the Arab oil embargo of 1973 hit and his own finances began to tighten, he told Fulton and Noyes that he'd simply run out of money for editing to continue.

For about five years, Fulton recalls, the film simply sat on the shelf until Noyes — whose family had published The Washington Evening Star and helped found the Associated Press — thought of applying for National Endowment for the Arts funding to complete the project.

Berelson approached the National Fund for the Arts as well as WGBY in Springfield and Greenfield Community College Foundation for funding, and, eventually, Berelson handed over ownership of the film to the GCC Foundation.

The peaceful spirit of nature that pervades the hour-long documentary was almost broken when Fulton and his financier came to loggerheads. Berelson, perhaps influenced by the wild popularity of the mesmerizing Pachelbel's "Canon" — used later throughout the Hollywood movie "Ordinary People" — insisted that the 17th-century music run during the end credits for "Root Hog or Die."

"I said, 'I don't think so,'" recalls Fulton. "This film has no music in it at all except for the square dance. It's all cinema verite, it's all very

spare, it's all understated, all immersion. We're not going to stick in Beethoven or Albinoni or Pachelbel at the last minute and change everything."

Berelson was so upset by the refusal of Fulton, Noyes and WGBY's Dan Kain — who had taken on the role of the film's executive producer — that he stormed out of the project and his friendship with Fulton. "He basically never spoke to me again," Fulton said.

Berelson died in 1988. "Root Hog or Die" was shown on Springfield public television and won prizes at the New England, Chicago and Houston film festivals and bronze awards at the New York and American film festivals, as well as a New England Emmy Award. Though it was converted from film to videocassette, it wasn't until about a dozen years ago that Fulton approached GCC Foundation about making a DVD version.

"I said, 'You guys have had this thing for years and nobody hears about it beyond the valley. I think it belongs in every American studies program in the U.S. and Canada and around the world. This is Americana at its absolute most basic and best.

... I said, 'How about giving me a crack at it?'"

GCC gave the Bernardston filmmaker back the rights to the film about five years later and Fulton began thinking about a sequel, about returning to look at what's happened to agrarian culture here 40 years later.

"What makes this film timely is the same thing that

makes it timeless," Fulton said. "There are deeper forces at work here ... By myopically putting on blinders and going to work every day, every day, every day, in what we do, we miss the connection between the now and the infinite. We miss the big picture. What makes this film special is that you have a localized portrait of the local situation and yet it does it in a way that's global."

And yet the film is quintessentially about Franklin County and describes a way of life that runs deep enough that its vestiges remain. It was Jeffrey Budine of Greenfield Farmers Cooperative Exchange, who approached Fulton saying, "I think the people who come in here are the kind of people who would love your film and appreciate it, and they ought to know about it."

The Farmers Exchange, at 269 High St., is the one place people can now go to buy the DVD for \$20. Budine reports that he's had interest from people who spot it on the counter as they're shopping and want to know about it.

That's especially true today, says Fulton, since there seems to be a reawakening — just as there was in the 1960s — of some of the values that are expressed in the film by people like Isabel Slate of Bernardston: "I'm next to the soil and you see all these things and you certainly can't help but believe there's a God."

Universal themes

"All the things in the '60s and '70s and '80s we thought our generation was discovering, she had grown up with

and was already part of her DNA," Fulton says, referring to Slate and others. "And this is what I think is the value of the film, what makes it timeless. We're now rediscovering things that they already knew. That's the full circle aspect of it. The film has kind of a permanent sense of connection to long-range values, long-range goals, long-range principles of organizing not just what we do but how we see and how we feel."

In the film, Charlie Culver of Ashfield recalls the "gruesome" Depression of the 1930s, but how some relatives who had "lorded it over us" after they had moved to the city returned home to the farm rather than having to stand three to five hours in a line to get a loaf of bread.

"They had come down to our level," Culver declares. "That's what we need right now. There's got to come a day of reckoning sometime. We can't live artificially forever."

Its basic values like that, expressed throughout "Root Hog or Die," that make Fulton believe it's time to produce a new version of the film, re-mastering it with the original film footage he discovered only recently after searching

for it for years.

"I've been wanting to do this for years. I think it's time," he says. "The mood has changed. The arc was in decline, but I think it's bottomed out. I think people are realizing these old folks had some amazing skills that they wish we still had."

But if there's renewed energy to relearn basic skills for living off the land and to regain some of the resilience that these old-timers had, what seems even more important is the return to their sense of values, Fulton says. In addition to revisiting some of the farms that were home to the folks featured in his 1975 documentary, Fulton wants to include a book of photograph portraits that accompanies the updated film with biographical sketches.

There's a long way to go before Fulton undertakes an updated documentary, showing what has happened to the farms in the original version — Lesure's sugaring operation in Ashfield is now South Face Farm, for example — and how a new enthusiasm for sustainable farming practices has emerged.

For one thing, Fulton would have to work on fundraising — a skill he's not used to applying.

But he believes it's important, not only to document what's happened to this community and the changes in values that have taken place, but as a way of connecting back to the universal issues raised in his very first film, about India, as well as the World Population Film/Video Festival he created in 1994.

"After living in India for two years in a village with no running water or electricity ... then I look at people living here on their basic farms with their small-scale work and village-level life, and I feel that deep human connection with people around the world, with agrarian peoples everywhere," Fulton says. "And then I spent 15 years working on world population growth issues. Digging into these cultural norms around the world and finding the common thread, the connection to the land, the respect for nature, the need to be in tune with nature and to work with rhythms of nature ... I feel we've come full-circle, from the declining small country farm, to it bottoming out, to suddenly a new generation of young people saying, 'This is great; We can do this. We can make it work.'"

There's a gentle balance in "Root Hog or Die" that reflects the gentle balance of life in the backwoods of Franklin County four decades ago.

"Oh, it's a good miss," Norman Fields says after a farm auction scene in the documentary. "You do miss 'em once in a while. There's a little pride of ownership and so forth, of being in business for yourself and having plenty of cows. But seven days a week ... that ain't worth it."

Field's emotional words are followed immediately by those of Louise Taylor as she feeds her calves on her Bernardston farm.

"Maybe it's a hard way of life. But in some ways, it's quite gratifying," she says quietly. "When we came here, we came on what you'd call a shoestring and it has been a struggle ever since we've been here. I think some people don't get any thrill out of having to pull hard to make both ends meet, but I find it fascinating. Good thing I do."

On the Web: www.Searchlightfilms.com/media/?vid=ROOT_HOG_OR_DIE
Senior reporter Richie Davis has worked at The Recorder more than 30 years. He can be reached at rdavis@recorder.com or 413-772-0261 Ext. 269.

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