**Preserving Working Lands for Future Generations**

**The Suiters**
Meriden city officials longed repeatedly to buy the 128-acre Bilger Farm. Because of its proximity to Hunter Golf Club and city owned Giuffrida Park, the farm has been a desirable target for various possible projects over the years such as residential housing, an industrial park, and a magnet middle school.

“It has been on the radar for a long time... it’s one of the largest tracts we have,” said onetime Mayor Michael S. Rohde.

The city has been interested in the farm for economic development since Meriden has few relatively large sites remaining to develop its tax base.

Then there were the developers. The Bilger family had been presented with numerous multi-million dollar offers to sell the farm.

**The Farm**
Bilger Farm had been a dairy farm since the 1930’s when George and Emma Bilger bought the farm from her parents. During its prime, the Bilger brothers — Allan and David — milked 60 cows twice a day. Allan died in 1995 and David sold his last pail of milk in 1997 when operation costs outstripped milk prices. The farm switched to beef cows and replacement heifers before turning to hay and horse boarding. Tragically, David was killed in a tractor accident at the age of 82 in 2010. And he died without a will.

**Keeping a Promise**
Allan once said, “What are you going to do with $5 million dollars?”

And David had repeatedly let it be known he wanted the farm to stay as is.

Their sister Lucille Bilger knew what she had to do. She would fiercely honor the wishes of her brothers and the memory of her parents and make sure the farm remained a farm forever.

**The Deal**
First, Miss Bilger divided off 52 acres of woods and wetlands and donated it to Meriden Land Trust. Then, she sold the development rights to the farm’s remaining 76 acres to the Connecticut Department of Agriculture and Connecticut Farmland Trust (CFT). The voluntary land agreement prohibits housing subdivisions and other development and ensures the land remains open and free to be farmed.

“No doubt her parents and brothers would say, “you done good, Lucille.”

---

**“Bilger Farm is one of the last farms in Meriden and a very desirable location. If it weren't for the passion of Lucille Bilger and her family to protect it, it would most certainly have been developed.”**

— Elisabeth Moore
CFT Executive Director
An interview with James Shepherd
Smokedown Farm, Sharon

Q. You have lived all over the world as an infectious disease specialist. How did you end up farming in Connecticut?
A. I had been living in New York City working as a research fellow in a cell biology lab. My wife and I liked to get away on weekends, and we ended up buying a place in Stonington, CT. Encouraged by a friend, North Stonington resident and Connecticut Farmland Trust Director Josh Welch, I was inspired to look for a sustainable farming opportunity.

Q. And you now have a hop yard in Sharon?
A. I was looking for a high value crop that was possible to grow profitably in Connecticut. Hops fit the bill as a crop that could be produced locally for local consumption. Suitable land was unavailable in Stonington, and an expanded search resulted in our purchase of 170 acres in Sharon.

Q. Starting a hop yard from scratch is a daunting challenge, given the structure necessary to support the plants. What have been your major challenges?
A. Labor is a big input, and workers have been hard to find. Establishing the hop yard is a heavy construction project with tall poles and large diameter cables. The end of summer dry spell required irrigation.

Q. When will your hops be ready to market?
A. We should reach 2/3rds of our expected yield in a year. There has been sufficient interest from local craft brewers to project the sale of everything we can produce.

Q. How did you get involved with Connecticut Farmland Trust?
A. Josh Welch introduced me to Executive Director, Elisabeth Moore, and we talked about farmland protection and keeping farms in Connecticut. My interest led to an invitation to join the Board last June.

Farm Tours and Harvest Dinner

CFT hosted another year of farm tours at White Gate Farm in East Lyme, Beltane Farm in Lebanon, and Humphrey Evergreen Farms in Hamden. Guests also celebrated at our annual Harvest Dinner at The Hickories in Ridgefield.

The farms featured in this year’s farm tours contribute to Connecticut agriculture in their own unique ways. White Gate Farm specializes in fresh organic produce, poultry, eggs, and flowers. Beltane Farm is known for its artisanal, farmstead goat milk cheese. Humphrey Evergreen Farms manage a cut-your-own Christmas tree operation during the holiday season. Guests saw first-hand the hard work these farmers put into their operations every day, while enjoying a picnic lunch provided by our farm tours sponsor Whole Foods Market.

To top off the end of the season, an enthusiastic group braved the impending stormy weather to celebrate the harvest season, complete with entertainment and breathtaking views. The Hickories, a diverse vegetable farm in Ridgefield, provided the backdrop to a beautiful evening. A locally grown dinner prepared by Chef Tim LaBant of The Schoolhouse at Cannondale featured produce from The Hickories and Sport Hill Farm, meat from the Stuart Family Farm, milk from The Farmer’s Cow, and cheese from Cato Corner Farm.

“I was looking for a high value crop that was possible to grow profitably in Connecticut.”
— James Shepherd
Success @ The Capitol

CFT worked with our partners — Connecticut Land Conservation Council and Working Lands Alliance — to help secure **two key legislative victories** for farmland preservation during the 2015 General Assembly session.

**Community Investment Act (CIA)**
The governor's original budget recommended diverting all CIA funds for 1.5 years of the biennial budget into the general fund. CIA provides monies for Open Space and Watershed Land Acquisition (OSWA) grants, underwrites several Farmland Preservation Program staff positions, and contributes to the purchase and incidental costs of development rights on farmland. Over the years, CFT has received open space grants totaling $1,681,210, which is funded primarily through CIA. In addition, CFT helped protect 4 farms that relied on partner land trusts receiving OSWA grants totaling $999,385.

50% of the CIA funds were restored in the biennial budget.

**Raising the Cap**
State law prohibited applying more than a combined 70% of state and federal grant dollars towards OSWA projects. Previously, the cap was 90%. The 20% difference jeopardized three CFT farmland preservation projects, because it would have required local land trusts and communities to cover a combined $618,750 shortfall.

The cap was raised to 90%, and the three farm projects were saved.

We will keep you posted on the impact of upcoming budget talks on farmland preservation.

The Connecticut Farm Table Cookbook

The Connecticut Farm Table Cookbook is a celebration of food and Connecticut farms. Written by Tracey Medeiros and Christy Colasurdo, the cookbook features 150 local recipes from the Nutmeg State.

The book features a variety of Connecticut farms, including Beltane Farm in Lebanon and Cato Corner Farm in Colchester. Both of these award-winning cheese farms were protected by Connecticut Farmland Trust.

“It’s a window into the world of Connecticut’s farm-to-table movement, brought to life through vivid farmer and chef profiles, local lore, and stunning photographs.”
— The Connecticut Farm Table Cookbook website

A portion of the proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to Connecticut Farmland Trust.

A Special Thank You

For hosting picnics and farm tours
Pauline Lord and David Harlow of White Gate Farm, **East Lyme**
Paul Trubey and Mark Pearsall of Beltane Farm, **Lebanon**
Dick and Sally Jaynes of Humphrey Evergreen Farms, **Hamden**

For providing food and beverages for the tours
Whole Foods Market
The Farmer’s Cow

For hosting the 2015 Harvest Dinner
The Hickories, **Ridgefield**

For sponsoring the 2015 Harvest Dinner
Harney & Sons Fine Teas
Farm Credit East
U. S. Trust
Wise Banyan
David Moore Architects
Sara O’Connell

Board of Directors

Dr. Michael A. Fotos III, **President**
West Hartford
Susan E. Lockwood, **Vice-President**
Redding
John C. Haller, CPA, **Treasurer**
East Granby
Dawn C. Adiletta, **Secretary**
East Woodstock
Robin Chesner
Lebanon
Gordon F. Gibson
Vernon
Charlotte Hansen
Stafford Springs
John J. Kriz
New Canaan
Richard A. Marone
West Hartford
Nicholas Moore
Sharon
Sara D. O’Connell
Bloomfield
Toni Robinson
Essex
Tim Slate
Lebanon
James Shepherd
Stonington
Peter J. Sposito
Glastonbury
Gregory J. Weidemann
Bolton
Joshua G. Welch
Stonington

Staff
Elisabeth Moore, **Executive Director and Conservation Director**
Cristina Hayden, **Communications Associate**
John S. Weedon, **Conservation Coordinator**

Connecticut State Capitol, Hartford
Wike Brothers Farm, Sharon raises grass-fed beef and pork and has been farmed by the same family for seven generations. The 144-acre farm was protected by CT Department of Agriculture, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, Sharon Land Trust, and Connecticut Farmland Trust in 2010.