

## The Story of Friendly Hills Farm

*By William M. Blair*

My experience with bio-dynamic methods starts in the spring of 1937. To find a workable farm was not easy, even by the unexact standards I set up at the time. We had envisioned a property with a house well situated and capable of suitable remodeling, near congenial people and playmates for our children.

On our way to see one last farm, we passed what was then the Hewitt farm in North Pomfret. The location appealed to us and after many negotiations we bought the farm and "Friendly Hills" came into being.

This background has some bearing on the progress I have been able to make toward creating a good bio-dynamic farm. Because we had chosen the farm primarily for a home and a place to give our children a good healthy outdoor life, the farming aspects were but rather sketchily gone into. Inquiry among the neighbors and friends in Woodstock brought the information that the ex-Hewitt farm had for years been considered one of the best in Pomfret, that Pomfret was famous for its Jerseys, and that the Hewitt herd was a good one.

We had secured a house superbly located, having possibilities for attractive remodeling, land that lay reasonably well considering the hilly country. To boot, we acquired a sugar-maple bush (grove) that would hang fourteen hundred buckets, the trout stream that figures in all alluring farm advertisements, what seemed like adequate farm buildings, and a herd of sixty Jersey cows, mostly registered—and largely full of Bang's disease.

The winter of 1936-37 we spent remodeling the house, and I hired a local young farmer to take care of the herd. He stayed on as a working foreman. In the spring the farm problems and the making of compost piles were discussed. My foreman was an honest, likeable young man, competent to farm as the Vermonters had done for years, but deaf, blind and dumb to any new methods. His resistance was the hardest kind to overcome—completely passive, never a refusal to do what was wanted, but when it wasn't done, a thousand reasons why it couldn't have been, or simply a neglect to even attempt it.

Meanwhile, I was kept busy figuring what should be done to save the dairy herd. Cows were aborting, calves dying two to three days after birth from septicemia which was apparently running wild in a barn that had a wood floor carelessly laid over two others which had collapsed. The acquisition of a small farm adjoining ours opened a chance to move the herd to better buildings and to segregate the Bang's diseased cows.

Blood tests showed that more were coming down with it, and even after sacrificing nineteen cows under the government's "test and slaughter" method of eradication, I still had evidence that it was not licked. The report I made at the Bio-Dynamic Conference in 1939 on the results I

obtained with Weleda remedies\* used at Dr. Pfeiffer's suggestion told the story of getting a clean herd. I am glad to say that a test of the herd made ten days ago shows it to be still certified as Bang's-free.

These initial difficulties gave me little chance to do more with bio-dynamic methods at that time than to apply them as well as I could in making small compost piles for the garden, and in treatment of the vegetable and flower gardens. This was a great thing for me, because the more intensive use of bio-dynamic compost, rotted manure and sprays in the gardens gave me the first tangible, if limited, proofs of their worth. This experience has been invaluable since in keeping up my courage in the face of the many difficulties encountered in converting the farm, as a novice.

Regardless of how right the bio-dynamic methods seem, how much of an appeal they make to one who loves and has a feeling for growing things, there are times when even small-scaled but tangible results are greatly encouraging. There must be these encouragements, for the changing over of a farm is no short nor easy process. I think this follows the course of so many experiences in the learning of new subjects, when there is a time of apparently no progress, bringing with it a feeling of defeat. But there suddenly appear decided results—and from then on progress is fast because of the accumulated experience of the learning period. And so I think that with anyone adopting bio-dynamic methods for a farm it will be a good approach to first work intensively a small piece of land.

To get back to the story of Friendly Hills Farm. The summer of 1938 came and went with the following bio-dynamic practices observed: About one hundred acres of tilled and pasture land were sprayed with preparations 500 and 501. Manure was composted but came too wet from the barn due to lack of drainage for the liquid and to shortage of bedding-straw. Moreover, the bedding was not very absorbent, being poor quality hay in place of straw, which I could not get at any reasonable price.

Since 1938 was the first year we composted manure, and our piles did not ferment in the winter (and were not completely rotted even by the next autumn), there was not much well-rotted fertilizer to put out on the land. In that year I adopted a five year crop rotation according to Dr. Pfeiffer's recommendations, with certain modifications necessitated by existing circumstances.

By this time I began to see that land which was considered fertile, according to neighborhood standards, was not actually so at all. Land that the neighbors told me had been "run out" thirty-five years ago and not turned since, looked pretty discouraging. This was the case with part of the small farm I had bought later. It was heavy, badly drained in places, the old tile drains broken and plugged, and blind ditches fallen in.

Most of the land gave evidence of few earthworms. My vegetable garden for instance, which had been part of a hay lot, yielded no worms when my

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\* Under the auspices of the Bio-Dynamic Farming and Gardening Association, Inc., Weleda Inc., 225 West 57th Street, New York City, has developed a treatment for abortion, Bang's disease and mastitis. This treatment is still in an experimental stage. However, it has been proved valuable and is recommended by the Bio-Dynamic Association for trial.

children wanted to go fishing. The fields were hard to plow and not friable in texture. Witch grass abounded everywhere, and bindweed had become well established in spots, including a corner of the garden.

The crops harvested in 1938 were hay and corn ensilage, following the practice used previously. The cornfield was, however, not seeded down after harvest to a grass hay mixture but plowed for spring harrowing and seeding to an annual hay mixture containing three legumes and two grains to be cut early.

The following April I hired a new foreman who showed willingness to try bio-dynamic methods. In looking for a man I found great difficulty, as the state college showed no interest in helping me get a man to employ what they evidently thought silly and "radical" practices. The local people also fought shy of what, being new to them, they regarded as nonsense. And so it developed that the question of labor and its management was to be my greatest problem. For this reason I am so glad to see the development of a Bio-Dynamic School\* under the able direction of Dr. Pfeiffer, since I believe that the furtherance of bio-dynamic farming in this country can come about more quickly through good basic training given to those who will manage farms either for themselves or others.

The story of my labor troubles is not interesting and certainly not unique. I have encountered untruthfulness, "shop-lifting" and attempted walkouts during the busy haying season.

The net result of the 1940 season's work is that although we harvested about three hundred bushels of grain and put up enough grass-corn ensilage to feed all winter we are short of hay.

This sounds like a doleful story since I cannot point to great achievements in crops harvested after two and a half seasons of bio-dynamic farming. But now that I have shown the dark side, I am glad to speak of the benefits I know the bio-dynamic methods have brought.

To give an example: one field, across the road from our house, was planted to corn in 1937 after fertilizing with fairly raw manure. The witch grass almost displaced the corn, and while we harvested a fair crop (500 and 301 were both used), I decided that I would spend two or three years if necessary on that particular field to get rid of the witch grass. Also, I determined to improve the texture of the soil, which was lumpy and hard (it had been in sod for six or seven years).

That fall we planted winter rye, cut it green in 1938 and composted it to go back on this field. Then after cutting we plowed the field to a depth of about four inches and harrowed twice with a spring tooth. The next spring we harrowed again and planted rye, oats, vetch, Canada field peas and broad beans (for the last we now substitute soy beans). This was cut for hay and fed out very well. This last season we grew oats on this field and harvested thirty bushels to the acre. There is little witch grass left, thanks to bio-dynamic practices, and the soil is friable and much easier to work.

The field of about ten acres which I mentioned as not having been turned for thirty-five years, we plowed in 1939 after helping the drainage by digging a narrow open ditch and using a tool called a mole to make lateral drains to the

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\* Kimberton Farms Agricultural School, R. R. 2, Phoenixville, Penna.

ditch. We spread well rotted bio-dynamic manure at about twelve loads to the acre over six of the ten acres, which we planted to corn. The balance was not fertilized and was planted to buckwheat. Spraying with 500 and 501 was done, as it was each year on all the tillable land.

This corn was so slow to start that I was ashamed to look at it, but during that summer's drought it never wilted, as did all the corn around, and in the end produced a good crop. In the corn we had planted navy beans, which yielded a fair quantity. In quality, however, the beans were unusually uniform and excellent for baking. And the buckwheat did well.

All this was produced on land which the natives thought would produce nothing! This last year we grew mostly soy beans on this piece, cut a good deal green for ensilage and matured some, though the exceptionally short season did not allow a good yield of mature beans.

In general, I can see a decided improvement in the texture of the soil all over the farm, more earthworms in parts, better drainage and better ability to retain moisture. The most pronounced bio-dynamic results show in the vegetable and flower gardens, the shrubbery around the house, and even in some of the old trees.

In connection with the old maples, I had a surprise in store for a Bartlett tree expert. After having done some work in trimming dead wood and recommending a feeding program for the maples, he came up the next year to get more work. Looking up at the maples—which actually did show better color in the foliage—he said, "Well, I am glad to see the results our feeding has produced." I gently let him down (since we had done no feeding), but didn't think he was open to a discussion of the bio-dynamic methods.

From the first, we have had reasonably good vegetables (as any home grown are when compared with market bought), but last year we noticed a decided improvement in quality. Our older children came home from school in time for servings of early peas and all agreed they had never eaten any as good. This also was the opinion of a few friends to whom we sold our surplus. Not only were the peas wonderful, but also the beans, corn and most notably, beets. The last had never interested me before, undoubtedly because I had never tasted them as grown bio-dynamically, but they became last year almost my favorite vegetable. We grew them too large, yet even so they were tender and sweet and bright red all through.

I can also say that our flower garden showed the merit of bio-dynamic methods. In its third season, on soil none too good originally, it displayed brilliant colors, profuse and large blooms.

In no year did we have any great trouble with pests. In this connection, I am thoroughly sold on the combatting of aphids by planting nasturtiums near infested trees or shrubs. The practice has proved to be efficacious for me in the control of both green and woolly aphids in several cases.

And finally, I must not forget to refer again to the remarkable success attending application of the bio-dynamic type of care for the dairy herd, which in combination with use of the Weleda remedies resulted in the wiping out of Bang's disease.

With these cheering developments noted, I close my brief history of the conversion of Friendly Hills Farm toward complete bio-dynamic operation. Emphatically, my experience with bio-dynamic methods is that they represent the best in farming and gardening practices, and will produce, in the long run, results well worth the effort demanded.