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## Liberty Hill Farm

*Bob and Beth Kennett*

*Rochester, Vermont*

[www.libertyhillfarm.com](http://www.libertyhillfarm.com)

Liberty Hill Farm, located in the heart of the Green Mountains in Vermont, is a working dairy, agri-tourism and farm vacation facility. Owned by Beth and Bob Kennett, the home is a 150-year-old, 18-room farmhouse with a big kitchen where everyone congregates for a 6:00 p.m. evening meal and an 8:00 a.m. breakfast. Guests are encouraged to participate in the day-to-day operation of the 80-cow dairy farm. The agri-tourism farm has been in operation for 20 years and is located three hours from Boston and six hours from New York City. In 2002, more than 1,200 guests learned about farm life.



They are open for business year-round and have guests everyday of the year, on all holidays except Christmas day. Customers in the winter downhill ski on the nearby mountains, or participate in cross country skiing and enjoy learning about maple sugaring. Spring and summer guests visit the numerous nearby attractions or enjoy golfing, swimming or river activities. The fall foliage season provides visitors spectacular views outside the windows, as well as the opportunity to hike. Guests can feed the baby calves, help the hay crew, play with kittens in the hayloft or try their hand at cleaning the barn stalls.

### **Motivation**

In the early 80s, Beth had a neighbor who had taken in skiing guests during the winter months. The demand for homes and places for skiers to stay was growing and skiers coming to the area were looking for places to stay. "My neighbor came to me in early 1984 and told me, you need to do this to help out the finances for the dairy farm," said Beth.

At that time, as now, dairy prices were severely depressed and high interest rates on the farm Beth and Bob had purchased in 1979 was putting a severe strain on the farming operation. As Beth recalls, “I had two small children and no options for employment in town that would net any money after the babysitter was paid. I decided to give it a try. The local inn in the area gave us their overflow for the first few years which helped us. We also made the decision to try to be a year-round facility. At that time, people said it will never work. All the facilities at that time only had guests in the winter.”

The first guests to the farm were in the spring of 1984. It was a blended family of five kids from New Jersey. For many years the family returned to the farm every summer, and the couple, now near retirement, recently purchased a weekend house close to the Kennetts.

### **Business Development**

From these first guests the business has grown steadily. The first few years of business the business was lucky to cover expenses, and by 1993 the business had grossed more than \$25,000. Last year Liberty Hill Farm had more than \$100,000 in gross sales and had more than 1,200 guests. Most home-stays only include breakfast in the fee, but guests to Liberty Hill Farm are provided two meals, dinner and breakfast.

Beth indicated she was at a bed and breakfast meeting and was listening to the speaker advise owners that they needed to find their niche in the bed and breakfast business. “He looked right at me and said, and some of you have a built in niche like Beth. She has a farm.” It was at that time Beth said she realized she had found her niche—a farm experience for children, families and individuals who want to connect with agriculture.

“I’ve had parents tell me they give their children a choice of vacation options, Disneyworld or Liberty Hill and the kids want to come here and feed the animals,” said Beth. More than 80 percent of the Kennett’s guests are families with children.

Beth indicated one family from the Bronx told her after their 4<sup>th</sup> of July visit that their children had a very unique experience. “My kids had a chance to participate instead of being spectators.” Over their 4<sup>th</sup> of July visit, the family had helped to decorate the Liberty Hill Farm float for the Rochester Celebration and had ridden in the parade instead of being on the sidelines. At the end of the day, the guests and Kennett family watched as the city children created and performed a play before the families all enjoyed a 4<sup>th</sup> of July bonfire. The father indicated that in the city his children only get to watch. They had never been in a parade, and don’t have the opportunity to be the entertainment.



Since that comment, it has caused the Kennetts to reflect on farm life and to create an environment for kids to be involved. “It is something you take for granted on a farm. If you want a baseball game, you get a bunch of kids together in the neighborhood and have a game. In the cities it can be difficult to create an environment for that to happen,” commented Beth.

### **Market Access**

Within six hours of the Kennett’s farm there are 60 million people. Beth has used a number of marketing tools to attract guests to their farm. The Web site, [www.libertyhillfarm.com](http://www.libertyhillfarm.com), attracts an increasing number of visitors. They had numerous interviews in many of the major newspapers in the country, including the *New York Times*, *Boston Globe*, *USA Today*, *Washington Post*, *Plain Dealer*, and were featured on TV shows such as the *Today Show*, *Good Morning America*, *Boston Chronicle*, and various cable programs. Liberty Hill Farm has been written about in magazines ranging from *Gourmet*, *Yankee*, *Family Fun*, *Woman’s Day*, *Parents*, and *Arthur Frommer’s Travel Guide*.



“We have been very blessed to receive publicity,” said Beth. However, the largest number of guests learn about the farm from their friends. Every year the farm attracts new visitors and many of the guests come back year after year and book years in advance to guarantee the farm will have rooms at the times they want to come. Beth also indicated many families will book three to four stays a year, so they can experience the various activities and seasons.

Beth also helped to organize the trade group Vermont Farms! Association, which is a group of agri-tourism facilities that collectively market the farm experience. Beth is currently president of that group, which received the first agri-tourism grant in the United States to market the concept of agri-tourism. The grant was used to help create collective marketing materials, hire a coordinator and develop a revolving loan which agri-tourism proprietors can access for upgrading their facilities in order to accommodate the public. Many of the farmers interested in agri-tourism need to adapt their facilities in order to provide the proper environment for both the guests and the farm animals.

### **Critical Steps**

Recently the Kennetts have hired help in the busy months to help clean rooms, wash linens, etc. This has allowed Beth to focus on meeting the needs of her customers by helping them find things to do in the area, arranging for tours, stops and answering their questions. This focus has helped them meet their customer’s needs and increases both positive word-of-mouth referrals and also keeps guests coming back year after year.

Another critical step was determining their market niche and then actively promoting the concept. “Many people see us as their family away from home. We have some guests who are not from the United States and have asked us if we could be their children’s ‘adopted’ family,” said Beth. In a world that can at times seem impersonal and unconnected, the Kennetts have extended their hospitality to make people feel welcome.

### **Barriers of Success**

Establishing an agri-tourism facility requires that you know and are in compliance with all federal, state and local regulations and laws. For this type of business they are extensive and include compliance ranging from fire codes and health regulations to adequate and appropriate bonding and liability coverage.

### **Unexpected Problems**

Before embarking on an agri-tourism business, Beth suggests you have to be comfortable with who you are, as well as secure in your family relationships. “How you discipline your children, how you and your spouse treat each other, and day-to-day interactions and emotions are always on display. You have to ask yourself if you can live in that type of fish bowl. Agri-tourism may not work for every family,” she advises.

### **Success or Failure**

Beth commented that without the agri-tourism business at Liberty Hill Farm, they would not have been able to stay on the farm and continue in the dairying business. It has allowed Bob to stay on the farm and involve their son David to return to the dairy business. However, Beth said beyond the positive economic aspect of the business, their horizons and experiences have been expanded. “We have had dinner guests from every continent, and every walk of life. This business gives us a chance to learn and also an opportunity to tell our story about legacy, environmental stewardship and life on the farm,” said Beth.

### **Industry/Market Changes**

Agri-education and agri-entertainment are growing and will continue to grow as Americans look to connect back to a community and the security of knowing where their food comes from. The Kennetts say they will continue to provide for that market and are working through the Vermont Farms! organization to grow that market. There is synergy in having many farms involved in agri-tourism. “The more we have here for people to do and experience will help to encourage more visitors to come,” said Beth.

The Vermont Farms! organization is working to expand the marketplace by providing year round experiences. They will be promoting a Christmas Bed and Breakfast and Maple Open House in the coming months to encourage customers to visit them.

### **Lessons Learned**

Beth said, “Be WHO YOU ARE! Celebrate Farm Life! That is why people come. They can find a bed and a meal, or an entertainment activity anywhere. They make the decision to drive the extra miles and make the extra effort because they want to be a part of something!! Share your world with them!!”

“And, you have to be organized, efficient and flexible. All qualities that you need on a farm already!! Partner with those around you. You never know who your best partner might be; it could be the golf course, the bike shop, the artist colony. The opportunities are limitless. Always be ready to talk about your farm. Most importantly –Be a Good Neighbor!! You do want the kids at the gas station and the local store to encourage people to visit you when they are asked for directions to your farm! Give to your community. The friends you make both near and far are the best reward in life!”

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