

THE MAGAZINE of *SPLENDID HOMES and GARDENS* • MAY/JUNE 2015

# DESIGN

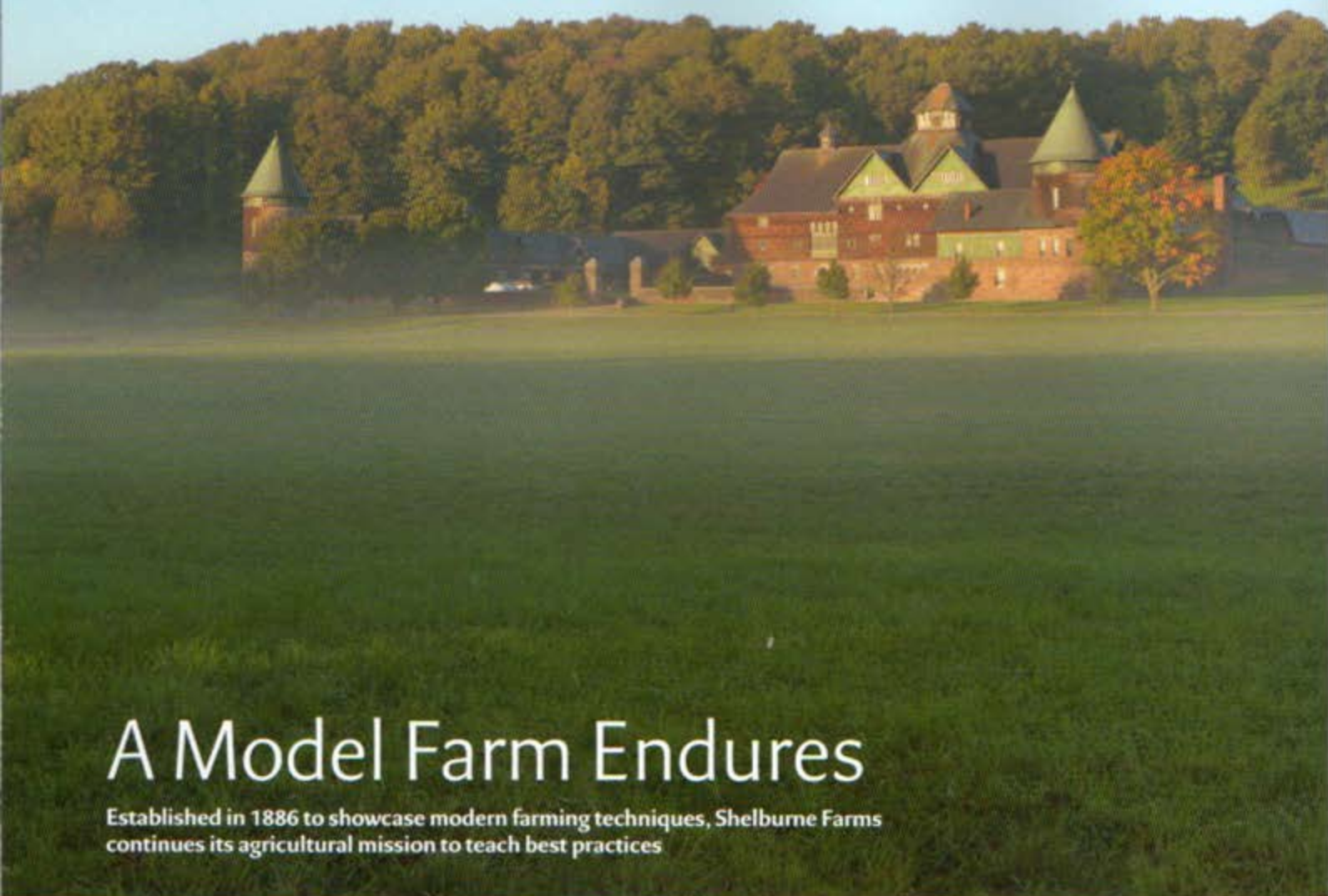
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# A Model Farm Endures

Established in 1886 to showcase modern farming techniques, Shelburne Farms continues its agricultural mission to teach best practices

WRITTEN BY REGINA COLE • PHOTOGRAPHED BY SUSAN TEARE

**A** toddler leans against the wire mesh of an animal pen in the central courtyard of the Farm Barn at Vermont's Shelburne Farms, straining to get a closer look at the suckling piglets arrayed against the flank of an enormous 2-year-old sow. She moves on to investigate the neighboring goat pen, passes a chicken coop, and reaches out to touch a lamb held in the arms of Rachel Cadwallader-Staub, manager of the Children's Farmyard, just one of the programs Shelburne Farms designed to educate 21st-century city and suburb dwellers about all things agricultural.

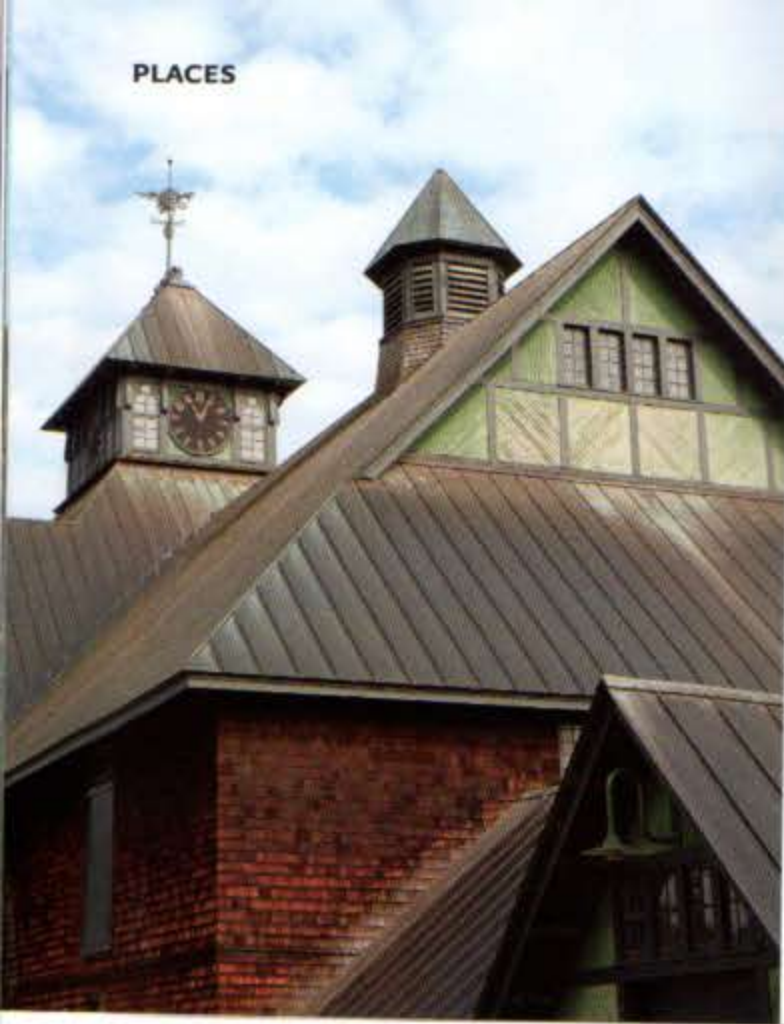
At the moment, the lamb is a teaching tool, but "when he's done with his educational work at the end of the season, this lamb becomes food," Cadwallader-Staub tells the group of children pressing close.

**THE FARM BARN**, a massive half-timbered, turreted, and gabled Queen Anne structure organized around a courtyard (ABOVE), is the centerpiece of Shelburne Farms, whose educational mission includes putting today's children in touch with farm animals (RIGHT).

"Wouldn't you rather eat lamb stew when you know that the animal had a lovely life being petted and cared for?" she asks. Small heads nod as she points to the egg a hen just laid. "That will be someone's breakfast tomorrow."

William Seward and Eliza (Lila) Vanderbilt Webb, who founded Shelburne Farms in 1886, might be astonished to see strangers —





150,000 a year, from all over the world — stream into their rural retreat to pet farm animals, participate in workshops, watch cheese being made, jog on lakeside trails, buy fresh bread and organic produce, and spend a night or two as pampered guests in their home-turned-inn. William, who was commonly called by his middle name, had trained as a doctor; Lila was a granddaughter of “Commodore” Cornelius Vanderbilt and inherited a fortune when her father died in 1877. The New York couple bought almost 4,000 acres of farmland in Shelburne, Vermont, along the shore of Lake Champlain south of Bur-



A CUPOLA FLANKED by ventilators (FACING PAGE, LEFT) crowns the four-story main block of the Farm Barn. Farm manager Rachel Cadwallader-Staub shows a visitor the Brown Swiss cows (FACING PAGE, RIGHT) that produce the milk for Shelburne’s prizewinning cheddar. The organic food sold in the Farm Barn courtyard (ABOVE LEFT) comes from the farm’s animals and produce. A tractor pulls a wagon loaded with visitors (ABOVE RIGHT) along one of the roads laid out by Frederick Law Olmsted.

lington to establish an ultimate Gilded Age country place. They wanted to entertain, pursue healthy outdoor activities, and enlighten Vermont farmers with the tenets of “scientific farming.” Seward, who left the medical profession for the Vanderbilt railroad business when he married Lila in 1881, was passionate on the subject.

“At the turn of the century, this was a

model farm,” says Shelburne Farms curator of collections Julie Eldridge Edwards. “They had the means to get the latest and best equipment, and they bred prizewinning livestock and horses.”

The Webbs engaged New York architect Robert Henderson Robertson, who designed a collection of buildings including the 75,000-square-foot Breeding Barn complex,



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## PLACES



**BROWN SWISS COWS** and *Sails*, an installation by local artist Nancy Winship Milliken, frame the view of the Inn at Shelburne Farms (ABOVE). Dairy farm manager Sam Dixon (LEFT) oversees a herd of 120 milking cows and 108 young calves. Market garden manager Josh Carter is in one of the year-round greenhouses (FACING PAGE, TOP), in which spinach, kale, and other hardy greens are grown. The half-timbered, brick-and-stucco Coach Barn (FACING PAGE, BOTTOM) is a sought-out venue for weddings and other events.

Old Dairy and Coach Barns, the monumental Queen Anne Farm Barn, and a rambling Shingle Style house at the lake's edge. Robertson brought in America's foremost landscape architect, Frederick Law Olmsted, whose design divided the estate into thirds: equal parts farmland, forest, and parkland. He created the meandering road system that provides stirring views of the barns, forests, fields, meadows, and the Adirondack Mountains across the lake.

At its height in the early 20th century,

Shelburne Farms was a vast enterprise designed not only to showcase the Webbs' wealth but also to lead the way to improved agricultural practices. But it was never profitable, and Lila and Seward's heirs struggled to keep it afloat.

In 1972, grandson Derick Vanderbilt Webb and his six children formed the non-profit Shelburne Farms Resources, now simply known as Shelburne Farms. Centered on 1,500 of the farm's original 3,800 acres, the enterprise began to offer school programs



and to make cheddar cheese from milk provided by the herd of Brown Swiss cows introduced by Derick in the 1950s. In 1987, Shelburne House was renovated and opened as The Inn at Shelburne Farms. Today, the non-profit, whose staff emphatically refuses to call it a museum, operates on a yearly budget of \$9 million, 70 percent of which comes from revenue streams such as the sale of cheese and income from the inn's rooms and restaurant. (Charitable contributions and grants fund the remaining 30 percent.)

An organic garden provides food for the inn and staff, with excess sent to the local farmers' market and to area food kitchens. Solar panels atop the Farm Barn and in the Solar Orchard provide half of the estate's electricity; whey, a cheese-making byproduct, is spread on the fields as fertilizer. The property has earned a National Trust for Historic Preservation Honor Award, and National Historic Landmark designation. Programs reach as far as China and Japan to forge partnerships for sustainability educa-

plants



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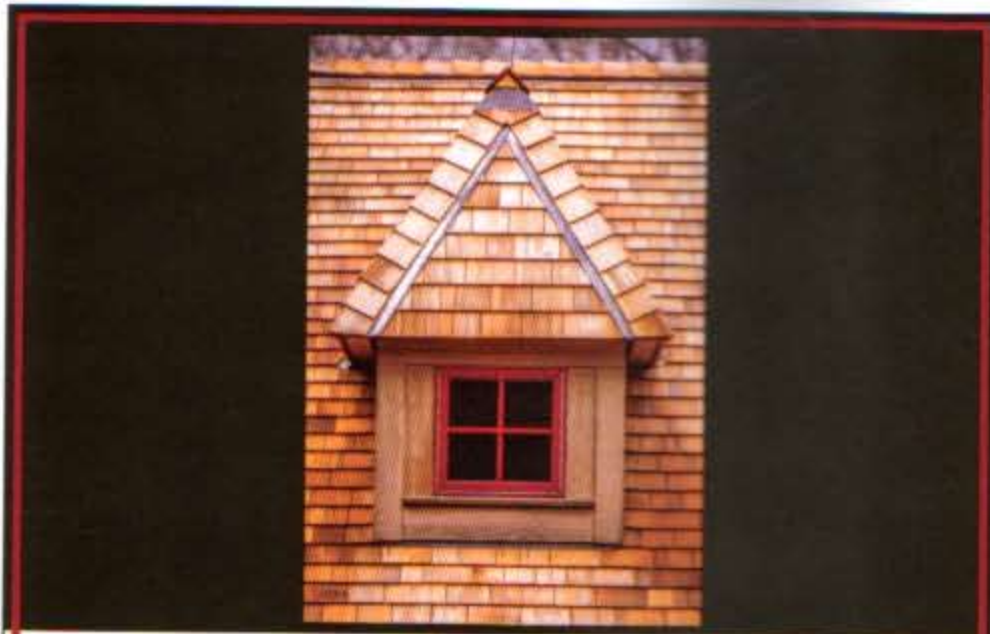


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### PLACES



THE BEAUTY OF the land is what first attracted city dwellers William Seward and Eliza (Lila) Vanderbilt Webb to the area. They built their home at the edge of Lake Champlain to make the most of the faraway sight of New York's Adirondack Mountains, but the property also has an expansive view of Vermont's Green Mountains (ABOVE).

tion, and the restoration of Lila Vanderbilt Webb's lakeside formal gardens has begun. The Coach Barn is a popular wedding venue, and during the school year, the Farm Barn is usually filled with children.

"Seward couldn't even give his horses away," Eldridge Edwards says. "He would be happy if he saw this today."

"It would be fun to have Lila and Seward ride through the property to see what we're doing," says Alec Webb, their great-grandson and president of the non-profit organization. "I think they would like to see how we continue with agriculture and innovation. And," he adds, "though it was their private property, I think they would like the fact that we're sharing the beauty of the place."

When Lila and Seward Webb created Shelburne Farms 129 years ago, there was considerable local resentment as the landscape changed from a network of small, independent farms to a vast model farm created with well-intentioned but paternalistic goals. But as farms have disap-



### Say Cheese

Children and adults line up to take turns milking one of the Brown Swiss cows that descended from the herd Derick Webb established in the early 1950s.

"The breed is docile, adapted to a wide climate range, and their milk is especially suited to cheese making," says dairy farm manager Sam Dixon. "Eighty percent of our milk goes to cheese."

Since 1980, Shelburne Farms has produced a raw-milk cheddar cheese that consistently wins prizes in national competitions. About 170,000 pounds produced annually break down into cheese aged from between six months to three years, plus a smoked and a clothbound version.

"How the pH, moisture, and salt play off against each other is what determines how long each batch will be aged," says cheese operations manager Tom Gardner.

Shelburne Farms sells its Farmhouse Cheddar online at [store.shelburnefarms.org/category/cheddar](http://store.shelburnefarms.org/category/cheddar), via mail order, and at the Welcome Center and Farm Store. It is also available in shops such as Formaggio Kitchen in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and at select Whole Foods markets throughout the region.

peared from the Vermont landscape, their vision and their descendants' efforts to keep it current are what keep this huge, beautiful tract of land operating as a farm. Perhaps, via the influx of all those strangers from around the world, their goals have been realized after all. ■

📍 Shelburne Farms, 1611 Harbor Road, Shelburne, VT, 802-985-8686; [shelburnefarms.org](http://shelburnefarms.org). Open May 9 to October 18. Admission: Adults, \$8, seniors, \$6, children 3 to 17, \$5. Free to members, Shelburne residents, and children under 3.

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