

Hank Bosma by Carol Masiello

If you want my opinion, and maybe you don't, the best people to have a conversation with are farmers. They don't care if you are impressed by them and they aren't particularly impressed by you- what a wonderful balance. No twenty dollar words or long speeches, they are as utilitarian in their dialogue as they are in their lifestyle. I enjoy being with them because I throw aside the city-raised love of glitz and instead I wrap myself in the warmth of their reality. I know I could never do the work they have chosen to do and I admire them for doing it. I do not insult them with long soliloquy's about the honesty of their labor and how they are at "one with nature". Heck, they work hard, the work is dirty and there are few rewards. But they can trace the roots of their profession back to the origins of humankind, how many of us can say that?

My most recent encounter with a farmer was like all the others, educational, enjoyable and an exercise in dry wit. I had the pleasure of meeting Hank Bosma and once again I was immersed in tales of days gone by. I was the student and he was the teacher, and as always I came away richer for the encounter. Let me introduce you a true Renaissance Man.

Most of us have driven up West Harford Avenue past Edgewood Golf Course and Bosma's Hoop Barn at least once. Maybe some of you have even played golf there (play all day for \$5) or stopped in at the antique flea market. Both are landmarks and the story behind the barn and its dairy farm is a typical New England story- with a creative twist. Hank is the creativity behind that twist; he is more like a James Dean rebel than your typical farmer. He has taken a few shortcuts and a few forks in the road along his life's journey. I was with Hank a few days before his 80th birthday and I learned the history of this wonderful part of the heritage of the Blackstone Valley. Like all the stories I hear, I can't wait to share it with you.

The original farm, where the barn is, was purchased by Hank's father Gilbert Bosma. Gilbert was of Friesian Dutch decent like most of the dairy farmers along the hills of Hartford Avenue, but he was distinct, he was the only Dutchman to live in Douglas. The Friesian Dutch came to the area by virtue of the noble cow. John Whitin, owner of Whitin Machine Works in Whitinsville, owned the "hundred acre lot" on Sutton Street. The land was poor and rocky, not at all suitable for farming, so Whitin had his mill hands clear the land and build the wonderful stone wall that runs along the roadside. After the land was cleared, the lot was used as a hobby farm for the farm's registered herd of Jersey cattle. A case of tuberculosis wiped out the herd forcing Mrs. Whitin, (who now ran the farm after her husband's death in 1886), to import Holstein-Friesian cattle from the Netherlands. A Friesian man named John Bosma came with the herds to help get the cattle settled and get the farm on its way. Mr. Bosma liked the land and countryside so much he sent for family and gradually the group expanded with more Friesian Dutch coming over. By WW2, nearly

65% of the privately owned farms (not company) were in the hands of the Dutch farmers. The Dutch became a vital part of the agricultural community in the Whitinsville, Uxbridge area.

Gilbert was born in this country and worked on the Bangma farm which was started by Hendrick Bosma who sold to Louis Bangma. After a few years Gilbert left and purchased a farm in 1926 from Jasper De Jong who was the custodian for the public schools in Douglas. Hank was born that year and four sisters would come along, all while the farm continued to prosper. It wasn't easy being the only boy in a farming family, the bulk of the hard work was his and his alone. Bosma's Dairy was a typical dairy farm; they peddled their own milk and grew what they needed on their farm.

The hallmark hoop barn that we admire today was not original to the farm. The design was from a plan in a book his father bought and construction was begun in 1938. The logic of the round top design was that the loose hay would seep into the shape of the barn. Gilbert hired four Dutchmen from Whitinsville to build the barn; the boss carpenter made \$1.25 an hour and the help \$.75 cents an hour. When it came time to construct the second floor there was a small dispute between the head carpenter and Gilbert. The carpenter said it was impossible to build a round top but Gilbert said it could be done. So Gilbert and his brother worked with the men on the second story and the carpenter sulked. He did not speak to Gilbert for one month, every week he went and got paid and never said a word. In spite of the carpenter's misgivings the barn was built and still stands today, I guess Gilbert was right. The barn is so sturdy it survived the Hurricane of 1938. Hank was coming home from school around 3:40 and the wind was blowing fiercely, there were trees falling everywhere on Main Street. By the time he got home there were no lights and he remembers his mother was ironing. His uncle came home at 4:15 from working at the shop and the wind blew so hard the doors on the new barn blew out. They had to milk the cows by hand that night because there was no power. Fortunately the only serious damage they received from the storm was a tree falling on the house, and happily no one was hurt.

Gilbert was the first dairyman on the hill to pasteurize milk and in addition to peddling his milk, he also sold to the A and P in Whitinsville. Hank started to peddle milk for the farm when he was 17 or 18 years old as was his duty as a farmer's son. Going beyond the culture of being a farmer's son, Hank was also the son of a Dutchman. He was raised in the tradition of the Dutch and was expected to follow along the traditional routes of the Dutch culture. Dutch families went to the Pleasant Street Church and mingled within their own group, keeping the old ways from the old country. Dutch had jobs in the shop in the foundry and "Dutch married Dutch". Sundays were spent in church all day and you did nothing, not even read a newspaper on Sundays. This was a little too much for Hank. This is where those taking the forks on the road began.

Hank attended school in Douglas that is after getting out at 5 am to do his chores. As he grew up and turned into a strong young man he played softball in the Dutch league. He was a leftie and his team played twice a week against both town and mill teams. Schuster's was the mill for Douglas and they would bring in college boys as ringers to play on the team. The mill hired them as part time help so they would be eligible to play. Schuster's wanted to win at any cost, and cost them it did. The college boys got paid \$5 for a single, \$10 for a double, \$15 for a triple and \$20 for a home run. Those must have been exciting games, watching the ringers go up against a team of large Dutch farm boys. You can picture the mill bosses sitting in the stands smoking their large cigars watching "their boys" try to out hit and out wit the locals. The mill would keep an eye on their ringers, or as Hank said, "they kept a finger on them" so Hank would give them rides in his pick up truck. His life was full of softball, candlepin bowling and just growing up in a small close knit community.

Gilbert bought the golf course in 1944 but with the war no one had gas for their cars, so no one could play golf. His father turned the course into a farm to grow the hay and corn feed for the dairy. Gilbert died at the age of 50 and Hank, being the only boy, had to help raise the family. He ran the farm and took care of his sisters and mother. But this did not deter him from being the independent thinking young man he had been up to that date. He smiles when he refers to himself as the "black sheep" of the Dutch community. Being Dutch back then meant adhering to the rules of the Dutch culture and that was not to this man's liking. Most Dutch snuck into the movies in Worcester on a Sunday so no one would know they were breaking the rules. He, bold as brass, went to the movies in Whitinsville. I can picture his lanky frame swaggering in making sure that all noticed him breaking the rule. And horrors of horrors, he peddled milk on Sundays! The elders came to his house on a few occasions and tried to show him the error of his ways and get him to conform to the Dutch ways. They wanted him to sell some of his land; he had too much for a young man to run alone. He should marry a good Dutch woman and the litany went on and on. They were kind men who wanted the best for him, but Hank knew what he wanted and it wasn't what they were preaching. He married all right, but it was an independent thinking business woman named Marlene. She was English and French and not at all like the typical Dutch woman.

Farming is hard work and it doesn't pay a king's ransom. You work 12 hours a day just to keep the farm afloat. You are up at five and peddle milk all the while you hope to get paid at the end of the week. Hank kept the dairy in business till the 1970's but then sold the business and cows to Stewart Baker. He told me a very funny story about the fickle nature of people. He had sold the business to Baker but continued to deliver Baker's milk in his old bottles. One day he ran out of Bosma bottles so used some Baker bottles. A week or so later a woman took him on the side and complained that the milk just didn't taste right. She had noticed over the past two weeks it was not as good, and

that coincide with Hank changing to Baker's bottles. The same milk mind you, but just in a different bottle. He delivered her the milk in Bosma bottles and she was happy, the milk tasted better.

After selling the dairy he turned the golf course back into a golf course. Hank needed two jobs to support the family and all that land because at the time he went into the golf business, there were plenty of nine hole golf courses; but now there is only one, his. Talk to anyone around these parts and they remember playing golf in the summer and tobogganing on those beautiful hills in the winter. Adults stop in every now and then and talk to Hank and introduce themselves as the children who came of age on his land. Each one has a story of how Hank touched their lives in a particular way and they are grateful to him for just being there. One summer there was a terrible thunderstorm and Hank looked out at the golf course and there was this sad kid standing under a tree. Hank went out and grabbed the boy and told him to wait in the shelter of the house, darn fool standing out there under a tree in that storm. Well, didn't that boy grow up and make the trip back to thank Hank for what he did that day. I know my own son has great memories of being in high school and playing up at the course during summer vacations. His favorite time was at the end of the season when Hank would give some of the boys' golf clubs that were left hanging around the place. Those clubs have a place of honor in my basement and they are part of the legacy that is Hank Bosma.

So what does our Renaissance Man do to occupy himself now? For one thing he collects the fees for the golf course; he likes that because people pay up front not like in the old days of peddling milk. He mows the lawns of the golf course and goes to the dump twice a week. Sounds pretty tame but if I know Hank Bosma, he does it his own way and on his own terms.

The house he lives in with Marlene was moved from Linwood. Next to Bonnie Brooks get it for 5,000 and 5000 to move it. Bank would not give him money to build one but they gave him money to move one.