

Is This Country Living? Ask the Cows



Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

RURAL ROULETTE Contestants put their money on a square of land, and a cow named Silly takes it from there

By MICHAEL POLLAN

CORNWALL, Conn.
MY town's annual agricultural fair fell on the Saturday after the attacks on New York and Washington, and I think everyone was relieved when the selectmen decided to go ahead with the event. The turnout, 500 people at least, was huge for a town our size, all of us more pleased than usual to come together as a community.

There was plenty of talk about the events in New York, though if you listened carefully you could hear two different strains. Cornwall is full of transplanted New Yorkers (not to mention weekenders) who retain close ties to the city, their talk was all about who they knew and how difficult it was to get through to anyone on the phone. In the map of their lives, New York City is still in the middle. The true locals live at a greater psychological distance from New York.

Their experience of Sept. 11 seemed more national, mediated mainly by television and newspapers, rather than by the

telephone. Same town, two different maps.

In a sense, the Cornwall Agricultural Fair is all about those maps. It is one of a handful of semihooky annual rituals we have (the Memorial Day bridge dance and frog jumping contest are two others) to help people here work out exactly what sort of place we live in. My guess is, we need the fair and the cow-chip raffle that tops off the event, because exactly where we live isn't self-evident any more.

Is Cornwall the country? To the eye it still looks pretty New England countryish, a hilly patchwork of forests and open fields in northwestern Connecticut studded with Holsteins, though over the last few years many of the farms have been bought by former city people like me. Most of us still keep the fields open, but mainly for aesthetic reasons. And if the old dairy farm I live on produces anything these days, it's mostly books and paintings (my wife is a landscape painter).

Baird's, the old general store, still has a creaky wooden floor, but it now sells free-range chickens. And though the big wheel of Cheddar still sits on its ancient maple

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chopping block, these days you can also get fresh mozzarella for \$6.99 a pound

But Cornwall isn't an incipient suburb yet either. We're a solid two hours from the city, too far to commute, so the suburban tide hasn't reach our shores. So Cornwall is neither the country nor the suburbs. Where then exactly do we live? We live in a town that holds an agricultural fair each fall — something that doesn't happen in Pelham, N.Y., say, or Menlo Park, Calif.

Curiously, Cornwall didn't hold an agriculture fair until we no longer had much agriculture to speak of; this year's edition was only the 10th. What competition there is is really among gardeners, not farmers.

Fortunately, there are still a couple of working farms left in town to lend the fair a bit of agricultural cred. This means the hayride wagon is pulled by an ancient John Deere, and there are also a pair of actual cows to perform, if that's the right word, in the cow-chip raffle. A cow-chip raffle, in case you haven't come across one, is a fund-raising event (in our case for the Volunteer Fire Department) consisting of a fenced-in field divided into

1,024 squares, two cows (in our case, Zora, a bony Holstein, and Silly, a compact Jersey) and a keenly anticipated cowpat. Think of it as a slow, rectangular form of roulette, with the vicissitudes of the bovine digestive system in the role of Lady Luck. Five dollars buys you one square, and if Zora or Silly happens to relieve herself on yours, you leave \$1,000 richer. No,

urination doesn't count.

It probably sounds a lot more exciting than it is, though each fall just about everyone in Cornwall buys at least one square and turns out in the field next to the town hall to wait and wait, and wait, and wait.

Twenty minutes spent waiting for a cow to defecate is not like any other 20 minutes in your life. Watching paint dry is allegro by comparison.

Unfortunately this year the cows took their sweet time. It was more than a half hour before Zora moseyed over to a square not far from the center (No. 610) and dropped an indisputable bull's-eye. That fact is important, because if the cowpats overlap two or more squares, it falls to the judges to determine the winner — a process that can slow things down even further. (The rules say the material must then be divided up and weighed, a procedure the selectman who serves as one of Cornwall's cowpat judges, Gordon Ridgway, will tell you he does not relish.) Anyway, the judges trotted out onto the field, took a few evidentiary photographs, and announced that, since no one had bought Square 610, the prize would go to the owner of the square immediately to its north, as per the official rules.

That left the rest of us to drift back to our cars, the children disappointed not to have won, again, the grown-ups feeling pretty good, again, about living in a town that holds a cow-chip raffle and a traditional agricultural fair, even if the tradition is only 10 years old.

And yet this year, I couldn't shake the sense that our September ritual, while it may look like a pure expression of rural values, in fact is an expression of something newer. A cow-chip raffle is a ritual of exur-



TENT SHOW Participants in an exurban agricultural fair.



Photographs by Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times

PLACE YOUR BETS A Holstein named Zora eventually performed in the annual cow-chip raffle.

ban life. The exurb has risen up in response to the suburbs, proposing yet another marriage between country and city.

Even the motto of the event — "organic gaming at its best" — sounds to me like an urban conceit, and the raffle itself a somewhat citified idea of country whimsy.

In this corner of Connecticut, we're drawn to the idea of the country, but not the reality of having to make a living off the land. We are inventing traditions to unite us, something that is neither country nor suburb but somehow straddles the two. You have to look carefully to see the changes taking place. But down at the end of

dirt roads you can find risk arbitrageurs working in trading rooms wired to Wall Street. The roads aren't paved, because if we obliterate the countryside we risk the sort of suburbanism we are hoping to escape.

Whether this new marriage can hold is really the big question around here. We still don't know what this new urban-rural culture will look like, exurbia doesn't yet have its Cheevers and Updikes. What it does have are these semihooky annual rituals by which we affirm our fealty to the idea of country and give thanks there are still cows enough, and time, for people to place their bets, and wait.



THE TENSION MOUNTS For the \$5 raffle, there are 1,024 squares plotted on the fenced-in field and two cows (the compact Jersey named Silly, taking her time, is in the background) but only one winner.