

Lakeside dairy farmers offer a holiday of wholesome cooking, country air and relaxation

Farm vacationers come from around the world

By Scott Russell

"Did you hang those sheets on the line?"

Florence Ball, an Ontario Vacation Farm Association (OVFA) member, had to smile when a young Michigan woman, visiting her 100-acre Lakeside dairy farm, asked her that question.

Mrs. Ball had just returned from the clothes line behind her white, wood-slat house set back along a tree-lined laneway from a gravel road east of Highway 19.

"We never do that in Ann Arbor," the young woman said.

Florence and Willis Ball, owners-operators of Balmoral Farm, welcomed the woman and her husband last fall. They were the Ball's first farm vacationers.

Now one of the 93 Ontario vacation farms which welcomes more than 5,000 visitors from around the world each year, the Balls have boarded guests from the United States and England.

"I wanted to do this for 20 years," Mrs. Ball said, sitting back in her modest living room with a cool breeze rushing across the plush backyard and into the room through a screen door.

"I figured if I wanted to do anything in my life, I'd better start now."

One reason she wanted to make Balmoral into a vacation farm was her hope of restoring the good feeling she had in her teenage years living in Woodstock with her family.

Her father owned an 18-room house and coach house on a three-and-a-half-acre lot. One summer, several cyclists came

from London to see her brother.

"They said, 'Why not make this place into a Canadian youth hostel.' And they did. I have many happy memories of the people we met from all over the world," Mrs. Ball said.

She said she thought it would be fun to have visitors again, for her children.

Another thing that spurred the Balls to join the association was their lack of time to vacation. Running a dairy farm is a full-time, all-year-long operation. So, the Balls thought, we will have people in to have some fun.

Also, the fact that extra money can be earned while remaining in the home appealed to them. And, "you're in the home if you family needs you."

Household improvements too not only make guest's stays more enjoyable, but makes family living more comfortable.

"You can't lose," Mrs. Ball said.

Most farm vacationers are city people. They come to enjoy the peace and quiet. They come for a relaxed, informal and inexpensive holiday. But, as Mrs. Ball points out, a farm vacation can also be as lively and exciting as one wants.

"They are free to help out at the barn, if they want to, or at haying time, they can sling bales."

Last fall, their youngest son Kenneth's goat had four kids. It was a great vacation for a Toronto woman who was bicycling from northern Ontario down to London. She was on the farm at the time of the births.

Farm vacationers don't expect resort accommodations, Mrs. Ball said. And they don't pay resort prices either, she emphasized. They expect good meals, comfortable beds and recreation.

The rooms are comfortable. Balmoral has three guest rooms with plenty of beds.

Fresh vegetables, home-raised beef, home baking, maple syrup and preserves populate Mrs. Ball's large kitchen table. "I cook wholesome meals. I don't dress them up too much."

And Susan Ball, their daughter, is a donut-baker.

"Preserves are a real treat for guests," Mrs. Ball said. She does all her own canning. "There is so much frozen nowadays."

Balmoral is just one of the 93 vacation farms across Ontario. The membership includes several diverse production farms, from dairy and livestock farms to self-sufficient farms and part-time operations.

There are northern bush farms and farms on islands which offer hunting and game fishing.

Association member farms spot the province from as far north as Cochrane, in the James Bay Frontier, to as far south as Rodney, near Lake Erie. Eastern vacation farms extend 18 kilometres east of Cornwall and to the west the farthest is on St. Joseph's Island.

Although, members welcome all-comers, some specialize in catering to unaccompanied children, handicapped persons or senior citizens.

Some farms offer separate accommodations, most bed-and-breakfast services, and some day tours.

Old people like farm vacations, Mrs. Ball said. Some have lived the country before and want to get out of their city apartments and into the breathing fields unbounded by city blocks. They want the hardy country air around them.



Willis Ball introduces their pet goat who recently gave birth to four kids, an event enjoyed by vacationers on their farm. The Lakeside dairy farm is one of 93 vacation farms in Ontario which offer homecooked meals, fresh, country air, relaxation and even experience helping out with chores. Photo by Scott Russell.

"It is a way to get out and avoid crowds of people," Mrs. Ball said.

Some farms pick up elderly vacationers who do not have the use of a car.

Speaking of Balmoral, Mrs. Ball said, "We get a lot of festival-goers because we are close to Stratford and close to the Windsor-Sarnia border."

Farm vacations around Stratford, however, are seasonal for the most part. May to October are busy times. And most people stay only three or four days.

To become a member of the OVFA, farm owners must obtain a safe-drinking water certificate, pass yearly association inspections and pay into a liability insurance program. There is a \$150 yearly association fee.

Mrs. Ball added, "You should love children, be outgoing, adaptable, value cleanliness..." She paused.

"Just be a good mom and dad."

The Balls have run Balmoral farm for 34 years. Willis Ball was born one mile from the farm.

The Balls have three sons, Stanley, Norman and Kenneth, and one daughter, Susan.



Willis and Florence Ball welcome vacationers to their Lakeside dairy farm. Photo by Scott Russell.