



The entrance to the Decker Farm in 2007.
Photo: Ray Smith.

DOT DECKER

by Raymond D. Smith, Jr.

Dot Decker lives in a gray raised ranch across from the big red barn on the Decker farm. Once one of four dairy farms on Phillis Bridge Road alone, by the mid 1980s it was one of the last large-scale dairy operations in Gardiner.

Dot's first question to me is, "Who are you? Do you do this all the time? Go out and investigate people?" and though her strong face is topped by neat swirls of white hair, one of her first statements is delivered in a first sergeant's parade ground voice; "No pictures!" it is a style that will become familiar during our interview. Close to Dot's large chair is a tray table with her reading materials, the phone, a glass of water and the TV remote. She suggests that I put my tape recorder on her table but warns, "That table has gone over three times in three days, so when I yell, grab your machine."

Dot Decker, it is quickly becoming clear, has conceded nothing to the infirmities of age; they irritate her, but she gives them short shrift. "Well, I can't walk, so I have this thing [a walker] . . . I have a nerve problem or something I'm taking medication for. And my fingers are kind of numb at the end." Her poor hearing she dismisses with, "I don't understand these ears."

Dot was born Dorothy Cryer, in Walden, and lived there for the first nineteen years of her life. "C, R, Y, E, R.," she spells out for me and adds, "I was told we were the only Cryers, the only family in the United States." Her grandparents lived in Kokomo, Indiana. Her mother had only one brother and Dot says, "People talk about their cousins. I don't know what they're talking about."

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Her father, William Cryer, worked in a knife factory by the upper dam in Walden. It was called the New York Knife Company. Dot believes that her grandfather on the Cryer side made knives in Sheffield, England. She says her father knew the knife business from his father, who knew the business from that father. She doesn't know how many generations it went back, but they all worked in the knife factories.

Asked about her childhood, Dot's immediate and firm response is, "I was a spoiled brat. That's all I can think of. I was spoiled. I was an only child. My father always wanted a boy. I knew that. My mother had another baby that died at birth after I was born, and there were no more. My mother and father both doted on me. Whatever I did was okay. When I look back . . . !" She smiles and shakes her head. "Boy, I should have had a few whackins. But I never got 'em." To illustrate, she reports having had a favorite cat. She'd

put it in the doll's carriage, hold it down and then walk up to the corner and turn around and come back. "Phew!" she says, "that cat had had enough of that. It wanted to get home."

When asked what her parents were like, Dot responds with a single word, "lovable," and says she wishes she had them back. Her father died at sixty-nine while her mother lived to be seventy-nine, and thought she would make it to eighty. "She thought it would be on the tombstone," Dot says, "eighty – and she thought she was the oldest in the family." Dot looks off and smiles, "She didn't know how old I could get. I can't believe it either." Dot was born in 1916, and is now 91.

Dot graduated from Walden High School in 1933 and soon after, met Dick Decker, also an only child. "He came up from Gardiner and I got caught up with him and that was it," she says. Dick Decker was young then, and couldn't drive at night, but his father had bought a new car, "a Rockne coupe, they called it. Black. Beautiful. Shiny." When she says this Dot is looking far away, back into a distant time; Studebaker Corporation built the Rockne in 1932 and 1933, and sold it for \$585 to \$735. That Rockne and a mutual friend, a fellow in Gardiner named Russell Hoffman, were what brought Dot and Dick together. Russell was apparently old enough to drive at night. "Russell got a girl and the four of us got in the coupe and away we went," Dot says. "I remember going to Orange Lake . . . and Maybrook.

"Tom Moran had that big hotel by the railroad station [in Gardiner]. The summer before we were married, Dick came and brought me . . . August the fifteenth, which is a big affair in the Catholic Church [Feast of the Assumption]. They had a supper and it was upstairs in Tom Moran's hall. I don't know if each person brought something, or just what. Of course there always were the farmers. Those women . . . *they* cooked! It was so nice. Since I was an only child, I wasn't used to all this. [Dick told me,] . . . and Dottie, don't talk about an Italian in Gardiner or an Irishman, 'cause they'd be related.' It was upstairs and we could dance. We could do our share of the bar, too!"

Grandmother Cryer didn't think much [of her marrying Dick Decker], but Grandmother Vernoye, "took him with open arms. Grandmother Vernoye was a sweet, lovable person." Dot thinks a moment. "I guess I'm more like Grandmother Cryer."

Dot soon took Dick to meet her Grandmother Cryer. "He'll be twenty the day before we get married," Dot said, and her grandmother exclaimed, 'He's not even a man yet!' 'We're going to get married anyway, Grandma,' Dot insisted. She says Grandmother Cryer didn't think much of it, but her mother's mother, Grandmother Vernoye, "took him with open arms. My Grandmother Vernoye was a sweet, lovable person." Dot thinks a moment. "I guess I'm more like Grandmother Cryer."

Dot married Dick Decker at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Gardiner on September 1st, 1935. "We moved to a house right over there." Dot points out the window and across the road towards the barn. "It's on the farm. The little house we lived in over there was like

the tenant house to this farm. My father-in-law lived over here. My mother-in-law died before Dick was ten years old, so I never met her. I have no idea what she was like. All I know is that she was a Donahue, and she was a sister to Betty Moran's father.

"All this land belonged to my father-in-law and then, of course, my husband got it. Now I finally divided it up and gave part to one son and part to the other. I want to see what they can do with it before I die. It was a hundred and some acres. I can't remember. So many things I can't remember. I'd ask Dick, but he's not here anymore. I used to depend on him. He knew the land better."

When I later speak with Dot's son, Gary, he shows me a circa 1947 aerial photo of the Decker farm and starts identifying things in the picture. "That's the old farmhouse my grandfather [Daniel Decker, 1884-1965] lived in; then they tore it down and put up the house my mother's in. See this truck? That's a '47 Chevy. I can remember driving that truck when I was a kid. There is a wooden silo. It rotted away and finally fell down and then we built the present silo. That's the kitchen on the back of the farmhouse. You stepped down to get into it."

Gary Decker is in the living room of the home behind the barn and across the road from his mother's house, where he and his wife, Bobbie, live. They enjoy a commanding, 180-degree view of the Shawangunk Ridge. Gary kicks off scuffed cowboy boots and sits in stocking feet, jeans, and checked shirt with his long legs stretched out.

"My grandfather, Daniel Decker, was the first one that had the farm. They moved here to the farm in 1919. My grandmother [Ella E. Donahue, 1872-1925] died when my father was ten. She was a very attractive lady. My grandfather raised my father himself. Pretty unheard of back then. My father was an only child and my mother was an only child. My father was a farmer. He was happy farming. Besides farming, he was a cattle dealer for a while when I was a kid – you know, trucked cows for a living, when my grandfather was still running the farm."



*An aerial view of the Decker Farm at 163 Phillies Bridge Road, circa 1947. (note 1947 Chevrolet truck in foreground).
Photo courtesy Gary Decker.*

When Daniel Decker died in 1965, Dick and Dot Decker sold the antiques in the old farmhouse and had an auction of the remaining furniture. That house was then torn down and the Deckers planned a new home. In the process, they had each selected different homes from Schoonmaker Homes, reconciled their home choice differences, and decided on electric heat at the suggestion of a friend who worked for Central Hudson. Dot explains, "He sort of talked us into it and we were never sorry. I have a thermostat in each room." At that time, Dot and Dick Decker had been living in a house on the west side of Old

Ford Road, near the corner with Phillies Bridge Road. That house has since been replaced by another.

Gary continues the story of the farm. "When my father took it over, he got more cows and built the milking parlor. He'd get up and milk at 3:30 in the morning and he'd milk at 3:30 in the afternoon and he'd never switch with daylight savings so he always milked at the same time. In winter it would be 3:30 normally, but in the summer, it would be like 2:30." Gary chuckled, ". . . and I'd be haying. That's how he did it," Gary says. From his chuckle, I am brought to understand that haying is back-breaking work, which somehow always fell to him. Today, Gary and Bobbie train horses at the farm so even with the cows long gone Gary continued to do the haying up until seven years ago.

Dot thinks back to the Gardiner of 1935, when she married and moved here. "There was John Moran's store, which is Majestic's up there now. I can remember when my mother and father would want to come see me in the middle of the winter. We had *snow* in those days. They could drive their car from Walden, up Route 208, into Gardiner and park at John Moran's store. Then my husband would go with the horse and sleigh . . . pick them up, put 'em in the sleigh and bring them the rest of the way down here. My mother wasn't used to the country life. My father wasn't either, really. My mother, she put up with it, just to see me. I had no washing machine at that time. I had a roof over my head. We used to get our dirty clothes all together and she took them back to Walden with her.



*Dick Decker in his early 70s, circa 1986.
Photo courtesy Gary Decker.*

"I think the post office was part of Moran's store. The small building on the north side was the post office, I think I remember. There had been a big fire in Gardiner before [1925], down the main street, where McKinstry's store was, which is an antiques shop today, and all through there, over where the creamery was. There was an undertaker's parlor there. Frank Moran, I think they told me, ran an undertaker's parlor down there. I don't know whether that got burned down or not. And the railroad station, because the railroad ran through Gardiner. And I remember the man that used to be the caretaker, or whatever you call them, Myron Wells. For years he was there. He lived up on Route 208."

Dot and Dick Decker had three children: Shirley, born in 1937, Greg in 1939 and Gary in 1941. "I lost one," Dot says, "She was two. I lost my little girl. Tubercular meningitis. Sixty-eight years ago. My second child was four weeks old. We had tough times." (Shirley is buried in the cemetery adjacent to Saint Charles Borromeo Church, where Dot and Dick got married.)

With America's entry into World War II Dot feared her husband might be drafted. She recalled that on December 7, 1941, "I had this little radio on my table and they announced about Pearl Harbor. I had a baby two months old and a son two and I said to

myself, what am I going to do? Are they going to take Dick? What am I going to do with two babies? He never did go. He said, 'Maybe the war will be over soon. But they need the farmers to feed everyone. So don't worry about it.' My kids were too young.

"We had rationing, but because we were on the farm, we could get food. I suffered most during the war, trying to get shoes for growing kids."

To my inquiry about bringing up her children she responded with a cock of the head, an incredulous look and a smile: "How were they? What a question to ask! [When Greg started school,] you make a sandwich with mayonnaise, a lot of lettuce; you don't need anything else. The other guy, he started school and he wanted peanut butter and jelly. Were they difficult? No, they were both lovable children. They were good. As far as problems, they were no trouble at all. One was quiet and more sedate than his brother and one was wild. Whew! You know how much a mother takes . . . and my mother took plenty from just one brat."

When I report to Gary that his mother thinks he and his brother, Greg, had been no problem as children, he looks at me for a long moment. "No, I don't think that was true," he says evenly.

Greg says his brother was very close to his Cryer grandparents. "When school got over for the summer, there was a Trailways bus that stopped at Ireland Corners. The day school was over, he was waitin' for that bus and he lived there [in Walden, with his grandparents] all summer. He came back the day before school started. I was with my father all the time on the farm. I enjoyed the farm." Greg now lives in Monticello, NY and trains horses at the tracks.

Gary continues, "There used to be a creamery right here in Gardiner, where Mario Milano has got his apartments [Creamery Village]. And then that closed, around 1950. The next creamery was in New Paltz at the Jewett Farm. We'd put the cans on the truck and take them. They went up a conveyer and they processed it. They didn't bottle it there. Then it got put into a tanker and it got shipped somewhere else [to be bottled]. That creamery closed about 1962. My father anticipated changes, so he put in a milking parlor – the only milking parlor in Gardiner."



The aptly named Dutch Belt cows. Photo courtesy Gary Decker.



*The Decker barn today.
Photo courtesy Gary Decker.*

The milking parlor enabled Dick to manage the cows on his own. According to Gary he had a local kid help him after school, at the end of the day, after he'd gotten everything done. Dick Decker had it set up so he could move the cows into the milking parlor, milk them, and move them out again without help.

The milking parlor was rectangular, with milking stalls in rows along the long sides and a pit between the two sets of milking stalls. The milker would stand in the pit, in easy reach of the cows' udders without stooping. Each milking stall had a gate parallel to the passageway. The gate was hinged in the middle so that as the cow came down the passageway, one side of the gate would be opened, blocking the passage and steering the cow into the milking stall. The cows got their grain at a feed bin up above while being milked, so they were motivated to enter. Gary

says his father, "never left that pit, while some thirty cows were being milked. He'd pull a rope, the door would open, and a cow would walk in." Once milking was complete, the other side of the gate would be opened and the cow would be headed toward the exit.

The process was repeated for another thirty cows and then for the ten or so cows in pens outside the barn. "My father did all the milking himself. He had his own system. It was a pretty good system for a single farmer. He was six feet two and a half inches and weighed 135 pounds. Strongest man I ever met.

"He'd open the stanchion and after the cow was milked, he'd release the bar and that cow would walk on out and back into the barn and 90% of the time, they went back into their [barn] stanchions." In the main barn, there were cow stalls with stanchions on either side of the barn with a wide center aisle and narrower aisles along the side walls. Once finished milking, Gary explained his father's next chore. "He had an ensilage cart, to get the silage [feed] out of the silo. He'd put a good fork – a big wide fork – of corn silage in front of each stanchion. After the cows were in, he'd walk in front of each stanchion and close it".

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Gary explains, "With a milking parlor, you didn't carry milk to the cans and dump it in the strainer anymore. It was all pipelines. When we got the bulk tank, the milk went up through a pipeline and right into the bulk tank, like a big hopper. That was refrigerated. And then the truck came, a big tank truck. They'd hook the hose on the bottom, pump it out into the truck and then it went away.

"In the wintertime, you had to have it plowed out – you know, on a bad snow day, so they could get it. We're lucky, 'cause we're right on the road. But you had to have a spot plowed that a tractor-trailer could go into. I think they came every other day.

Even the mucking out was simplified; the barn was equipped with a barn cleaner – a series of paddles attached to a continuous chain, powered by a large motor. The chain and paddles ran in a shallow trough along each side of the center aisle of the barn, across the front entrance, down the other side of the aisle, up a ramp at the back of the barn and out into a shed to the side, then back around to start over. The manure spreader was stationed underneath the end of the ramp. Manure was pushed out of the stalls, into the troughs, the motor started and the chain and paddles would pull the manure through the trough and up into the spreader. When the manure spreader was full, the manure would be spread in the fields. The chain and paddles took about an hour to make a complete circuit, after which, Dick limed the barn floor so it would smell nice.

“We owned ninety-nine acres that I know of at one time and then we pastured, we rented, more land than we owned” Gary pointed out the door, “Like this field out here [north of the barn] . . . that belonged to the Bonaguras. They owned the farm down the hill there. So when I was a kid, we pastured our cows there. Then on all the flats, we grew corn. We grew corn from just about the fringe of 44/55. You can see, where the river starts to bend. We grew corn all the way past where we are now.

“I miss my husband. We were married nearly fifty-nine years. I miss the cows, believe it or not, the stinkin’ cows ...”

“And this here, where the house and all that is now, that was just pasture fields. That pasture out there, we probably rented for \$1 a year or something. The fellow that ran the Bonagura farm, Bryant Gibbs, gave it up, then he finally passed away, so that was completely empty. So we just farmed it all. I don’t know how much hay we put in – 16,000 or 18,000 bales a year. A lot of hay. And the corn? I don’t know how much. We had to have 25 acres, then a 5 acre piece in between, another 10 acres, another 20. So we had to do 60, 70 acres of field corn for feeding the cows. So that took a lot of time. It’s a lot of work. But when you’re out in the fields, workin’ by yourself, nobody can bother you.”

When harvested, all the corn, husks, cobs, stalks and all, were shredded and blown up into the silo. This silage had to be moist. If the stalks were too dry, a hose would be run up into the silo to moisten it as it was being blown in. The dampness would cause the silage to ferment; fermentation acted as a preservative.

“Twenty-two years ago. My father had a heart attack. He just passed out in the barn and then he went and had tests and they said he had a heart attack. And he got rid of the cows. Just like that.”

Returning to Dot Decker I ask her what she misses most. “I miss my husband. We were married nearly fifty-nine years. I miss the cows, believe it or not, the stinkin’ cows. One day, one came up to this fence. I had some stale bread. Gary worked at Freihofer’s [Baking Co.] and we used to get the stale bread. He said, ‘Go over and feed that cow.’ My mother was here and she said she wouldn’t go near the cow. I said, ‘Well, I don’t expect they’ll bite me.’”

When questioned about the end of their dairy operation, Gary responds, “Twenty-two years ago. My father had a heart attack. Not one where you get operated on. He stayed



Bobbie and Gary Decker in 2007. Photo: Ray Smith.

in the hospital. He just passed out in the barn and then he went and had tests and they said he had a heart attack. And he got rid of the cows. Just like that. He was sixty-nine then. "I think it was in the spring, early summer. We had a bunch of heifers too. But only milked fifty cows, so twenty-five were calves and heifers. We kept the heifers till that fall, then we sold all the heifers, then we had one Dutch belt cow left, Pea Pod." Pea Pod had been Dick Decker's first real Dutch belt, so he kept her when all the other cows went. "My wife got the job of taking care of the Dutch belt," he says. "We nursed that cow, I

don't know how old she was, but she finally got down. I had to put her to sleep. She lived in a box stall in the barn. Bobbie took care of her; I don't know how many years. When she died, I thought my father would really fall apart. Dead cow. Well, that's the way it goes . . . he just went back to the barn. But Bobbie, she sat there and cried for two weeks over the cow. You know, 'I took care of that cow for so many years . . .' So, that was the end of the cows."

The Decker farm may have been the next to last dairy farm in Gardiner. Gary says, "I think Art Maier was still milking cows, up on Denniston Road. I'm not sure how long that lasted." When I ask Gary why dairy farming had died in Gardiner, his answer is brief: "No money." Increases in population brought increased taxes and equipment costs rose. Gary explains that in 1980, you could get a good tractor for \$14,000. Now, he estimates a similar tractor would cost about \$50,000. But the price paid to farmers for their milk remained the same. The price to the housewife may have gone up, but the dairy farmer has not shared in that increase.

Dot Decker seems to bear with the vicissitudes of her age with a combination of irritation and good humor. As she sums up, "When you get to be ninety, things aren't the same.

"I have too many friends in nursing homes. I've been in hospitals. But I ended up in the nursing home outside of New Paltz. And I was so glad to be home. But now [when] I say, I'm tired of sittin' and lookin' at that barn every day, [I ask myself] you wanna go back into the nursing home? NO!

"They told me the other day, if you fall, you're going back into the nursing home. I've had so many falls. I'm usually pretty good – I land on the carpet. The doctor comes to me. I don't know whether he makes the trip to all the old people, or what. And they have a hospice down here. And I said [to myself], God, I'm too well for something – the hospice!"

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But the infirmities of age don't bother Dot as much as the loss of so many good friends. When I tell her we live on Forest Glen Road, she immediately says, "I have a friend over there – Janie Weston. They're going to move to Tennessee. I get so upset, every time I think about it.

"Betty Moran, Mary Carol . . . outside of Montgomery. That's all I really have, except for Janie. Now, everybody else died on me! Everybody! I get out the old address book; I look at it: died, died, died. Some of my best friends are gone. Some have been gone like fifteen years. It's lonely. I'm used to having friends. Being able to pick up the phone and call this one or that one.

"I write to Mary back and forth. She'll be 93 in June. You know where the Van Duser Orchards are [421 New Hurley Road, Wallkill]? She lives there, Mary.

"Poor Betty. She must get sick of my phone calls. She's good to everybody. She's very religious. She goes to the St. Charles seniors' group. I wouldn't join at first, but Betty kept asking me, so I said I better join. I can take this [the walker] in the car."

Long, leisurely telephone conversations were a means for Dot to stay in touch with her many friends. One I spoke with told me that in more than one conversation she had with Dot, she could hear Dick in the background saying, "Dottie, get off the phone! She has things to do!" Dot holds strong opinions and expressed them at length. Often, the person at the other end of the phone line could get by with an occasional "uh huh" or "yes," while Dot kept the conversation going.

I ask Dot what she has learned from her long life. Without hesitation, she says, "Do whatever I thought was right. And you learn from the other person."

For quite awhile, Dot was an Avon lady, which some suspect was as much a means of getting and sharing the local news as it was a moneymaker for her. Along with her wares, she always carried a pair of slippers and would remove her shoes and put those on before entering a customer's home. Still thoughtful of others, Dot remembers birthdays and sends cards.

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After my interview, I start to pack up the tape recorder. Dot reacts, "Now you're through askin'? I'll think of something after you're gone."



Raymond D. Smith, Jr.

Writer

Ray Smith, author of the Dot Decker story, and Editor of the Betty Moran, Annie O'Neill and Vivian Beatty stories for the *Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner*, spent 37 years as an international banker and credit officer at Bankers Trust Company in New York City and London. He retired twelve years ago. Ray and his wife, Anne Allbright Smith, moved to Gardiner three years ago.

Ray was an English major in college and during his undergraduate years was, at one time or another, either editor or managing editor of every student publication on campus except the yearbook. He is an avid reader and enjoys writing.



Lew Eisenberg

Editor

Lewis Eisenberg, author of the Annie O'Neill story and Editor of the Dot Decker story for the *Hudson Valley History Project Gardiner*, has been a Gardiner resident since late in the last century. By day, he is a marketing and public relations consultant. Before the day starts, he is often a visual artist with an affinity for the surreal and the mythic. His essays have been featured on National Public Radio and been published in the Wall Street Journal and other publications. He was written speeches for James Earl Jones and many CEO's.

Prior to moving to Gardiner, Lew was executive director of a national Jewish men's organization and Clearwater, an environmental organization founded by Pete Seeger. He has served Gardiner as chairman of the Open Space Planning Committee and chair of the Environmental Conservation Committee. He is married to Myrna Socol, his childhood sweetheart.