

Memories of Tudor & Laura Holcomb
October 28, 2023

Nannie and I moved to 16 Broad Hill Road in the spring of 1969. Our land abuts Holcomb Farm on its western flank, so I thought it would be interesting to meet the brother and sister owners of that farm. I had no agenda other than a vague thought that it might be good for us to enter into a boundary line agreement if there was any disagreement about where our land ended. We never did enter into such an agreement, but — somewhat to my surprise at the time — they warmly welcomed me. I spent an hour and a half or so during that first meeting and over the next few years I visited them every few weeks, usually after work and always for at least an hour each time, and often more. I had a keen interest in history and was eager to learn how they had come to own the farm, who their ancestors were and how they came to be so successful. I knew nothing about agriculture or, really, about the history of Granby, but they knew such things and seemed delighted to tell me story after story. Tudor did most of the talking, as men so often did in those days, but Laura was always there and added the necessary details from time to time.

The stories they told didn't have a neat end, where the loose ends were wrapped up, because they did not know what the next chapters would be after they died. They had been thinking about the future of their farm for a long time, as had many others in Granby and elsewhere, all of whom offered unsolicited suggestions. It would be a perfect location for a golf course, for housing, for a school or for other uses, various people urged. Everyone else, Tudor and Laura said, had an agenda. I didn't. I was a newcomer to the community and didn't know enough about it to suggest uses that would accord with the Holcombs' priorities. Most importantly, I recognized that it was the Holcombs' farm, not the community's, so they had to make up their own minds about what should happen to the farm.

Tudor and Laura had a deep reverence for Granby and their neighborhood village of West Granby. To them, West Granby was a rural community grounded in agriculture as the driving economic force and in the West Granby United Methodist Church, which bound the population together, both culturally and spiritually. People worked together and knew one another on the job and through the church. It had been that way since Tudor and Laura were children, but how would West Granby and their farm evolve?

They did not know the answer to that question, and, needless to say, neither did I, but as they pondered the dilemma, we began to talk about what was important to them. Let's focus on that, I suggested. Agriculture was their core value, of course, but education soon evolved as being of equal importance to both of them. They knew that, to succeed, farmers had to embrace the newest technologies and techniques. They had gotten head starts from educational opportunities that were offered to them and were proud of the many innovations they had introduced to their own farming operations. Maybe future activities on their farm could offer similar educational opportunities and foster an entrepreneurial spirit in future farmers.

UConn had a School of Agriculture in Storrs. Maybe it would like a western agricultural campus, too. One of us, I don't recall which one, called the Dean, who was thrilled to talk to them. Soon, he and some of his colleagues came to West Granby to talk to the Holcombs. I was the only other one in the room. Over the next few years, that first Dean, his successor in that office and various other UConn officials met with the Holcombs and me to discuss the details of Tudor's and Laura's evolving ideas. I listened but did very little of the talking. Nor was I the lawyer who eventually drafted the deeds. After the various transactions were defined, they called on their Suffield lawyer and fellow tobacco farmer Charlie Stroh to document the arrangements.

UConn envisioned a working classroom, but did not need all of the agricultural acreage of the farm. That suited Tudor and Laura, because that meant they could convey a five acre parcel to the methodist church and fund the construction of a modern building that could accommodate future growth and all the activities a thriving congregation would sponsor. They also could convey a ten acre parcel of prime agricultural land to their neighbor and friend, Mark Williams, who they knew would be a faithful steward of that land. They had not mentioned providing an endowment for the farm, but I expected that request to be made. When it wasn't, Tudor asked, "*Do you want our money, too?*" I was amazed by the answer. "*Not at all,*" the Dean, responded. "*The University is very well funded. We just want your farm. You can give your money to the Hartford Foundation or someone else.*" Today, such an answer would be unthinkable. I remember it so clearly because it was so unexpected. All I can guess is that the Dean may have worried that asking for an endowment, as well as the farm, might have been too much and would kill the deal. Whatever the reason, UConn did not get its endowment and Tudor and Laura each created a separate fund at the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving.

Looking back, perhaps we should be grateful that Tudor and Laura did not fund an endowment, because the state's generous funding of the university's agricultural programs soon ended, forcing UConn to reassess the costs of offering a working classroom in West Granby.

UConn eventually decided not use the farm as an agricultural campus. Never thinking such a thing would happen, Tudor and Laura nevertheless had outlined what the next steps would be if it did. Their deed decreed that, if UConn did not use the farm, it would go to the Town, free of further restrictions. The farm was returned to the Town in 1991. In the years since then, with twists and turns along the way, the Town has formed alliances with the Friends of Holcomb Farm, with generous funders and with hundreds of volunteers to operate it as a self-sustaining agricultural and educational community resource. What Tudor and Laura never could have contemplated is that the Town, the Friends and the Granby Land Trust would craft a series of documents that would define operating responsibilities and permanently protect the farm's vulnerable eastern and western flanks.

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Decades ago, before all of this happened, I was honored to participate in Tudor's and Laura's deliberations about the future of Holcomb Farm and, after Tudor died in 1978, to be a pall bearer at his funeral. Laura died in a nursing home two years later. They wanted their farm to serve agricultural and educational roles for future generations and to be preserved in perpetuity as a community resource. It would be a place of innovation, abuzz with energy, as it certainly is today. If they were here now, I know without a doubt that they would say to all of you who have brought new life to the farm, while also honoring the spirit of their gift,

"Well Done, Friends! Thank You!"