

Billings Farm & Museum had an ‘extraordinary year’

By Tess Hunter

Managing Editor

Billings Farm Executive Director David Simmons put it best: “It was Billings most extraordinary year — ever.” Simmons notes that their 72,513 visitors in 2021 was remarkable not only because it was up by nearly 10,000 guests compared to 2019, but because it was coming off the back of “one of the worst years ever for Billings Farm.”

Simmons said there were just over 30,000 visitors in the pandemic year of 2020. “We really took it on the chin... During the height of the pandemic, it was half the number of folks that we usually welcomed. But then the very next year — 2021 — look what happened. It just



Shawna Burgess, center, of Moretown, with her daughters Mara, 3, at left and Aileigh, 1, greet an alpine goat at the Billings Baby Animal Celebration in 2021. Billings Farm Manager Chuck Deome said that having people come back to pet the baby animals was his fondest memory of the 2021 season.

Rick Russell Photos

blew the gates right off.”

Billings Executive Vice President Michelle Somerville says that pandemic year

provided a kick-off point for things to come. “It was a year that we decided we wanted to do something during the

pandemic, to make a difference, do more, be creative, and be a place the community could enjoy, in spite of the

pandemic and all of the restrictions. It worked because we were determined to make it work, for the staff, members and visitors to Billings Farm & Museum,” she said.

As to what contributed to the success, Simmons and his team offer a variety of possibilities — creating a safe and welcome environment during a pandemic, a number of innovative new programs and educational outreach, farm-to-table experiences, a bevy of volunteers and, of course, the working dairy farm. But perhaps the biggest secret to Billings’ success came not from an agenda of goals for the year or attendance benchmarks, but from a thriving team effort and community spirit.

Why now?

So why was this the right place and right time for BF&M’s best year ever? Simmons said a big part of it was post-pandemic “revenge travel” — the idea that after more than a year being cooped up in quarantine, people are eager to scratch their tourism itch as often as they can. Simmons said he heard plenty of rumors that such revenge tourism would be on the way in 2021 and “sure enough, with that was the lived experience at Billings Farm.”

Simmons said the biggest factor in that response was creating an experience that felt safe to visitors. “We delivered. We made our mark

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as being one of the safest experiences in the Upper Valley. We really did some very diligent, thoughtful, careful planning, and the execution of protocols that maintain the safety of our staff and our guests. We touted that in 2021, we created more outdoor experiences than we ever had before.”

Not even a Vermont winter could stymie Billings’ outdoor offerings. Simmons describes a rash of winter programming, including, snowshoeing trails, fire pits, and sleigh rides. “We expanded and enhanced a mile-long walking trail. We had games out of doors for kids and adults. The Sunflower House grew and expanded to showcase over 100 varieties of sunflowers last year. And then we also had Farm to Ballet — that kind of iconic Vermont-y experience, which had the largest crowd ever. And I

think it was our fifth foray into that. It was pretty cool.”

Membership increase

Billings didn’t only see a rise in attendance numbers in 2021, it also marked a sharp increase in memberships. According to Manager of Advancement Jen Flaster, Billings saw a 45% increase in new membership compared to 2019. Not only that, but 29% of that membership group includes people from locations other than Vermont and New Hampshire.

“There is a core of memberships that are held by folks out of state,” said Simmons. “Some of those are folks that are second homeowners or they vacation in the area on a regular basis. Others are folks that have formerly lived here and have moved away, but want to continue to maintain their support — and they may never set foot on Billings again... That makes you



Emmett Scoville, 17 months, from Farmington, Conn. gets ready to bowl his pumpkin during the Billings Harvest Celebration last year. Photo Provided

feel really good and positive about the organization that you’re working for and what that means in the hearts of other people.”

Volunteers

Simmons says that one of

Billings Farm’s most remarkable achievements in the last year was the exponential growth in the number of volunteers. From just a handful of volunteers a few years ago, to over 100 in 2021, the volunteer force put in a combined 1,400+ hours of work at Billings Farm and included those as young as 12 years of age to those in their upper-80s. “I will say that we’ve never had 1,400 hours of volunteer work in the past. Put it that way — it’s a tremendous upward trajectory of effort on their part,” said Simmons. He gives much of the credit for that effort to Alec Fannin, the Schedule & Volunteer Coordinator.

“Going into 2021, our organization made it a top priority to expand our volunteer program,” said Fannin. “As a longstanding and well-known pillar in the community, we had immediate interest. Volunteers helped out at our special events and on busy days in the summer and fall. We were also thoughtful in honoring the time that volunteers were giving. We set up a benefits program, where volunteers could earn admission coupons, Billings Farm Cheddar Cheese, and more at certain milestones — 10 hours, 30 hours, 50

hours, etc. Enough people tried out shifts and appreciated their experience that word spread and they invited their friends and family to join as well. Respecting the mutual benefits of volunteerism helped us thrive. Plus, who doesn’t want to be around our Jerseys?”

Educational outreach

Across the board, a majority of BF&M’s staff cited the farm’s outreach to local schools in 2021 as one of their proudest accomplishments — Simmons among them. “One of the things that we did, that happened on our campus last year, that I’m most proud of was the relationship with the Woodstock Elementary School.” Billings Farm offered its campus as an in-person, outdoor classroom from February through June. “By moving the sixth graders out of the school building, that allowed the K-5 students to expand into other rooms and to continue their in-class experience. And then, having the sixth graders on our watch — it was such a cool thing to do.”

Guest Experience Manager Anna Berez said that having the students at Billings was her fondest memory of 2021. “Every day at

lunchtime, the whole Visitor Center would fill with the sounds of excited chatter as class ended and the kids could be with each other for lunch and then play outside for recess,” she described. “I loved overhearing some of their lessons and re-learning information I’d forgotten. We took them to see the baby goats and lambs as they were born, which was an especially unique experience for them. In the three and a half months they were here, they filled the space with such joy and excitement and I remain extremely proud that we, as an organization, collectively did everything we could to make that happen for them and for the community. Without hesitation, we all stepped up and looked at what we could do to make that experience possible. If that is not a clear indication of how much the community means to Billings, I don’t know what would be.”

Vice Chair of the Woodstock Foundation Board of Trustees, Sal Iannuzzi, agreed that the response Billings got from both the students and the parents was overwhelming, saying, “We received wonderful letters and things from teachers acknowledging how beneficial it was for the kids. And that’s really what it’s all about.”

“It felt so good. I’ll never forget that and I know that the kids won’t either,” said Simmons, reflecting on the way Billings was able to help in such a unique and difficult time. “I suspect that it will be a memorable experience for the kids that will last with them forever. They can tell their kids and grandkids, ‘Hey, I went to school on a farm.’” Simmons described the sixth grade graduation, which was also held on the Billings campus, as a memorable conclusion to the strange and gratifying year.

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Billings also plays host to a number of other educational programs, beyond Woodstock Elementary School, including internships with the Woodstock Union High School Students, as well as college and graduate school interns. Summer camp experiences also play a huge role in the farm. Somerville said the implementation and expansion of summer camps coming out of the pandemic was among her proudest accomplishments. “While many camps were not able to open and some camps reduced their activities, we dug deep, thought outside of the box and created a fun place where kids could enjoy summer camp in a safe, fun environment,” she said. “In fact, we increased the number of weeks and expanded our offerings. I am so proud of the team for putting this together and especially Gabi Bourassa, Lead Educator and Camp Coordinator, for always pushing forward and finding a way to yes.”

Meanwhile, Christine Scales, the Interpretation & Education Manager, said the day-to-day educational programs were equally important. “I’m really proud of our Billings Backyard Series, which has been running for about three years, but really took off in 2021. We offer classes and workshops on all sorts of topics related to self-sufficiency and sustainability like Canning and Preserving Food, Hand-Dyed Yarn, and Seed Starting. I’m also proud of our Farm Discovery Camp, which launched last year. It’s for older campers ages 11-14, and really allows us to dive more deeply with these young people about what it means to be a farmer. We bring in professionals from different fields like a large animal vet, a beekeeper and more so the campers can hear first hand from people in the community.”

The life of a farm

Undoubtedly, all of these accomplishments center around one key element — the farm itself. Billings’ award-winning herd of Jersey Cows is the lynchpin from which all other efforts, including the educational outreach, the farm manager’s house, the farm-to-table offerings, and the garden experiences spring.

“I would have to say our herd of Jersey cows are the unsung heroes of Billings Farm,” said Farm to Table Manager Emery Gray. “Without them, we wouldn’t have the continued legacy that we have enjoyed since the Farm’s founding in 1871.”

In 2021, Billings had continued high scores for the Jersey cow herd in the twice-annual evaluation by the American Jersey Cattle Association. According to the Billings Farm annual report, all of the farm’s cows scored in the top two tiers, with 30 cows scoring Excellent and 25 cows scoring Very Good. The farm also welcomed a new team of Percheron horses in October — Danny and Larry. The pair joined Billings’ effort to offer more outdoor activities to guests, including sleigh rides and wagon pulls. For Farm Manager Chuck Deome, the best part of 2021 was the simplicity of “watching the guests pet the babies after almost two years” at the Baby Animal Celebration.

Seeing the Farmstead Gardens come to fruition under the direction of Woodstock Inn & Resort’s Creative Director of Landscape and Design, Ben Pauly, was also noted by staff as a particular accomplishment. “We just opened up a new garden last night on the farm, growing a much broader array of vegetables and things like



Billings Farm Manager Chuck Deome said that having people come back to pet the baby animals was his fondest memory of the 2021 season. Nori Pepe Photo

that. Children and adults can see how that’s how it works, how it’s done,” said Iannuzzi, adding a personal anecdote, “It’s gotten my grandchildren interested in it, because now I have a competition with them to see who can grow the biggest sunflower. And I cheated I — I bought a metal [sunflower], 10 feet tall. But it’s got them excited about that, and they can see something go from a seed to this beautiful sunflower.”

“The Sunflower House is the bees knees for me. You can’t be unhappy walking around thousands of sunflowers. It’s one of the most rewarding outlets of creativity as a landscape designer.” — Ben Pauly, Woodstock Inn & Resort’s Creative Director of Landscape and Design

For his part, Pauly doesn’t just manage the new garden, but collaborates with Billings to develop and implement the annual Sunflower House, oversee Billings Farm’s organic production gardens for the Woodstock Inn & Resort, develop winter decoration plans at Billings Farm for the holidays, and help implement landscape visions. “The Sunflower House is the bees knees for me,” said Pauly. “You can’t be unhappy walking around thousands of sunflowers. It’s one of the most rewarding outlets of creativity as a landscape designer.”

Simmons said that Billings will soon be introducing solar panels. “We’re working with Sun Common to provide panels that will go live this coming week, and will provide a little more than 10% of our electrical needs here at the farm on an ongoing basis.”

Meanwhile, Gray said she has “thoroughly enjoyed being able to present culinary centered programming for our Billings Backyard adult education series. I am passionate about both food and education and to share both with guests in a fun and relaxing atmosphere is very rewarding. The programs I enjoyed the most last season were backyard grilling, jam making, and quick pickling.” Both Gray and Berez are excited about Billings’ upcoming Date Night cooking classes. “All classes focus on how to utilize the fresh ingredients that Vermont gardens have to offer all year round and present food in a style that celebrates cuisine from around the world,” said Gray.

Pauly said the farm also allows people “to connect with a simpler way of living. Looking back into history allows people to connect to a world that doesn’t have the negative associations

that exist with our current hectic environment. Whether your stresses stem from environmental change, human rights, politics, war and conflict, or food insecurity, I feel that people can reset their everyday life by following an inner desire to become more in tune with being sustainable, self-sufficient, and living off the land. Billings Farm offers that window into how people did that in the 19th century, but also ways we continue to implement those approaches in this modern world.”

Coming up

Simmons hopes to continue BF&M’s upward trajectory with a number of new activities planned for 2022 and the years ahead. “There are three things this year that are coming up. One is going to be a pilot program that we hope is going to be an ongoing program and presence here at Billings Farm Museum — and that is a classical chamber music series.” Simmons says that the Boston String Trio, which has visited other Woodstock institutions in the past, will have its first Billings performance on Sept. 2. Billings will also play host to TEDxHartland-Hill — a multi-day speaker conference addressing questions around what it means to be a community. And finally, Billings will extend its documentary film series into 2023, working with filmmaker Jay Craven. “All these different experiences, above and beyond a working dairy farm or a museum, are ways of engaging culturally on our own landscape here in Woodstock.”

Community-centric

Iannuzzi says that Billings Farm & Museum is an essential part of the Woodstock culture, and Lawrence Rockefeller’s larger vision for the town. “Mr. Rockefeller’s vision was that the resort is there to anchor the town. In a number of ways, it provides a lot of visitors to the town and contributes to the vitality of Woodstock. And the purpose of Billings Farm, Mr. Rockefeller used to say, was to ‘raise the human spirit.’”

Scales sees Billings as one in a long legacy of important Woodstock institutions. “It’s rare these days to have a farm so close to a town, so to have that connection and proximity to the land and to agriculture is pretty special. We love our community, and really enjoy seeking out new opportunities to work with and serve them,” she said. “We’re in really good company in Woodstock between the Marsh Billings Rockefeller National Historical Park, the Woodstock History Center, Pentangle, Artistree, and other great community organizations.”

Meanwhile, Fannin sees Billings as a celebration not just of Woodstock, but of Vermont, saying, “Billings Farm & Museum provides a safe and wholesome venue for local residents to fall in love with where they live. Billings Farm is a celebration of the best of Vermont and Woodstock. From the beautiful views of the farm pastures, to the 1890s Farm Manager’s House and the Jersey Cows, we showcase our local heritage and bring it into the present for everyone to enjoy.”

And for Somerville, Billings is simply a place to call home, “a place to gather. To eat ice cream, enjoy the vistas, and relax.”

Team spirit

According to Iannuzzi, Billings Farm embodies the phrase “it takes a village.” “[This success] is due to the people that we now have at Billings Farm. Really an excellent group of very enthusiastic passionate people that are interested in what they do and have great interest in education, which is a primary part of our mission,” said Iannuzzi. He went on to describe several scenes where Billings’ staff had gone above and beyond their job description. “I was on the phone with Anna [Berez] and I could hear wind in the background. I asked her, ‘What are you doing?’ And she said, ‘Oh, I’m out placing signs for this evening’s event.’ She’s a manager there, but she’s the one placing the signs. Emery [Gray] helped plant the new garden. I went up a couple of weeks ago, and she was on her hands and knees, planting vegetables. Christina [Scales] was making sure a child that has allergies got a lunch that’s appropriate. And so it’s managing, but it’s very, very hands-on in a real way,” he said, adding, “It’s the people. David [Simmons] and Michelle [Somerville] are very important. But people like Anna are the people that make it tick. Anna went on three grocery runs [at an event recently]. They

had many more visitors than they thought and they ran out of hotdogs and she had to go find a few hundred hotdogs and buns. Not something you would think is part of her job, but she did it.”

Simmons agreed that this hands-on approach is what makes Billings special, and he said few are more hands-on than the facilities team, which got a big boost this year. “We bolstered our facilities team, in a couple of ways, both in personnel — we increased the size of the team and added an assistant facility manager — and we actually built new space for there to be the facility hub for equipment. All of this so that they could just do more work onsite that had previously been outsourced — snow removal and lawn maintenance,” Simmons said, adding, “But they’re the ones that are here early in the morning or starting at midnight if there’s a snow event and, and getting the place ready and keeping it shipshape.”

Berez agreed with Simmons’ praise for Facilities Manager Ben McLean and his crew, saying, “[McLean] is here setting up some days at 3 a.m. — he responds to alarms that go off at all hours of the day and night. He keeps the building running and the site looking beautiful. He has wonderful and creative ideas for how to push Billings into the future and works extremely hard to execute all of the behind the scenes details that literally keep this place open and operational.

Alongside the facility team, the farm staff is up to their elbows in hard labor. “There are a lot of farm staff that guests don’t see,” said Simmons. “They’re back of house and they’re on the tractors and in the fields, mucking and doing things after hours and delivering calves at three in the morning, repairing fences and so on and so forth. I just have to stop and give a great shout out to Chuck Deome and his team for the constancy of

their work and their dedication to the farm.”

Simmons went on to applaud the staff more generally saying, “I’m just so proud of the team that we have in place... Our frontline staff, our interpretive education staff, our farm staff, our volunteers — they’re the face of Billings Farm & Museum. They are the faces that are remembered and the conversations that are remembered as folks get into their cars and head back home, whether it’s in the state of Vermont or elsewhere.”

Scales had praise for the Interpretive staff. “We have a staff of about 50 part-time interpreters/educators, and they do such a great job running programs and sharing information about our site,” she said. “They teach school programs, engage with guests daily, work at camps and workshops and do such a fantastic job. They are a great community of passionate individuals and I love working with them. Our farm educators too — they put in a lot of hours taking care of the animals and they care deeply about the farm as well as about teaching people about the animals and dairy farming.”

Simmons also called attention to the staff “back of house,” the operational and administrative team. “They’re faces that one doesn’t usually see out and about with the public, but their work is the foundation for the physical dimension of a site visit... I’m also just really proud to know that upstairs in the offices among the team there are three MBAs and one of them is even a CPA. So we’ve got a lot of firepower, a lot of brainpower, a lot of talent that’s brought to bear every day on the experience of our visitors.”

Simmons and Iannuzzi both expressed appreciation for the support of the Woodstock Foundation Board of Trustees and its chair, Ellen Pomeroy. “She’s made terrific strides clarifying the mission,” said Iannuzzi. “She’s just done a wonderful, wonderful job.” Somerville made a point to note that there are no “non-essential” or lower positions in the hierarchy at Billings. “We know we need each other, we praise each other and support each other for the benefit of the guest experience.”

In his closing remarks, Iannuzzi said, “I’ve been involved with Billings for over 12 years. I have a farm right down the road and I’ve been visiting since the mid-80s with my children. It’s a special place in many regards. But to answer the question ‘Why now?’ I think the word is getting out there more and more that the experience is pretty terrific. And you don’t achieve that if not for the people. Yes, we have buildings. Yes, we have made some improvements and things like that. But if you don’t have the people, their dedication and enthusiasm, then they’re just buildings.”



Farm to Table Manager Emery Gray brings a load of supplies to the dairy bar, including ice cream cones and paper towels. Almost every position is “hands-on” at Billings Farm, according to Vice Chair of the Woodstock Foundation Board of Trustees, Sal Iannuzzi, and most people — including Gray — go above and beyond their job description. Rick Russell Photo