



Ed and Paule Drexler, left, chat with John and Colleene Werbela of Nelson, N.Y., before the Werbelas took off on a quick weekend cruise off Long Island. The Drexlers believe they are the nation's first farm sitters.

Sitters For Vacationing Farmers

ITHACA, N.Y. — It's easy to find someone to water your geranium and feed your dog while you're on vacation. But what if you also have 300 acres of crops and 100 cows on a modern farm with complex milking equipment, an array of machinery, computerized feed formulas and other high-tech wonders?

When bad luck drove Ed and Paulie Drexler out of dairy farming two years ago, they remembered the trouble they had finding someone to mind their farm when they were taking a trip in 1980. So they began a new and successful career: "farm-sitting," that is, doing the daily chores for vacationing farmers.

The young couple, who live in a house they built on 54 wooded acres in the town of Fabius near Syracuse, believe that their occupation is unique. "As far as we can tell, no one else has ever heard of anyone doing what we do as a profession," Ed Drexler said. "Farmers might be able to get help from neighbors for a short period of time, but it's tough to find someone who could fill the void for a week or two."

Since the Drexlers became farm sitters one and a half years ago, they have worked on numerous farms in most of the northeastern states.

"We will milk in Tahiti if someone there pays our air fare," Paulie Drexler quipped in an interview. "Seriously, we go anywhere."

Their business is booming. They are booked solid this summer and fall, and February 1988 already has been taken, too. Many people make reservations months and even a year in advance, Ed Drexler said.

The Drexlers said that they draw deep satisfaction from helping many farmers to make a much needed escape from their grinding daily chores. "Every time the phone rings, it's exciting because we know somebody out there needs us, and we try to schedule our time to help them get away," Ed Drexler said. "When we arrive at a farm, we get comments such as 'Where have you been the past 20 years?'"

Paulie Drexler said another reason they love farm-sitting is that "it's never boring," because they work at different farms.

The Drexlers are graduates of

Cornell University, where they majored in animal science. When Ed Drexler graduated in 1974, he went back to his family farm in Smyrna in Chenango County, where he was in partnership with his father. Paulie Drexler joined him a year later when she graduated from Cornell.

The partnership didn't work out well. So the Drexells decided to leave the family farm. For a while, they worked in Altamont near Albany as rural real estate agents, selling hobby farms for city people who wanted to live in rural areas.

Selling hobby farms was an interesting job, but "we missed cows," he said. In 1978, they bought their first farm — with 62 cows and 200 acres of crop land — in St. Johnsville in Montgomery County.

The farm thrived. Within 18 months, the Drexlers boosted their herd's average annual milk production from 14,000 pounds to 18,000. Their herd was designated the most improved in Montgomery County for 1980. The Drexlers also were named as New York Farm Bureau's Outstanding Young Farmers that year.

But because of its poor soil quality, they sold the farm in 1981 and moved to Pompey near Syracuse, where they bought a farm with 165 cows and more than 600 acres of cropland.

As they began expanding the herd, they ran into "a brick wall," as Ed Drexler described it. Some of the cows they had bought in Ohio were found to have Johne's disease, a bacterial infection that causes a chronic diarrhea fatal to afflicted animals.

From then on, it was a losing battle. "Within six months after we had bought 37 cows, we lost 27," Ed Drexler said. "Eventually, we had to send every one of our 185 cows to the slaughterhouse for beef."

Although the Farm Home Administration made a generous offer to help them rebuild their herd, the couple decided to call it quits. "A fight against a disease like that takes all your pizzazz out of you," Ed Drexler said. "So we were right back to square one."

They sold the farm in August 1985 and moved into a house they built that summer. They limped along that fall by selling Christmas trees and firewood from their

property.

That was when the Drexlers came up with the idea of farm-sitting. In February 1986, they attended a farm show in Syracuse, where they handed out mimeographed copies of a simple brochure explaining their farm-sitter service. "Right off the bat, we got two bookings. That astonished us," Paulie Drexler said.

The business soon brought in more jobs than they could handle. "The first year, we were turning down about five to six jobs for every one we could take," Ed Drexler said. "This year, we are booked 100 percent from the last week of June to almost Christmas."

Their going rate is \$100 per person per weekday and \$125 on Saturdays and Sundays. It's \$12 an hour if the job involves only temporary field work.

"If everything goes okay on a farm, anybody can come in and do it, but that isn't the case. Those who hire us are paying for insurance — the unexpected, not the routine work," Ed Drexler said.

On one occasion, for example, silos ran out of feed for the dairy animals. "The feeding program got shot to heck," Paulie Drexler recalled. "We had to use what knowledge we had and come up with a balanced ration fast; we had to readjust, among other things, protein levels for individual cows. When the owner came back, he found out that we were producing as much milk as when he had left. The bulk tank never lost a pound of milk," she said.

Farmers who have hired the Drexlers as farm sitters are happy with the quality of their work. Bill and Marilyn Bird of Asbury, N.J., wrote: "Everything was great. We can't think of any way to improve." A New York farmer, Stanley Connelly of Virgil, commented, "We were pleased with your services. The corn is coming along fine now. You helped a lot."

Some of the agricultural agents of Cornell Cooperative Extension are enthusiastic about the farm-sitter service, too. Kathryn A. Daxendell, a dairy agent with Cooperative Extension of Onondaga County, called the farm-sitting a "fabulous idea," saying that farmers need people who are competent to run their farms while they

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