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Photo by Jennifer Williams Thompson
Cattle graze at Shat Acres in
Greensboro Bend, Vt.

Highland Raisers Win Award

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Vermont Correspondent

GREENSBORO BEND, Vt. — Ray Shatney hollered as his wife, Janet Steward, watched, waited and grinned.

"Come on, girls! Come on!"

Then they appeared, first one by one, then in clusters, from up over a small hill, until the green field where Shatney and Steward stood held about 60 of them.

Some of them had long horns; some were shorter.

And most had the long, wavy coat that makes them one of the most recognizable breeds in the world.

In tiny Greensboro Bend — population 232 — Steward and Shatney operate Shat Acres, an award-winning Scottish Highland cattle farm.

Shatney and Steward have 160 Highland cattle split between Greensboro Bend and their home

farm in Plainfield, about 40 minutes away.

Shatney has 50 years of experience with Scottish Highland herds in Vermont.

He can trace some of his cattle back to the first Highland cow registered in the U.S., and although the farm was — and still is — mainly a place for preserving the breed

More **HIGHLAND**, page A2

Highland

Continued from A1

through genetics, there is a fairly new marketing concept on the menu: beef.

Shatney and Steward started processing their cattle for beef about eight years ago. Their timing was right.

The locavore movement was skyrocketing, and Vermont grass-fed beef was in demand.

Because the Highlands' long hair replaces the thick layer of fat found on other breeds, Shat Acres offers a grass-fed meat that is lower in fat and cholesterol than other types of beef.

In a short time, Shat Acres has grown from processing "just a handful" to 35 grass-fed animals a year, the couple said.

Recently, the Small Business Administration honored Shat Acres with the 2016 Family-Owned Small Business Award — a rare honor for a Vermont farm, and one that earned Shat Acres accolades from Vermont Congressman Peter Welch and Sen. Bernie Sanders, as well as Chuck Ross, the Vermont agriculture secretary.

"Shat Acres Highland Cattle is the kind of hard-working and innovative family agricultural business that makes Vermont's working landscape so vibrant and unique," Ross wrote.

Steward said the award "made it all worth it. It meant so much. It was so gratifying. This is hard work, you know? Seven days a week, 12 to 14 hour days. To me, that award said 'this is why we're doing this.'"

Shat Acres has also earned awards for their breeding stock.

Their bull, Raisin Cain, was the top-selling Highland bull at the National Western Stock Show in Denver, Colo., in January.

Raisin Cain's dam, Cinnamon Raisin, was a grand champion in a cow-calf category at the same show for three years — possibly the only cow in history to reach that accomplishment, according to Shatney

and Steward.

Shat Acres sells its breeding stock all over the U.S. In August, Steward and Shatney will travel to the Pacific Northwest to visit Raisin Cain and other animals they've sold.

"When we started showing nationally, people could not believe that his little farm in Greensboro Bend, Vermont, was producing these Highlands," Steward said.

For five years, Steward has chaired the American Highland Cattle Association's Beef Marketing Committee.

She claims Shat Acres is the only Highland herd in the U.S. that is not supported by off-farm income or outside capital.

She and Shatney, the sole employees of Shat Acres, partner up on everything, including distribution and delivery of their product to Vermont stores and restaurants.

"Janet handles the business and marketing end of things," Shatney said. "I do a lot of the physical work."

Shatney's paternal grandparents, Arthur and Winona Shatney, started a dairy farm in nearby Greensboro in 1915. Ray Shatney's parents, the late Carroll and Polly Shatney, took over the farm in 1940.

"There was a guy who bought some Highlanders from out west. He got scalded in a pulp mill and died. A friend bought one (cow) and then had a heart attack, so he sold his cow to me," Carroll Shatney recalled during an interview in Peter Miller's 2013 book "A Lifetime of Vermont People."

Carroll Shatney is featured on the cover of that book — in his nineties, wearing a hat from Vermont's Champlain Valley Fair, emblazoned with the word "Fun!"

"We ain't never seen them before," Carroll Shatney told Miller, describing Highland cattle. "Nobody had. They were different with their long hair and horns but they got the best beef I ever tasted."

The elder Shatney bought his first cow for \$50 in the late 1960s; it was branded but not registered, so he traced the brands to register it.



Photos by Jennifer Williams Thompson

Scottish Highland calves pause in a pasture at Shat Acres in Greensboro Bend, Vt.

In the 1980s, Carroll and Polly Shatney moved from Greensboro to the current farm in Greensboro Bend, where he and Ray build their herd of Highland cattle.

Ray Shatney and Janet Steward met in the early 2000s and married two years ago.

Steward grew up on Long Island, not on a farm, and was an elementary school teacher for 30 years. She was Vermont's Teacher of the Year in 2002 — and at one point in her life she was afraid of cows.

The horns on the Highlands still intimidate Steward sometimes — they have the same effect on some veterinarians and farm visitors — but she and her husband treat their herd like pets.

They rue the trips to the slaughterhouse every other Tuesday, even though they understand the necessity.

"I never slam a door and I never slam a gate (when they're going to the slaughterhouse)," Shatney said. "I don't force. I don't yell, whoop or anything. If it takes a half hour to get one in the truck, it takes a half hour."

Steward never imagined a time in her life that she would be designing barns, paddocks and marketing plans for the unique beef she was



Janet Steward and Ray Shatney own and operate Shat Acres, a Scottish Highland cattle farm in Greensboro Bend, Vt.

raising.

When she first tasted Highland beef, she said, she realized that "this was an animal whose time has come."

Shatney and Steward are in their sixties. They have five daughters between them, but none of them have shown interest in taking over Shat Acres someday.

So for Shatney and Steward, a huge question remains: What will happen to this herd, its history and legacy? Will it continue? And, if so, under whom — and how?

"It's something we're just starting to talk about,"

Steward said. "We just don't know yet."

For now, though, the cattle are keeping them busy.

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Ray Shatney brings part of his 160-head herd to a new paddock on the 170-acre farm.

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