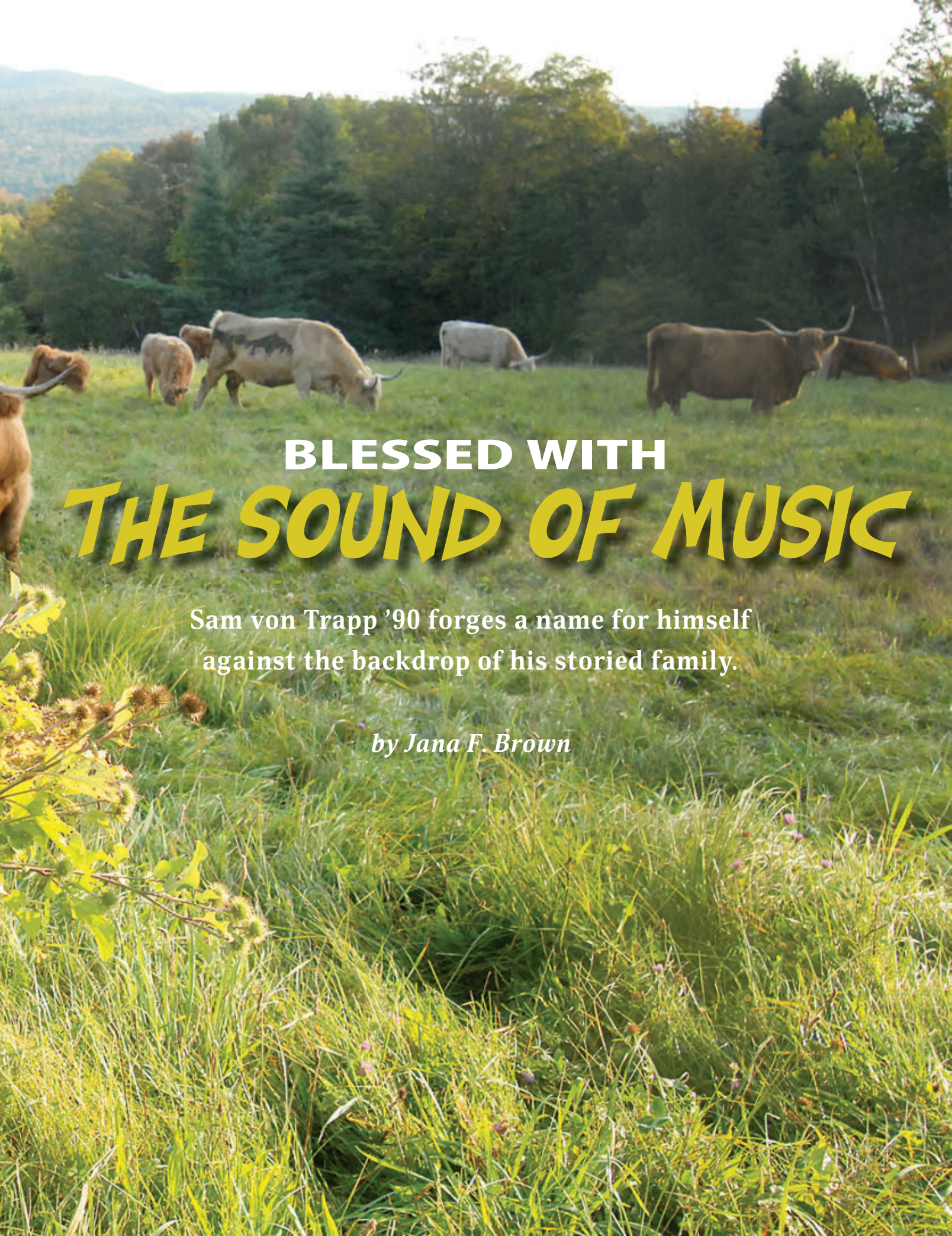




COLOR PHOTOS BY GLENN CALLAHAN



**BLESSED WITH**  
***THE SOUND OF MUSIC***

Sam von Trapp '90 forges a name for himself  
against the backdrop of his storied family.

*by Jana F. Brown*

# It's a curse

*and a blessing*, acknowledges Sam von Trapp '90, as he walks the property that captured his heart as a child and summoned him home five years ago to carry on the family tradition.

Von Trapp's love for the 2,400 acres that surround the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe, Vt., is not unlike the affection his family's story has inspired in millions since his grandmother wrote the 1949 memoir *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, a tale adapted into one of the most beloved musicals of all time. But being the descendant of a clan with a popular following is not always a leisurely stroll among the green hills. Sam is a third-generation von Trapp and, much to the surprise of many lodge visitors, he doesn't sing.

The youngest grandchild of the Baron and Maria von Trapp, Sam estimates that a billion people have watched the fact-based 1959 Broadway portrayal and the 1965 Hollywood version of his family's saga, director Robert Wise's Oscar-winning *The Sound of Music*.



PHOTOS COURTESY TRAPP FAMILY LODGE

"If I were given the chance to go back, I probably wouldn't change anything," he says. "At the same time, when someone asks what it's like to grow up as a von Trapp, I don't know anything different. I probably would have been less self-conscious because when people are constantly asking questions about you and your family, you can become accustomed to talking about yourself."

Momentarily distracted, von Trapp uses his iPhone to snap a photo of a budding apple tree that thrives mere feet away from the family plot in which his grandparents are interred; later he'll e-mail it to two of the movie-version children. But even as he hovers with his smart phone between the real and fictional worlds of the von Trapps, he talks of the confusion he felt as a child when strangers and – worse – friends would ask him about the von Trapp legend.

"What we are learning is to bring out the better side of it," he says, noting the constant barrage of questions and expectations that come with being a member of a famous family. "Some of my relatives only saw the cursed side – the last thing they ever wanted to talk about was *The Sound of Music*. I did go through a period like that, and some of my friends from St. Paul's would probably remember that I didn't quite understand why all these people were still so excited about this movie."

Von Trapp, who recently celebrated his 40th birthday, lived a relatively idyllic life on his family's green-acred property in the mountains of Stowe. With the television relegated to the closet (except for an appearance every four years to show the Olympics), he spent summers outside, biking, swimming, and exploring the property. He and his sister, Kristina, were exposed to agriculture early in life, taking on responsibility for the family chickens, among other duties. Von Trapp began working at the lodge at eight and, by 14, was clocking a 40-hour week.

"It was an amazing place to grow up, to step out of the house and have access to 2,400 acres of land," he says, putting away the iPhone with an explanation that he will forward the image of the apple tree to Nicholas Hammond and Duane Chase, the film actors and still close family friends who played Friedrich and Kurt in the Rodgers and Hammerstein version of his family's saga. The tree was planted by three generations of von Trapps in 2008 in memory of Sam's uncle, Werner (a.k.a. Kurt in the movie), and with "gratitude to the von Trapp children who lived



the real story from the children of *The Sound of Music*.”

Taking in the brilliant sunsets over the mountains and surveying the endless stretches of green that emerge through a dense fog each morning, it’s easy to imagine why, in 1941, his paternal grandparents, Georg (a.k.a. the Captain or the Baron) and Maria von Trapp, chose to settle their 10 children in the Green Mountain State, with its resemblance to their ancestral Austria.

“I have these vague memories of watching *The Sound of Music* once when I was six or seven,” says von Trapp, who returned home in the summer of 2007 to help his father run the lodge, a family resort that, including the 96-room Austrian-style Main Lodge and the surrounding villas and guest houses, can accommodate up to 1,000 guests. “But my parents really downplayed it and I never really understood just how big it was.” He next saw the film at age 23 – in Spanish.

Even through college at Dartmouth, von Trapp rarely associated himself with Julie Andrews’s memorable singing and frolicking among the hills of Austria. Being a von Trapp was “all I knew,” he repeats. “Nothing special.”

Just as his family’s tale contains elements of fiction, the story of von Trapp’s return to the lodge does as well. The popular version is that Johannes von Trapp, Sam’s father and the youngest of the Baron and Maria’s three mutual children, gave his son an ultimatum – spend 10 years after college doing whatever you want, but then you must come home to run the lodge. He did just that, traveling the world to surf in Chile and teach skiing in Aspen. He became fluent in Spanish and Portuguese. He moonlighted as a skiwear model for Ralph Lauren, filmed a ChapStick commercial with Olympic skier Picabo Street, and was named in 2001 by *People* magazine as one of “America’s Top 50 Bachelors,” a distinction that has brought him an imbalance of pride and discomfort.

“Coming from this *Sound of Music* family, defining ourselves on our own was really important to my sister and me,” he says, “to make sure there were things we had done that weren’t connected to the family.”

In reality, von Trapp always aspired to join the family business. “On my first boarding school application to Eaglebrook, I wrote that when I grew up I wanted to run the Trapp Family Lodge,” he says.

The Baron and Maria von Trapp ▶





Sam von Trapp will indefinitely remain linked to Julie Andrews, who portrayed the saintly singing postulant parading as his real-life strong-willed grandmother, but he has grown up and is making his own mark on the storied property. Running a lodge is exhausting work, but there's nothing von Trapp would ask of his staff, which bulges to 250 employees in the high season, that he wouldn't do or hasn't done himself. He has held every title from dishwasher to bellman to front desk clerk. Sometimes he meets a visiting family in the lodge's main parking lot and, when they inquire about his role, he tells them he makes snow.

"I know there's a direct impact on the guest experience no matter what the job is," he says. "And, of course, you have a greater motivation to perform when you work with your family." (He jokes that when he and his father have a disagreement he has to "remind him that I went to St. Paul's, so in the end my opinion is most likely correct.")

Since his return in 2007, von Trapp has built a nine-hole disc golf course, engineered a snow-making operation (hence his identification with the task), and added mountain biking trails to the property's already thriving Nordic ski reputation. Von Trapp spent his first summer back carving out the landscape for cycling with the help of a 68-year-old Austrian operating an excavator as von Trapp wielded a shovel.

Among his countless duties on the property, von Trapp lists trail clearing at the top. And you believe him when you enter his office, which sits in a modestly appointed Austrian-influenced outbuilding across the street from the Main Lodge. In a corner by the door, a fire-fighting model axe called a Pulaski stands on its dirt-covered head, waiting to be called into service. Hardcover copies of his family's biographies line a bookshelf, and a world map adorns his wall. There is one photo of him surfing in Brazil and another of a hotel in Portillo, Chile – vestiges of the life he led in his decade-long hiatus from Stowe.

Though it's not always easy living at work, von Trapp mixes business with recreation by traveling to his office in the winter via "commute chutes" – trails through the woods that he cleared so he can strap on his cross country skis to make his way to work each winter day. In addition to his laptop, he carries a hacksaw in his backpack in the winter months to cut down any branches that threaten to encroach on the lodge's many trails. It's not uncommon for him to climb high above the property into a hemlock tree to clear branches that prevent snow from covering the trails.

The 50 Scotch Highland cows on the property, whose steady moos provide the soundtrack to a summer morning breakfast overlooking the mountains of Vermont, are fed from the spent grain that is a byproduct of the brewing of Trapp Lager.

"The great thing about the spent grain is that the starch has been removed in the brewing process so there is none of the negative impact on the livestock," von Trapp proudly explains.

The two-year-old on-site brewery is a 12,000-barrel-a-year enterprise that von Trapp and his father (who still holds the title of president) hope to expand to 50,000 barrels as a way to supplement the painting and roofing and lawn care and other endless maintenance punch lists that are a daily reality of running a large property.

"The brewery was a departure," explains von Trapp, noting that the label's logo features an Alpine goat called an ibex, known to range in Austria. "My father had to convince his mother to serve alcohol on the premises at all. Now, someday, instead of being a hotel with a brewery, we might actually be a brewery with a hotel."

The proposed brewery expansion would produce enough spent grain to sell to other farmers in the area. Meanwhile, Johannes, Sam's father, has led the lodge's composting efforts for decades in a way that Sam credits as being "ahead of his time." About 200,000 pounds of kitchen waste a year combat the less-than-ideal fertility of Vermont's hills. And at their home on the outskirts of the property, Sam and his wife, Elisa, are experimenting with sheep as a way to replace lawnmowers.

"A lot of it is being a Vermonter because you have to be careful in Vermont," he says. "The growing season is short, the winters are cold. The options are relatively limited agriculturally. Vermonters have always been relatively frugal and self-reliant. Another part of it is being Austrian. The Austrian culture is very similar to Vermont in a lot of ways. The locavore movement has really taken off, but it was a big part of Austria for a long time – making your own cheese, milking your own cows. If we get the right people to help us with these things, it means I get to focus on doing the things I love, which are trail work and talking to people about the agriculture and efficiency programs."

"We get to people through *The Sound of Music*," he adds, "but we use that to talk about the things that are important to us. Whenever my dad is exasperated by answering the same question for the 40,000th time, I remind him that these people have given him a podium where he can choose to speak about conservation or



grass-fed beef or controlling the spread of the pine beetle and mix those with answering questions about Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer.”

Still, the von Trapps understand that *The Sound of Music*, a fictionalized version of events, is part of what attracts guests to the lodge. Three years ago, in an attempt to satisfy day visitors, Sam launched family-history tours. “They are a way to accommodate the person who has driven all the way from Newark to see Maria’s grave, without disturbing the serenity of our guests,” he explains, adding that he personally leads as many as four weekly tours. “It has actually brought our family closer to *The Sound of Music* story by seeing how much it means to people.”

The tour tells the real story of the von Trapps. Unlike the stage and movie versions, Maria was not a governess but a tutor to a sick von Trapp daughter. The Baron had already instilled a love of music in his children before Maria arrived on the scene, and the von Trapps traveled regularly to perform, including a stop in America, at which time they requested asylum. There was no crossing over the hills of Austria into neutral Switzerland. And the nuns at the abbey did *not* remove the spark plugs from the Nazi vehicles, von Trapp adds.

“While we are a full resort with an unbelievable number of offerings, at the end of the day we’re always going to also be the resort that was created by the family who inspired *The Sound of Music*,” he acknowledges. “That’s always going to be a part of it. It’s an opportunity for us to educate people about the real story and also a great way for us to come to grips with it.”

Von Trapp gets emotional talking about the 1980 fire that destroyed the original lodge. “It only really sunk in for me when I saw the emotional impact on my aunts and uncles,” he explains. He also gets a bit choked up when he speaks of two of his uncles returning to Austria in 1943 to help liberate the country from the Nazi occupation that the Baron and Maria resisted – a truth the Rodgers and Hammerstein version depicts. He says his grandmother would have enjoyed that her story is still inspiring people to make different choices in their lives (though she would not have looked favorably upon the individual who recently pilfered flowers from her grave). Not long ago, a gentleman told von Trapp’s sister, Kristina, that he had fled oppressive conditions in Peru because of the von Trapps’ inspiration.

While the intentional references to *The Sound of Music* are limited, family photos adorn the walls of the lodge: *Johanna and Martina Haying, circa 1947; Maple*

*Sugaring, 1943* (the lodge’s springtime maple-sugaring operation still thrives today); *Father Franz Wasner directing a rehearsal of the Trapp Family Singers; On Tour, San Francisco, 1946*. “But those are all family photos – photos of the *real* family,” von Trapp says, noting that only one hallway – the second floor of the Main Lodge – is dedicated to *The Sound of Music* version of events. There, posters from various productions of the fictional von Trapps line the walls – iterations in Japanese, French, German. One of the last holdouts of *The Sound of Music* phenomenon was Salzburg, Austria, whose citizens resented the film’s interpretation of the annexed German territory as dominantly Nazi. But even Salzburg came around. Sam and several other von Trapps attended the city’s premiere of the play in October 2011, holding hands on stage with the cast at the curtain call. Sam, who happened to be clasping the hand of the Austrian production’s Maria, noted the emotion of the evening. “She had tears running down her face,” he says. “Our ties with Austria are very strong.”

Time has revealed the blessing of his family history, including the opportunity for von Trapp to carry on and expand his grandparents’ business. But he is also quick to deflect too much praise for the von Trapp clan.

“I always try to remind people to look at their own family history because almost everyone has a story,” von Trapp adds. “If Rodgers and Hammerstein were to write the soundtrack to your family story, chances are it would be a huge hit. Our family really isn’t that different. I am proud of my family, but a lot of other families sacrificed more than we did. In reality our family really isn’t that special; our story just happens to have been told.”



Sam with his father, Johannes (photo courtesy Trapp Family Lodge)