

## Shutter Buggin'

### Round two of the Syracuse International Film and Video Festival is on view this week

By Bill DeLapp

*American Farm.* Set in the Leatherstocking region, James Spione's passionate 84-minute documentary details the Ames clan of Richfield Springs, the fifth--and apparently last--generation of dairy farmers as the family's legacy of cow milkers draws to a close. Langdon "Lanny" Ames, born in 1938, has kept the farm going for more than 40 years, but his livelihood is at the end of the line, because his three sons don't want to continue the business. Spione is emotionally connected, too, since he's an extended member of the Ames family, which pays off in terms of intimacy as well as a plentifully detailed historical document on his own family tree.

Some of these familial branches offer fascinating backstories: Lanny's gregarious son Bradley was a bad-seed hellraiser who had to get straightened out during his Marine Corps hitch; his brother Gregory accepted Jesus at age 13 (Lanny says his son is still trying to "save" him); and sister Janet, a wanna-be actress-singer, hightailed to Orlando to work at the Medieval Times theme restaurant and wound up being a single mom. (A Christmas scene shows Janet hogging her daughter's karaoke machine to warble a Shania Twain song.)

During a recent phone conversation with Spione, the auteur cited the Wal-Mart-styled consolidation of bigger corporate farms as one reason for the squeezed-out decline of farming families. Yet Spione's compact documentary is also reminiscent of the sociological impact generated by the early 1970s PBS reality series *An American Family*, as the old traditions of arduous work and personal sacrifice no longer make sense to the new generations. In a remarkable sequence that takes place very early on Christmas morning at the Ames' stable, Lanny aids a pregnant cow's birthing by helping to pull the critter out of the mama moo'er, as a shower of cowflop quietly rains down behind him. Lanny remarks afterward, "Wow, that's a calf and a half!" The poignantly rendered *American Farm* will run Saturday, April 30, 3 p.m., at the Everson Museum.