

Narrative: Susan Sink, Owner and Manager, Sinkland Farms

Riner, Virginia

Interviewer: Ashely Griffin

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I'm Susan Sink, and I am owner and manager of Sinkland Farms. Sinkland Farms began in 1980 with the purchase of this piece of property from an existing dairy farmer in the dairy business. My husband, Henry, he was from a home dairy farm and knew that that was going to be his life's occupation. You know? It's just simply like if you're from a farm and you want that as your occupation, it's sort of like in the blood. It's just like something that is just bred into you, I believe. But anyway, we were looking around for farms in Montgomery County. We knew that we couldn't go back home for him to join in with his dad on the home dairy because the home dairy was operated by his dad and his uncle. And between the dad and the uncle there were nine children, and Henry was in the younger group. And there was already two older sons in each family interested in continuing the dairy with the dad. So, we knew that we would need to find our own place for our dairy operation. So we bought this farm in 1980 from Edwin Keith, who was wanting to retire from the dairy business at that point in time, and he was looking to find a couple, like us, that would continue with the dairy business. Of course, he didn't want his property to be sold and developed. He was very interested in continuing the farming operation. So we bought the farm, the property, all the cattle, all the milk equipment, all of the tractors—everything. It was like a turnkey process.

The dairy business is a very difficult and hard life—one of the hardest things in the production/agriculture business. And a lot of that has to do with because you milk cows 365 days out of the year, and it's a twice a day or three times a day operation. Our milking herd was milked two times a day. And so you always have to be here, and the two other circumstances that make dairy a difficult occupation is that you always have to rely on the weather for your crops for feed for the cattle, and Mother Nature can be very unpredictable. And also, there's government pricing involved for milk products. And so we have no control over pricing.

During the years from 1980 through the next few decades, we experienced a lot of hardship with drought, because it seemed like once every three or four years you'd have a horrible drought, and we would have to buy feed, which was like tens of thousands and over a hundred thousand dollars typically a year to buy feed to feed your cattle when you can't produce it because of lack of rain. So we experienced a number of hardships, and during the course of the

years, we started doing extra things to diversify and give us extra income, to be able to pay the farm bills. So we experimented first with sweet corn, and we even still sell sweet corn here for the people in the community. We've done other things, like we've had a "you-pick strawberry patch" for about 12 years in the late 80s and early 90s. We grew thorn-less blackberry bushes. We grew some Christmas trees for sale, and then we started growing pumpkins for wholesale purposes. And the pumpkin crop was a great cash crop for us; there seemed to be a huge market for wholesale pumpkins.

Well, when my husband was here and worked in the production end of the dairy industry, I've always had an off-the-farm job. So when you ask me what I would advise young farmers going into the business, I think you have to have an off-the-farm income to enhance family living because I've been able to be able to...we've been able to do things and have extra money because of my extra income that's not related to the farm. I guess the traditional farm family, both the husband and the wife work on the farm that are my age and older, but any young couple going into the farming and agriculture, I would recommend that as one thing they should think about—one of the spouses having an off-the-farm income.

We are known in Southwest Virginia for our pumpkin festival. It's the 17th year, this year, and we started sort of on a whim. Henry and I had gone to a festival in Craig County many years ago, and we went through their experience and could not believe the number of people they had attending to ride a hayride and see some farm animals and pick a pumpkin. So we came back from that experience, and we both said, "we can do that." We have an ideal location, being 2 miles from Interstate 81 and right smack dab between Virginia Tech and Radford University, with Roanoke, Salem, and the towns of Radford and Christiansburg and Blacksburg fairly, you know, fairly close, with good roads to get back and forth to the farm. So the very next year we opened up very small with basically what we had seen the year before in the Craig County festival experience.

Well let me tell you why I'm so heavily involved right now. It is that I lost my husband in 2007. He was killed in an accident, and so otherwise, he would be sitting here in this interview. So it was certainly a complete shock to the family and unexpected, and we decided, the three children and I, decided that we wanted to carry on his legacy here at Sinkland Farms. And that's why we've continued to build and enhance the Sinkland Farms reputation, just to carry on his legacy. I know he's up somewhere in Heaven smiling while...

It's grown even more in the last three years because we've really tried to come together as a family and think about what all we can do to enhance the experience. So in other words, I'm here in this position not by choice. It is only by circumstances, uncontrollable circumstances that I'm here in this position, but now I really relish this position. So I continue my full-time position in another occupation, off-the-farm, so that I can have the extra salary to invest in the farm, so when I retire, when the time comes that I retire from Radford University [as Executive Director - for Campaigns and Leadership Giving], I will have a business already in operation, already noted, and, you know, a steady market already, which we do with the pumpkin festival. But I've also added several other things at Sinkland Farms.

One, I think that you need to be extraverted. You need to be, when you're involved with events, you need to always remember that the customer is king. And I always think...I've been to Disney many times with our children and that was by virtue of me being able to have another position...an off-the-farm one...to be able to go there. I look at the way Disney is represented by their employees, and that's what I want here. I want smiling faces where you accommodate all needs and wishes, so that customer service is the number one priority. The best thing about my job here at Sinkland Farms is to come out on the weekends, is seeing families with young children smiling and laughing and having a great time. And that's what makes it all worthwhile.

The hardest thing is realizing that, um, being perfect is a very, very high expectation. And I am a perfectionist. And I will walk around and I will see the tiniest pieces of trash, and I'll stoop down to pick it up because I want everything to be A-1, first class perfect. And often times, I think that is an expectation that many people don't have.

Well, you know, the American dream, I think, um, for many is very materialistic. I think as I have aged and become more wise and have gone through this unfortunate situation with the passing of my husband, I know that life is not all about material things. And it's more about what you can do for others, and one thing that I'm very proud about that Sinkland Farms does is: it does provide a community service in the Riner area because we do employ a lot of students from Auburn High School. I employ not only students but adults from this particular community. And we offer an outing, an experience for families. It is very affordable and in particular, we offer an extra opportunity for families to enjoy themselves as a family here on the weekends—to have that family experience.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.